

Last at the Cross - First at the Tomb

Introduction

On Sunday morning, nearly 2000 years ago, when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had departed from His tomb, there were many likely candidates who could have been given the honor of being first to see the risen Christ and announce the resurrection.

Tiberius was a likely candidate. He sat on his throne in Rome with absolute authority. His subjects revered him as a god. He was the most powerful man on the face of the earth at the time. But that morning, Tiberius heard no special news from Judea. In Jerusalem, the Jewish religious leaders for more than a millennium had been the stewards of the oracles of God. If Messiah had come and had been raised from the dead, it seems that surely they would have been first to know. But neither priest nor rabbi nor Sanhedrin council member received a message from God that morning heralding the most important event ever to occur in human history. In fact, as the sun rose that morning, and they went about their rituals, they were heaving a sigh of relief. They were finally rid of that interloper, Jesus of Nazareth, who had nearly pulled down their little world.

Pontius Pilate might have found the news rather disturbing had he been first to hear. His sleep had been troubled the week before regarding the fate of the Nazarene. But Pilate heard no news about the resurrection that morning either. In fact, when the Jewish authorities would finally hear of the resurrection, they would try to keep the news from him. No, not one of these likely groups or individuals was first to hear the news of the resurrected Christ. Instead, God chose an obscure woman who had spent a great portion of her life under the influence of demons. To this day her name turns few heads.

In this message we will look at the story of Mary of Magdala, or you may know her better as Mary Magdalene. John 20 contains our text. Please join me there. Three points will help us keep our place in this story. We'll first set down her sorrow over the death of Jesus. Then we'll look at her surprise as she discovered that He was alive. Finally, we'll consider her supreme joy as it dawned on her that she had become the first to see the risen Lord.

(Read John 20:1-18)

Regarding Mary, consider first with me:

1. Her Sorrow.

The word in verse 11 translated "weeping" actually has a connotation of sobbing.⁽¹⁾ As Peter and John turned from the tomb and ran, their footsteps fading away into the semi-darkness of early morning, Mary was again overcome to the point that her body shook with uncontrolled emotion. That tense for "standing" is continuous. She "continued standing." Mary was unable to move. Frozen in her grief. Heaving out her despair in convulsive sobs. Mary's grief is so characteristic of the whole human race at the point of death of a loved one. Death is the great robber. Intense sorrow and painful loss almost always strike those it leaves behind - a theme repeated at funerals since the days of Adam. It is likely that Mary had not slept well for several nights before this. Perhaps it was insomnia that brought her to the tomb so early on this morning when she arrived before the other disciples. Whatever the case, as she stood there crying and stooping to look into the tomb, her emotional wounds began to bleed again. Someone had taken the body of the Lord! It isn't fair for us to eavesdrop on Mary's grief like this without first trying to understand her particular case and why she had such a strong reaction to the death of Jesus. Let me give you a bit of her background.

Mary Magdalene comes into Scripture for the first time in Luke 8.

There, as she is described, she is already one of the close followers of Jesus, along with some other women. Jesus was still traveling around at that point, preaching with the twelve.

(Read Luke 8:1-3)

Mary Magdalene gets her name from the city in which she was raised. She came from Magdala, a Galilean coastal town about 3 miles from Capernaum. Just as Jesus was called a Nazarene because of the place of his rearing, so she was called a Magdalene. Magdala boasted of its dye works and primitive textile factories. We know nothing of Mary's marital status or her lineage. We don't know her age at this time. It could be that she was either single or widowed, since she seems to have been free to follow Jesus and the other disciples who were very much on the move at the point when she joined them. Some have associated Mary Magdalene with the unnamed prostitute who wept on Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair in the home of Simon the Pharisee. That story is recorded in Luke 7. (Luke 7:36-50) As best I can tell, that comes mainly from Roman Catholic tradition and not from the Bible. There is no sure evidence that I know that shows these two were the same person.

