

Mary Magdalene and the Risen Lord. Bethesda Meditation. 24 April 2011.

Each Lord's day we gather together to eat bread and to drink wine, if I may use our Lord's own words, 'in remembrance' of Himself. But this particular Lord's day is also Easter Sunday, and so, quite naturally, our minds turn also to the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 2, 'Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead'.¹

You may recall that the passage which John Marsh read to us last week from Matthew 27 included two references to Mary Magdalene. First when she was listed among the women who beheld the Lord's cross from afar,² and second when she was reported as sitting with another Mary to witness the Lord's burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.³

But this morning we meet to celebrate the fact that, as Mary was then soon to discover, our Lord's death and burial were not the end of the story ... not by a long way.

Two of the gospel accounts make it clear that Mary was the very first person to meet the Risen Lord. We are told in Mark 16 that 'when He rose ... He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons'.⁴ But I want us to focus this morning on the other gospel account, that of the apostle John – and as we do to try to capture something of the joy and wonder of that occasion. The first three verses of John 20 read:

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark,⁵ and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

She ran therefore and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him'.

So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb.

Verse 11 takes up the story after the apostles left the empty tomb for their own home:

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him'.⁶

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?'⁷ Whom are you seeking?' Supposing Him to be the gardener,⁸ she said to Him, 'Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away'.⁹

Jesus said to her, 'Mary'. She turned¹⁰ and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher).¹¹

Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"'.¹²

Mary Magdalene went' John reports, 'and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"'.¹²

There can be little doubt that, as Mary made her way to Joseph's tomb early that morning, she was running low on faith and hope. What she had recently witnessed had served to all but shatter them both. But there can be no doubt whatever about her love and her devotion. The passage we have read makes it clear that neither apostles nor angels could begin to fill the aching void in her sorrowing heart. No, not even angels!

Luke tells us that when that morning the other women encountered two angels 'in dazzling apparel', they were 'filled with fear, and bowed down their faces to the earth'.¹³ But not Mary! For she had no more interest in two resplendent angels than she did in two leading apostles. She had lost her greatest treasure – the One she spoke of consistently as 'Lord'. With Him she had everything, but without Him she had nothing. Hence her unrestrained 'weeping' – of which we read no less than three times.

As Mary expressed it to both the apostles and to the angels, 'they' (some persons as yet unknown) had 'taken away' her Lord's body – using exactly the same words ('taken away') as were used by John back in verse 31 of the

previous chapter to describe the intention of the Jewish leaders, when, and I quote, 'the Jews asked Pilate' concerning both Jesus and the two malefactors 'that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away'. If the Jews had had their way, our Lord's legs would have been broken, and His body 'taken away' to be disposed of along with the bodies of the two robbers who had been crucified either side of Him.

But God was having none of this. First, He used the soldiers (who, as John says, 'saw that He (the Lord) was already dead') to preserve our Lord's body from mutilation.¹⁴ Then He (God) used Joseph of Arimathea (who, as John says, 'asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus') to preserve that body from degradation – from the shame of being denied a proper burial.¹⁵ Isaiah makes it clear in chapter 53 of his prophecy that, although the Servant of the Lord would most certainly be 'numbered with the transgressors' *in His sufferings*,¹⁶ He would most certainly *not* be numbered with them *in His burial* – 'they assigned His grave with the wicked', Isaiah wrote, 'but He was with the rich in his death'.¹⁷

But, as Mary was soon to discover to her joy, not only had God used the soldiers to preserve the Saviour's body from *mutilation*, and had used Joseph to preserve the Saviour's body from *degradation*, but had acted Himself – directly – to preserve the Saviour's body from corruption.¹⁸ ... and I have my eye on the prophetic words of David in Psalm 16 (quoted by both Peter and Paul in their preaching), 'you will not allow your Holy One to see corruption'. God, David would have us know, ensured that He who did no sin in His life saw no corruption in His death.¹⁹

Back in John 11, another Mary (Mary of Bethany) had been present at *another* tomb where, in the normal course of events, as her sister Martha was quick to observe, there would have been the foul odour of corruption. But when Mary Magdalene 'stopped to look into' *this* tomb, there was no fear of any such stench. For, as the apostle Paul expressed it in Acts 13, 'He whom God raised up saw no corruption'.

As Mary made it clear to the apostles, the angels, and the supposed 'gardener', the most she hoped for was to find her Lord's dead body 'laid' somewhere.²⁰ The very last thing she expected was to encounter the Living Lord 'standing' alongside her – as we read that He was in verse 14. 'Supposing him to be the gardener', we read, 'she said to *him*, "Sir, if you have carried *Him* away, tell me where you have laid Him ...". But one word convinced her that the 'him' to whom she spoke was none other than the 'Him' of whom she spoke!

For though she didn't recognise Him from His physical appearance – any more than did the two on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24,²¹ or the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias in John 21 – and though she didn't recognise Him from His kindly enquiry 'Why are you weeping? Who are you seeking?' – she recognised Him immediately He spoke her name.

Evidently only the Person who had once expelled the seven-fold demonic power which had held her captive could pronounce her name in quite that way.

Back in chapter 10, the Saviour had said of an ordinary, human shepherd that 'the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and ... the sheep follow him, for they *know* his voice',²² and had then added, 'My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me'.²³ Oh yes, when Mary heard the Good Shepherd call her name, she knew His voice alright! And His one word sufficed to dry her every tear.

