

John 20:11-23

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[0 : 0 0] Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. Why don't we shadow Mary on that very singular journey to the garden tomb? Join with me as we walk just behind her and try to see what she saw and hear what she heard. But if you're game to join me in that journey, don't linger, don't wonder, stay close lest you miss something of what Mary saw on that first Easter morning, a morning that changed the world forever. What did Mary see?

Well, Mary saw an empty tomb. There in the very first verse of chapter 20 that we've already read.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. We read in verse 11, after Simon Peter and John had returned to Jerusalem, that Mary remained, and she stood outside the tomb, the empty tomb, crying. She saw an empty tomb. Mary began her journey that morning accompanied by her friends.

But it seemed such was her urgency to reach the tomb that she hurried ahead. And what did she discover when she arrived? Well, the stone had been removed from the entrance. Mary was startled and confused and tentatively looked inside the tomb. But the tomb was empty. And as she struggled to process this shocking discovery, she saw in the distance that Simon Peter and John were approaching, and she ran to tell them of her unwelcome discovery.

And as they ran to confirm her story, Mary also scurried behind them to enter again the garden that was, in a strange way, a scene of both tranquility and trauma. Well, Simon Peter and John, as we read in verse 10, they determined to return to Jerusalem. But Mary lingered by the tomb. Are you still with her? Are you still there behind her, observing and seeing what she saw? She lingered by the tomb. She stood outside the tomb, weeping? Can you hear her sobbing? Can you imagine in your mind's eye her grief-stricken features?

[3 : 3 1] But why did she weep? Well, Mary, I imagine, was overcome by a complex cocktail of emotions. She was mourning the death of her Lord. She was confused by the circumstances of His death and by all that she was now witnessing. She was distressed by what seemed the final indignity of a violated tomb, the Lord's resting place, affording Him no rest, even in death, or so it seemed to Mary.

And so she wept to break the dawn. But as she wept, she knelt down to look again into the tomb, and what did she see? Are you still with me? Are you just behind Mary, bending over to catch a glimpse of what the rays of the slowly rising sun might just reveal? So what did Mary see? Well, Mary saw two angels, two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. I wonder if for Mary there was a strange flashback to Golgotha, and there where Jesus was hanging under a tree, there was a thief on His right and a thief on His left, and here in the empty tomb. Two angels, one at the head, the other at the foot, but there was nobody in between. Before she could even begin to try and understand what this was all about and what could explain the presence of angels of light in the darkness of the tomb. The angels asked her a question. Woman, why are you crying? I wonder why they asked that question. Were they gently encouraging

Mary to ponder on that very question, or were they perhaps bemused at the sight and sound of weeping at the empty tomb? You see, from the perspective of heaven, which presumably is the perspective that the angels harbored, there could be nothing more incongruous than weeping at the empty tomb. The empty tomb must be a place of joy and celebration. But Mary replies to their question. They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put Him. They have taken my Lord away, for Mary, Jesus is still my Lord.

And can you, if you're still there behind her, listening, can you detect the devotion in her voice as she delivers her reply to the visitors from heaven? And yet, though He is still her Lord, He is, as far as many can conceive, still very much a dead Lord. I don't know where they have put Him. I don't know what they've done with the corpse. Suddenly, she hears a rustle just behind her. If that's where you're still standing, perhaps you need to move a little to the side. Or was it a rustle that she heard? Or was it perhaps the angels motioning to her to look behind her? In any case, she turns around, and what does she see? What does Mary see? Mary saw a man. We can't say more than that. Just a man.

Perhaps the gardener. But this is Jesus. And why can't she recognize the one she has just spoken of as my Lord?