There is one thing we do know about Mary Magdalene. As we turn back the pages of her life that we do have, there were some very dark chapters. Luke mentions Mary among a group of women who had been demon possessed. Of these women, Mary's case had been the most severe. Luke says she was the one "from whom seven demons had gone out." Demon possession, as described in the Bible, was a hideous thing. A demon terrorized Saul, the first king of Israel, in his later life. (1 Samuel 16:14-23) He was at times gripped with fits of paranoia and rage. One demon possessed man in the New Testament was deaf and mute because of the demon in him. (Mark 9:17-29) Another demoniac, a man of Gadara, was so demented that he actually lived among the tombs. (Mark 5:1-5) He was so violent that no one dared come near him. Mark reports that someone had tried once to chain him up. The raging man snapped the chains and broke the shackles with his bare hands! Night and day he ran around the tombs, naked, shrieking, picking up rocks, and gashing himself. Demoniacs were at times thrown into convulsions. They would foam at the mouth. In several instances even children were demon possessed, as evidenced by the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus and asked him to cast the demon out of her little girl. (Matthew 15:21-28) Demon possessed people would sometimes fall into fire and water as they were driven about by their frenzied captors. (Matthew 17:14-18) There were apparently several "kinds" of demons. When the disciples were unable to cast out one particular demon, Jesus told them, "this kind comes out only by prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17:19-21) I don't know all there is to know about demon possession. Frankly, I have no desire to know any more than what is revealed in the Bible. From that I'm sure that it was a hideous state to be in. I picture Mary the day she met Jesus as a wild-eyed, revolting object to look at. Hair matted, clothing ragged and filthy, beset by convulsions, screaming in terror, now lunging, now cringing, a pitiful shell of humanity driven by seven vicious beings of evil.

Then she crossed the path of the Son of God and He reached out to her in mercy. The demons within her heard His voice of authority commanding them. "Get out of her life!" Then as the last demon threw her to the ground as it departed her deranged mind and nerve wracked body were suddenly as tranquil as the Sea of Galilee Jesus had calmed. Sanity returned, along with the color in her cheeks. The sunken hollows of her face disappeared.

She, like the Gadarean demoniac, was now "clothed and in her right mind." (Mark 5:15) Because of this change brought about by the power of the Son of God, Mary became one of Jesus' most devoted disciples. In utter gratitude, Mary left her home in Magdala, attached herself to that little band of people who were on the road with Jesus, ready and willing to serve Him in any way she could. Her money became His money as she gave Him support. (Luke 8:3) Her time became His

time. She was there, close by as His ministry flourished. She also followed Him into the shadows that led right up to the cross.

When Jesus began to tell His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer, Mary was there. As the multitude that had once hung on His every word now turned against Him and ridiculed Him, crying out for His crucifixion, she stayed with Him.

One poet, in tribute to this faithful woman, wrote:

Not she with traitorous kiss her Master stung, Not she denied Him with unfaithful tongue. She, when apostles fled, could dangers brave, Last at the cross, and earliest at the grave.

Mary was probably in or near Pilate's Hall when the death sentence was read. She was probably near the crowd that pressed Him through the streets of Jerusalem dragging His cross. She must have wept, too, as the spikes were driven into His hands and feet, then stood by helplessly as His life drained out of Him during the final hours.

An artist tried to capture this in a painting. He pictured the night of the crucifixion. One many recorded a description of the painting this way:

"The world is wrapped in shadows; the stars are dead; and yet, in the darkness, is seen a kneeling form. It is Mary Magdalene with loving lips and hands pressed against the bleeding feet of Christ."

When her Lord was dead, Matthew tells us she was there to help Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take Him down from the cross. (John 19:38-42) The last recorded scripture before the description of the resurrection reads this way:

"And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave." (Matthew 27:61) The scene then fades into the next day.

What devotion! What love!

G. Campbell Morgan writes in his commentary on this passage, "I never read that without feeling rebuked at the loving, loyal devotion of Mary of Magdala." How about us? Do we feel rebuked? Hasn't Jesus scattered our night, too? How strong is our devotion to Him? Would we have stayed there at the foot of the cross amid the torture and the jeers? Do our present actions bear it out?

When someone on the job curses, using His name, do we join in? Do we support His ministry like Mary, or is He just someone to use once or twice a week when things aren't going our way? Have we ever risked anything for Him? Have we ever denied Him?

Can we now identify with Mary as she stands there sobbing, looking into the tomb? She hurts so badly that she is not even frightened by the two angels sitting by the empty grave clothes. I recall several occasions where the appearance of angels terrified people. (Matthew 28:4) All she can think of though is that someone has taken Him away.