In the Song of Songs chapter 3, we read the words of the Shunammite concerning her beloved when she had gone out in the dark to seek him, 'I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go'.²⁴

And just as that Shunammite of almost a thousand years before, Mary, who went to seek her Beloved while it was still dark, reached out to hold her Beloved tight.²⁵ But it was not to be. As was evident from the title by which she addressed Him, 'Rabboni', Mary thought only of retaining Him as she had known Him during His public ministry.²⁶ And the Risen Lord gently pointed her to that more intimate, abiding and uninterrupted fellowship, which, by His Spirit, she would enjoy after He had ascended.²⁷ And, thank God, not she only. And so it is that we can experience and enjoy the presence of the Risen, Living Lord with us as we meet to remember Him this morning.

Footnotes

¹ 2 Tim. 2. 8.

² Matt. 27. 56.

³ Matt. 27. 61.

⁴ Mark 16. 9.

⁵ Little did the priests know – when, later that very morning (‘the morrow after the sabbath’⁵), at the time of the morning sacrifice, they waved the sheaf of firstfruits (collected from the other side of the Kidron) in the Temple in accordance with Leviticus 23 verse 11 (The Mishnah, the rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, devotes one chapter of Tractate Menahoth to the gathering of the omer in the fields and its processing in the Temple) – that God had already reaped the great wave sheaf from Joseph’s tomb, the firstfruits of a very different harvest ... that as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, ‘now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep’, 1 Cor. 15. 20. I suspect that his reference to Christ as ‘the firstfruits’ suggested itself to him because his letter was written in the run up to the feast of Pentecost, 16.8 – that is, at some time around the feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits. This may also explain why, back in chapter 5, Paul introduced references to ‘Christ our Passover’ and to ‘the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth’, vv. 6-8. The point here in chapter 15 is that, as raised from the dead, Christ is the first-fruits of an abundant harvest – the pledge and guarantee of the ingathering of the rest. But in what sense can the Lord Jesus be said to be the first-fruits? What about the cases of resurrection in the days of Elijah and Elisha – or the several resurrection-miracles performed by the Lord Himself? In what sense could Paul inform King Agrippa that, following His suffering, Christ was ‘the first to rise from the dead’, Acts 26. 23? In Romans 6, the apostle put his finger on that which distinguishes the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from all of the other cases – ‘Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no more has dominion over Him’, v. 9. Those raised previously had each been raised to a continued earthly existence and either had died again or would die again. But it wasn’t simply that – in terms of a prolonged life – they had been granted only temporary visas whereas the Lord Jesus was granted full resident status. The difference was far more profound than that. He had conquered death and had risen to an altogether different kind of life – to another dimension altogether. When Lazarus had been raised, he ‘came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth’, John 11.44. Lazarus had indeed been raised – but he couldn’t pass through even the graveclothes, let alone the walls of his rock tomb. He still had exactly the same kind of body he had before he died – he needed to come out through the same door through which he had been carried in – and he would die again. But when the Lord Jesus rose, He passed right through both His graveclothes and the walls of His rock tomb – bursting out into another dimension altogether. He is the mighty Conqueror, ‘alive for evermore’ and possessing ‘the keys of both Hades and of death’, Rev. 1.18.

⁶ To the apostles, she had spoken in terms of ‘the Lord’ and ‘we do not know where’ – for Peter and John probably knew that she had set out in the company of other women. But as far as she was concerned the angels knew only of her interest – hence ‘my Lord’ and ‘I do not know where’.

⁷ The very first recorded words of the Risen Lord. He still heals the broken-hearted. The first words to come from His lips in resurrection life were addressed to a Mary; just as had been the first recorded words of His earthly life, Luke 2. 49.

⁸ He has indeed once been a ‘gardener’, Gen. 2. 8-9.

⁹ Either this was entirely unrealistic, as it had taken two men to take the body to the tomb, John 19. 40-42, or Mary was offering to make the arrangements to fetch the body and give it a proper burial – for it is clear that she was a woman of some wealth and standing, Luke 8. 2-3.

¹⁰ It may well be that she had resumed her former position, facing the tomb and lost in her grief.

¹¹ She addressed Him in the way she had been used to speak to Him.

¹² John 20. 11-18.

¹³ Luke 24. 4-5.

¹⁴ In fulfilment of Exodus 12. 46. See John 19. 36. This was not in fulfilment of Psalm 34. 20, which refers figuratively to preservation of general well-being.

¹⁵ ‘He that blasphemeth God, let him be stoned; and let him hang upon a tree all that day, and then let him be buried in an ignominious and obscure manner’, Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book IV, Chapter 8, Paragraph 6.

¹⁶ Isa. 53. 12.

¹⁷ Isa. 53. 9.

¹⁸ The huge quantity of spices (75lb), John 19. 39, were not needed to preserve this body!

¹⁹ Psa. 16. 10, quoted in Acts 2. 27 and 13. 35. Acts 13. 34 says that God ‘raised him from the dead, *no more* to return to corruption’; compare, ‘Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more’, Rom. 6. 9. For this reason, He was ‘the first to rise from the dead’, Acts 26. 23 – this was priority in time; cf. the title ‘firstborn from the dead’, priority in rank, Col. 1. 18.

²⁰ John 20. 2, 13, 15.

²¹ Cf. Mark 16. 12.

²² John 10. 4.

²³ John 10. 27.

²⁴ Song of Songs 3. 4.

²⁵ Jesus was not saying, "Don't touch me," but "Stop touching me" = "Let go of me!", B. H. Bryant in *The College Press NIV Commentary*.

²⁶ She assumed that a return to His former earthly life exhausted the extent of the Lord's victory over death.

²⁷ Contrast Matt. 28. 9, where our Lord raised no objection to the other women taking hold of His feet.