

## **I have seen the Lord**

Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 118:1–2, 14-24

Colossians 3:1-4

John 20:1-18

### **Text: John 20:2, 18**

So she (Mary Magdalene) ran 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.’

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

### **Introduction**

All the gospels agree that Mary Magdalene was first, or among the first, to come to the tomb early on that eventful Sunday morning. It had begun some two years earlier; Mary’s following of Jesus. She was from a town not far from Capernaum, the headquarters for Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus had released Mary from the torments of evil spirits (Luke 8:2) and ever since that day Mary joined the company of disciples who followed Jesus and supported his mission. Everything changed for Mary that day Jesus came into her life, and now nothing can deflect her from her complete dedication to him.

Mary had witnessed firsthand Jesus’ Galilean ministry; she had rejoiced with others who, like her, found in Jesus one who cured infirmities; she had heard him preach the message of the kingdom that God welcomes sinners to come home. Indeed, she knows herself welcomed home. She had made the journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, no doubt among the disciples witnessing the moment when Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb. Mary had walked with the throng of joyful pilgrims joining in the loud hosanna as they entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. She has been there this awful week when things go so terribly wrong for Jesus. But she won’t abandon the one whose love for her means everything to her.

John tells us that Mary Magdalene was standing near the cross at Golgotha with Jesus’ mother Mary along with his mother’s sister. Mary Magdalene watches the horrific crucifixion of Jesus and was also at the tomb as they buried Jesus. She won’t abandon him—this one to whom she owes her very life. What was it like for Mary as she makes her way to the tomb that Sunday morning? Does she expect to meet Jesus? Hardly.

John tells us that it was “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.” ‘While it was still dark.’ This isn’t just a technical line to tell you how early Mary set out for the tomb. In John’s gospel the themes of light and darkness play a significant role. In the beginning of his gospel he tells us that Jesus is the light coming into the world. The overarching story of John’s gospel is that ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’ (John 1:5) But here, early on this Sunday morning, ‘while it was still dark,’ it was indeed dark for Mary. For her, the darkness seems to have overcome the light of the world who brought so much light to her life.

The reason I have drilled down on Mary's experience is that we might appreciate the wonder of her witness. We mustn't hurry over the humanity of this moment; Mary isn't a prop for a good story. We are sufficiently acquainted with disappointments and bereavement in life to know how crushed Mary is in her heart. As we dwell there for a moment, I believe it helps us appreciate the wonder of her witness when she says, "I have seen the Lord."

1. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright said that "our minds and imaginations were too small to contain it" when Easter burst into the world. "So, we do our best to put the sea into a bottle and fit the explosive fact of the Resurrection into the possibilities we already know about." Easter preaching is like trying to put the sea into a bottle. It's utterly "explosive," charged with cosmic-altering good news. So, trying to explain the beautiful story and stupendous implications of Christ's resurrection with everyday words and categories is challenging because our words aren't big enough to contain the magnitude of this event.

I notice that in all the gospels the account of the early morning discovery of the empty tomb lacks what we might call spiritual embellishments. If these gospel stories of resurrection were made up some years after Jesus' death to bolster belief in Jesus, as some scholars say, you would expect them to have some quotes of scriptural references, for example. If these stories of resurrection were people looking back reading into the events of Jesus' life older testament passages and building up from them a story of Jesus coming back from the dead, as some say, you would expect to see evidence of that in the way the story is told. But something else was shaping the narrative; a personal encounter to which witness was borne.

When Mary comes to the tomb and saw the stone had been removed, she responds in a way that makes perfect sense to us. Mary, like us, understands that dead people stay dead. She comes expecting to find the body. "So she ran 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.'" Later, even as she is outside the tomb weeping, thinking Jesus to be the gardener, she persists in her very reasonable conclusion, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

So, what happened between her first news she shares with the disciples about the body being missing and the second time when she burst in and says, "I have seen the Lord." What happened between "they have taken the body" and "I have seen the Lord." When Mary burst in and said, "I have seen the Lord" do you think she meant she had a vision that Jesus had ascended to some otherworldly heavenly realm or that she had a warm feeling that her dear friend Jesus had safely arrived in heaven? If she meant that she would have said that. She wouldn't say, "I have seen the Lord."