(Re-read verse 13)

The next verses contains what must be one of the greatest, most dramatic changes of emotions ever recorded. We'll call it:

2. Her Surprise.

(Read v. 14)

Perhaps she didn't recognize Him because her tears clouded her vision. Not only that, but she wasn't looking for a living Christ, but a dead one. When people approach Christianity today, they often do the same thing. They approach it as though it is the religion of a dead founder. Perhaps they view it as a good religion. It is an honorable social thing to associate with. The teaching of Jesus has certainly brought a lot of good to the world. So they are interested. But they misunderstand! They are looking entirely at the wrong things. Though all these things are true, they are but the results of what Christianity is about. We are Christians today because He is alive and we can have a living relationship with Him. Many followers of world religions worship the sepulchers where their founders lie - or perhaps the ideas they taught. We worship a living Lord!

Mary hadn't figured that out yet.

(Read v. 15)

Mary's love knew no bounds. So concerned was she for the body of Jesus that, though she was a woman, though it might have been next to impossible for her to move the body of a dead man with it wrapped in the grave clothes, she said, "Just show me where He is and I'll take Him away."

Tell me, if Mary could be so devoted to a dead Master, how much more should we be devoted to a living one?

(Read v. 16)

It is impossible for me to intone all that transpired in that instant of recognition. Jesus called her name as perhaps He had done many times before. Instantly pictures of the happy past flooded her mind. Words simply cannot express what happened as full realization entered this dear lady. She had Him back. He was alive!

3. Her Supreme Joy.

Joy swept away her darkness just as dramatically as it had done several years before this when Jesus had driven out her demons. Now He was rebuking her grief.

What happened next is not recorded in John, but it is obvious. She could not control her joy. She must have embraced Him with hugs and kisses.

(Read v. 17)

This passage has become a commentator's battleground. The King James Version of the Bible, instead of reading, "stop clinging to me," says, "touch me not."

Assuming that there must have been some supernatural reason for forbidding her to touch Him, all kinds of weird explanations are offered to clarify this verse. While I'm in no way dogmatic about my own explanation, I think it makes good sense and solves some problems.

If I may paraphrase:

"Stop clinging to Me now. I haven't left you yet. I haven't ascended to My Father yet. There will be time to express emotion later. Right now it is more important to notify the others that I have risen."

If you don't like my explanation, that's OK. It doesn't alter the basic meaning of the passage. Can you imagine how quickly Mary ran back through the gates of Jerusalem to tell the others? Do you suppose she stopped for anything along the way? Did she dally? I don't think so!

In my mind's eye she arrives at the closed and locked door of the disciples' quarters nearly out of breath. She bangs on the door: "I've seen the Lord! I've seen the Lord!" Then perhaps, one of the disciples opens the peephole in the door. "Hey, it's Mary! Let her in." Then she enters the room in her excitement. "Calm down, Mary! Calm down! Tell us what happened."

John records this:

(Read v. 18)

Although that is the last clear glimpse we get of Mary Magdalene on the pages of the New Testament, I have no reservation in assuming she was present in the upper room with the 120 in the first chapter of Acts. I also believe she became one of the 3000 who were baptized on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

I guess we'll have to wait to find out for sure.

Conclusion

Let me suggest two lasting lessons we can take home from this passage. First, we see here what Christ can do for a person willing to submit to His Lordship.

Mary had lived her life in pitch-black darkness. She had absolutely no light. Then Jesus came in and the darkness departed. Her life became something beautiful, something admirable. He gave her purpose. He gave her hope and joy and a reason to live.

Jesus can still do that today. If a person is willing to open up his or her life unconditionally to His Lordship, the difference can be like night and day. And, there are some "Mary's" in the church today - people with pasts that have been healed. They live in gratitude. They serve him willingly and joyously.

Secondly, we see what any person can do for Christ who has seen the tremendous difference He brings to a life. Mary's commitment to Jesus, even when He was dead, knew no bounds. She was loyal, faithful, and dedicated.

Has the Lord's role in our lives made us that way? Are we serving Him with dedication like Mary? Do we need to do better? Will we do it?