

Humanity Redeemed

Week 7 - The Empty Tomb

John 20:1-18

Praise God, Calvary was not the end of the story! The empty tomb and the resurrection of Christ is the glorious climax of God's redemptive work to Redeem Humanity. The tomb became a vehicle for life, not death! Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4).

I. Mary at the Tomb - John 20:1-2

The combined accounts of the other Gospels reveal that several women, including Mary Magdalene, came to the garden tomb for the purpose of completing the burial process. However, John's account focuses on Mary Magdalene.

We were introduced to Mary Magdalene in Luke's Gospel as the one "from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:1-3). The Scripture offers no particulars on how or when Mary came to be inhabited by demons. Nor does it offer any details of her encounter with the Lord Jesus when He delivered her. We can safely assume that prior to her conversion experience, her life was a nightmarish existence that exiled her from the realm of polite society. That was, until she met Jesus! A tragic young woman - demon-possessed, damaged, disgraced, destroyed, and devastated - intersected with Jesus at a place called **grace**. From that day forward, she became part of the privileged group of women from Galilee who accompanied Jesus and His twelve, and was given a front-row seat to the kingdom of God.

After a fitful night with little sleep, Mary Magdalene arrived early "and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb" (John 20:1). The tomb was wide open and the soldiers were AWOL. She jumped to the conclusion that Jesus' body had been taken either by grave robbers or by the Jews themselves. Grave robbery was a crime common enough for the emperor Claudius to make it a capital offense, deserving the death penalty. Mary ran to tell Peter and John of her discovery and suspicion of foul play. After all, what other explanation could there be?

II. The Disciples at the Tomb - John 20:3-10

Peter and John raced to the tomb with Mary Magdalene in pursuit. John peered inside while Peter pushed his way inside. The men observed the linen wrappings with the face-cloth "rolled up in a place by itself" (John 20:7).

The general sense of John's account is that the resin and linen had formed a hollow cocoon where the body had been. There was no evidence of haste or vandalism. Everything was orderly and in place, indicating Jesus had come to life, passed through the grave clothes, pausing long enough to neatly fold the face covering on His way out of the grave.

Standing in the cool dark tomb and looking intently at the empty burial shroud, Jesus' teachings began to reverberate in John's befuddled brain. John "saw and believed" (John 20:8). The imperfect tense of this phrase is best translated "began to believe." The only plausible explanation pointed to the reality that Jesus had risen from the dead!

At this point, John pauses in his narrative to point out the terrible dullness of the disciples in those days. "As yet they knew not the scripture," he says. There was really no excuse for that. Even if they were unable to grasp the truth of Psalm 16:10, what about the Lord's repeated prophecies of his death, burial, and resurrection? Mary of Bethany had believed. John himself had seen three resurrections. They were "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken," as the Lord put it shortly afterward to two of them on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:25). And surely we should be loathe to cast stones at them. In the end they became magnificent believers who went out to turn the world upside down. (John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary*)

III. Jesus at the Tomb - John 20:11-18

The disciples left Mary alone at the tomb. Looking in, she saw two angels sitting "where the body of Jesus had been lying" (John 20:12). Some Bible scholars believe this scene evokes the imagery of the golden cherubim on the end of the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:18-19), putting a further emphasis on the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Through His death, burial, and resurrection, Christ has accomplished His purpose to Redeem Humanity (see John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). Hebrews says, "Not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). Christ paid the sin debt for the whole of humanity. However, His blood is only applied to the sin debt of those who receive Him in repentance and faith. This truth was beautifully pictured in the first Passover. God said, "Take some of the blood [of the sacrifice] and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses...When I see the blood I will pass over" (Exodus 12:7; 13).

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb looking for a dead body to anoint rather than expecting to find an empty tomb and a risen Savior. Blinded by grief, she overlooked the heavenly visitation by two angels, failed to notice the significance of their position on the burial bench, and missed the magnitude of the empty burial clothes!

The risen Jesus spoke to Mary, but at this point her theological misunderstanding of the cross left no room for the resurrection. Mary, possibly blinded by grief, assumed the one speaking to her was the gardener, until He called her by name. At the sound of her name Mary knew she was in the presence of the Lord. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who calls His sheep by name (see John 10:27-29). Mary responded, "'Rabboni!' (which means, Teacher)" (John 20:16).

Tremendously relieved, Mary (probably) wrapped her arms around Him as she fell at His feet in worship. Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me" (John 20:17). Having

found the Lord again, Mary did not want to let Him out of her sight! And it appears Mary was still clinging to the old earthly relationship of rabbi-teacher, failing to understand that the cross changed everything! The risen Lord was ushering in a new era, the age of the Spirit, and with that came a new way of living and a new set of family relationships.

Jesus instructed her to go and tell the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord! Mary was doubly blessed to be the first to witness the risen Lord and the one commissioned to proclaim His resurrection to His followers. Jesus orchestrated the announcement of His resurrection to be made by Mary rather than Peter and John who had been at the tomb a short time earlier. Strange really, considering her past and the fact she was a woman. I remind you that the world Mary lived in was very hostile to women in general. Women were generally ignored and not permitted to move in the same sphere as men. They were not allowed to study under rabbis, they did not have a voice in legal matters, and were not accepted as a credible witness in a court of law. During His earthly ministry, Jesus had been dismantling long-established social, cultural, and ethnic barriers that marginalized women and relegated them to the peripherality of society (see Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Jesus' choice of a woman for the supreme honor of being the first to witness Him in His resurrection was designed to teach a grand truth - He was building a church, a family, a community, a body of believers from different walks of life who shared the bond of Christ. Everyone would be welcome, and everyone would have a significant part to play in His kingdom.

Mary, the first ambassador of the resurrection tidings, raced to the disciples to declare, "I have seen the Lord." No longer was Jesus merely her Teacher. He was her Lord! As we reflect on that resurrection morning, may we glory in the fact that in Christ we have unlimited access to the Father and have become "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). Jesus is not dead! The tomb is empty! He is risen. He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! What a Savior!