[7 : 39] Is the half-light of a dawning day the reason? Do the tears that still fill her eyes impede her sight? Or is it just that she can't even for a moment conceive that this man could be Jesus? She's looking for a corpse. Or is it perhaps that Jesus is different, somehow just different? We know from the gospel accounts of His resurrection appearances that the disciples on a number of occasions struggled to recognize the resurrected Jesus, even after they knew that He was alive. Perhaps the most striking occasion was there on the road to Emmaus, where two of the disciples who had heard the news of His resurrection were able to walk a great distance in the company of Jesus, and yet they did not recognize Him. The risen Jesus was now endowed with a glorified body. He was the same Jesus, but somehow different. Well, perhaps any number of these reasons. Perhaps some of these reasons together explain Mary's difficulty in recognizing the man standing there at the entrance to the tomb.

And maybe we could just retreat from the garden for a moment and reflect on that problem of non-recognition, if we can call it that. And think about two of the reasons, or two of the possible reasons that Mary did not recognize Jesus, that we've suggested. She couldn't see Him because she wasn't expecting Him. Now, that's something to ponder on. She couldn't see Him because she wasn't expecting to see Him. I think that happens today. I think that happens with people coming to church on a Sunday.

We don't see Jesus because we're not expecting to see Him. We're expecting to participate in a religious ceremony or ritual or service or whatever you might want to call it, but we're not expecting to meet with the risen Jesus. And so, because we're not expecting to see Him, we fail to see Him. We fail to see Him in the Scriptures. We fail to see Him as the Word is proclaimed because we're not expecting to see Him.

But then we also suggested that she couldn't see Him because He was different to what she imagined. And though the parallels aren't exact, I wonder if that is also a problem that we can have, that many can have. We don't see Jesus because He isn't what we imagine. We've decided what He should be like.

We've decided what He should look like. We've decided who He ought to be, a Jesus in our image, and we don't see Him because He's different to the Jesus that we've constructed in our mind.

[10 : 47] Well, whatever the reason, Mary doesn't recognize the man standing there at the entrance to the tomb, and she sees a man, just a man. And what did the man say? Well, he repeated the question of the angels, why are you crying? But then he posed a further question, who is it you are looking for?

Who is it you are looking for? Did you hear that? Are you still there behind her, listening in? Who is it you are looking for? And I think this question takes us to the heart of the matter.

Mary was looking for a what when she should have been looking for a who. Does that not capture her problem? Mary was looking for a what? A body when she should have been looking for a who. She should have been looking for a person. Who are you looking for is the question that Jesus poses. Again, let's just step outside the garden and reflect on that crucial flaw in Mary's search, looking for a what instead of a who. And is that not a very contemporary problem? Are there not so many folks today who determine to explore the Christian faith, but they do so not looking for the risen Jesus, but for a religion or a philosophy or an example looking for a what instead of a who? Maybe that describes you.

But what about those of us who have been called, who have been commissioned to share with others the good news concerning the risen Jesus, to share the gospel story? Do we sometimes speak about it rather than speaking about him? Who are you looking for is the question this man posed to Mary?

Well, Mary doesn't pick up on the significance of the question posed and insists on searching for a corpse. If you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him. And then there is a moment, a moment marked by both tender simplicity and dramatic revelation. Jesus said to her, Mary. Are you still there at the entrance to the tomb? Can you hear the voice that pronounces that one word, that one name, Mary? And as the voice pronounces her name, what does Mary see?

[13 : 41] Mary sees her Lord. But how does she now see what before she could not see? She sees because she hears. She hears the name, her name, voiced by her Lord. What was it that Jesus said to the Jews in Jerusalem at the feast of dedication? We read some of what He said there in John's gospel in chapter 10, My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me. And Mary discovered that to be true as she heard the voice of her Lord pronounce her name, Mary. Mary listened to the voice of Jesus as He pronounced her name. And in a moment her grief was dispelled. The dark clouds of confusion lifted, her blindness healed, her life transformed. All because she heard her name voiced by Jesus, Mary.

Mary. Mary, who had turned away from this stranger, now turns again and sees Jesus. Rabboni, my dear master, my Lord, my shepherd, it is you. It really is you. And let's just step outside the garden again and reflect on a stirring reality. The risen Jesus still calls His sheep by name. Is He calling you by name?