I invite you to hear her witness. What we think of her witness is another matter. But let us at least let her speak. We don't want to be like the disciples whose first reaction to hearing this news was that the women's witness seemed to them an idle tale. (Luke 24:11) "I have seen the Lord." Further, Mary gives them a message from Jesus whose content they know could only have come from Jesus' lips. "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Jesus is the one who talks like this and they know it.

The witness of Mary is that she met the risen Jesus and had given a hug; a hug of which she didn't want to let go. Mary's witness, joined with the witness of many others recorded in the gospels, is that Jesus of Nazareth has been bodily raised from the dead. I would dare to say that if he was not raised then we would never have heard the name Mary Magdalene. The conviction that Jesus has been bodily raised from the dead constituted, for the early church, the axis upon which their prayers, praise, practices, narrative, symbols, and confession all turned; it was the basis of their recognition of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, their insistence that the God who created the world had inaugurated the long-awaited new age, and above all it provided the pledge for their hope in Jesus' return, the resurrection of all believers, and God putting all things to right.

The Resurrection was not preached in the early church as a symbolic representation of wonderful higher spiritual truths like, "We must always keep hope." The Resurrection was preached as a hard, bare, terribly irritating paradigm-shattering, horribly inconvenient but impossible to dismiss fact. When Mary Magdalene found herself startled on Easter morning, she was face-to-face with Jesus of Nazareth. By the end of the conversation she knew she had encountered again the one who had turned her life around years earlier. The selfsame Lord, present to us now, does as much today as he overtakes us and seizes us, transforms us and commissions us.

John is the gospel writer who focuses his attention on the witness of Mary Magdalene this Easter morning. John tells us that he writes this story of Jesus "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." John was there in the room when Mary burst in with her news and he knows, firsthand, how unbelievable Mary's witness sounds. Believing starts somewhere. To say, I believe, doesn't begin with embracing every last detail of the story. Perhaps it begins with suspending disbelief for a moment; long enough to acknowledge this one thing, it is obvious that Mary believes she saw Jesus alive. The gospel witnesses that Jesus stands among us today and patiently desires to make himself known to us. John is writing this gospel to people who, like us, weren't there on Easter day so they too will encounter the risen Jesus. So they too will know that it is the Risen Jesus who is forging the reality of his presence over their lives.

The good news or the gospel is Jesus himself. It is encounter with him. It is this encounter that is driving the story of Easter. Mary doesn't talk about how he was raised from the dead or try to explain the plausibility of her encounter. She simply says, "I have seen the Lord." Years later the Apostle John said this in one of his sermons, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." (1 John 1:1) Isn't this Mary's witness to us—what she saw with her eyes, heard with her ears, and touched with her hands? This is what Mary speaks about when she bursts in and says to us, "I have seen the Lord."

2. SO what does it all mean? Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead is much more than an amazing event; it is much more than a historical postulate, a random event that Christians claim is far and away the best explanation for the rise of early Christianity. Jesus' resurrection generates a world of meaning.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day believed there would be a resurrection from the dead at the end of the age. We hear this expressed by Martha to Jesus at the wake of her brother Lazarus when

he had died—she knew her brother would rise again at the end of the age. It was in this conversation that Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life.” What no one expected was that this resurrection would be brought forward into the middle of history. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the start of the creator’s new world—Jesus is the pilot project, indeed its pilot.

The primary meaning proclaimed by the apostles is that Jesus’ resurrection is vindication that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for the sin of the world is effective. Listen again to a portion of what Peter preached that day at the home of the Roman Centurion named Cornelius. “They put him (Jesus) to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” The great amnesty that Jesus preached has been secured by him on the cross and the resurrection is the vindication that this is so. The resurrection of Jesus is the reason the Apostle Paul would say to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’. My prayer is that all of you will know the joy of believing.