Do you recognize His voice? Will you follow the one who calls you by name? Mary sees her Lord. But what else did Mary see? Well, surely there is no greater sight, no higher summit we can climb than the sight of Jesus, indeed. But she not only sees Jesus.

Mary sees the Son of God. Listen to the perplexing words of Jesus that continue in John's narrative. Mary, as she recognizes her Lord, she embraces Him. She clings to Him.

And Jesus speaks to her and He says, Do not hold on to me. Do not hold on to me. Can you see her there, tenderly clinging to Jesus? Why should she ever let go? The one she thought she had lost forever had returned. And so she clings to Him. Do not hold on to me. Why this prohibition?

[16 : 39] Perhaps Jesus is assuring her that He's not about to go just yet. He does go on to say, I have not yet returned to the Father. And perhaps that is what is in the mind of Jesus. You're clinging on to me, but I'm going to be around for a while yet. There will be more opportunity for you to indeed embrace me and be with me. Perhaps it's as simple as that, the explanation. Or perhaps, and I think this is probably closer to the mark, Jesus is preparing Mary for a new kind of relationship relationship with Himself. A relationship marked not by sight and touch, but by faith.

But then Jesus goes on. I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. And Jesus there, with a startling economy of words, both affirms His own unique relationship with the Father and the intimate relationship with His Father that He has made possible for His brothers, to use the very language that Jesus uses, for you and me.

Jesus, in these few well-chosen words, is able to declare, to announce that He is the Son of God, by nature and right, while we, by grace and faith, are adopted as sons of God. And we humbly acknowledge the distinction, while joyfully marveling at the wonder that His Father is also our Father.

His Father is your Father. His God is your God. May he seize the Son of God. There's one final thing that Mary sees that I want to draw to your attention, that I want you to see with me as we come to the close of this narrative. And we see this, or we can note this, that Mary sees her calling. She hears or sees her calling. There are two simple but striking words that Jesus addresses to Mary. There in His final words to her, as they're recorded there in verse 17.

Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them. Go instead. When Jesus says, don't do this, it's because there's something else she has to do.

[19 : 20] Don't hold on to me, because I have another task for you to perform. Instead of clinging to me, this is what I would have you do. Go instead. Go and tell. This is her calling.

Go to the brokenhearted in Jerusalem. You see, there in Jerusalem were gathered the disciples, brokenhearted, distraught, confused. And Jesus says, go and tell them. Share with them the good news.

And these are the very words Jesus addresses this Easter morning to all His brothers and sisters, to all of us who by grace have come to know Him and to follow Him as His disciples.

Go and tell. Go to Aberdeen. Go to your home. Go to your office. Go to your lecture hall or shop floor. Go to the brokenhearted. Go to the lost. Go to the hurting. Go to men and women without hope and without going to go to God and tell. Tell them. Share with them the good news.

And what am I to say, you ask? If this is also my calling, if this is also my commission, what am I to say? Well, you can begin by saying what Mary said. I have seen the Lord.

[20 : 58] That's the message that you have to tell. I have seen the Lord. Now, no doubt you'll find other words, and there'll be other words to say, to draw out the implications of it. But may these words be at the heart of your story. I have seen the Lord. This was the calling that Mary was given, and it is the calling that is extended to you and me. Go and tell. Go and share the good news of our risen Savior.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the account we have, this historical account of what happened there on the outskirts of Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago.

How the man who was crucified, the man who died, the man who was buried, the man who was placed in a grave, rose again triumphant from the grave. And we thank You for the truth of this account that we read, and we thank You for all that it tells us of who Jesus is and all that He has achieved.

And we thank You for the way in which He continues as He spoke to Mary there face to face. So He speaks to us. As He called Mary by name, so He calls us by name and commissions us to go and to tell, to share with others these simple words of testimony, I have seen the Lord. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.