

## **John 20:1-18**

20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

20:2 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."

20:3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

20:4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

20:5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

20:6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

20:7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

20:8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed,

20:9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

20:10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb,

20:12 and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

20:13 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."

20:14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

20:15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

20:16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

20:18 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.

### **Sermon: Easter People**

John's gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene rises early in the morning. Well... actually, late in the night – it's too dark to call it dawn. Mary's a mix of grief, and nervous energy, and exhaustion, and even if her body is telling her she needs sleep, her soul – her entire sense of self – is calling her somewhere else. Mary needs to be reminded, at least one

more time, of what's been lost. Mary needs, desperately, to cling on to at least some remnant of a love that has transformed her.

I never noticed, I mean really, truly noticed, that Mary is alone in John's account of Sunday morning. She has company in Mark and Luke's accounts – three women, two of whom are Maries, determined to properly prepare the body of Jesus the day after Sabbath.

And somehow, it slipped my mind this year, even after Jessica's beautiful sermon two weeks ago, that Jesus' body has already been prepared for burial: first by Mary of Bethany, who lavishly anoints Jesus' feet with nard before his entry into Jerusalem, and next on Friday, by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, when they recover his body at Golgotha.

What depth these two small details reveal!

Mary Magdalene is alone. Mary Magdalene is her own Mary, and yet she represents every Mary, and indeed, every woman. Like Mary of Bethany, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary the mother of James and John, and Martha, and Salome, and so many others who followed Jesus, Mary Magdalene feels seen, and loved in his presence; her gifts have been recognized and embraced; she knows a little something of the God Stuff; in the presence of Jesus, she experiences the divine. And she recognizes the import, and the impact, and the urgency of God's presence in her midst.

And like every woman, Mary also knows the alienation of invisibility; she knows what it is to be silenced. She also knows the depth of a mother's love; she never, not once allows the pain of the not yet to dampen her hope in what will one day be. And she knows that if we're gonna love each other, really love each other, we've gotta love with our

whole selves. Not just words. But presence. And messy cries. And deep embraces. And the sharing of all our vulnerabilities and intricacies.

Mary isn't getting up this Sunday morning to perform a ritual task. She's going to the tomb in the hopes of holding, embracing, saying one last goodbye to the person who is representative of the deepest, most whole, most profound sense of love she's ever experienced. Mary Magdalene, like Mary of Bethany before her, intends to pour out her whole self to anoint Jesus with all the love she possesses.

But a funny thing happens on the way to the tomb. The stone is rolled away. And in this pre-Easter world, all that Mary can imagine is that grave-robbers have stolen the body of Jesus. Mary doesn't even look in the tomb. She runs to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

What follows is, I think, one of the more sophomoric scenes in the whole of our scriptures. Peter and the Beloved Disciple engage in a footrace to the tomb, and then jockey for position to see who can climb in first. It conjures up images of Laurel and Hardy trying to squeeze through a revolving door at the same time. And since it's a contest, we learn that the Beloved Disciple is faster, smarter, stronger, and definitely more manly than Peter. Both men confirm the obvious: "Yup, it's a grave robber." And then they proceed to go back home, each to their own dwelling places, without seeming to offer the slightest amount of insight, pastoral care, community, evolved behavior, or even a hug to Mary.

And then there's this great little breadcrumb: the Beloved Disciple didn't believe, but he really did believe, it's just that he didn't know he believed yet. And he can't really be the most beloved, and wise, and

disciple-y if he's not the first, and the best, and so you know, we've just got that disclaimer in there. But anyway...

Halfway through the story, Mary is back to where she started. Alone. And she's weeping, because surely, we can do better than this. Surely, there's more to this story. Surely, we aren't just gonna give up, and go home, and hide, and stop remembering the umph of all that's happened in our lives?!? Right?!?

Mary is resolved to do what she must. She peers into the tomb for herself. And she sees two strange men, angels, sitting where the body of Jesus should be.

And they see her, too. And they say, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And you know, I used to always read this like they were scolding Mary. But they aren't! They see Mary. Her humanity. Someone who is overcome with grief. In that moment, when her friends the disciples are too self-absorbed in their own grief to notice Mary, to give attention to a larger issue, the angels aren't. They ask about Mary's wellbeing. I love this detail!

And here's what I love even more. Mary has moved into full-on "I-ain't-messing-around" mode. She's come here to show her love for Jesus, and she's gonna find his body if it's the last thing she does. "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him."

Flummoxed, Mary turns around, and this time, sees Jesus, whom she assumes is the gardener. And again, don't discount his two questions.

"Woman, why are you weeping?" Like the angels before him, Jesus sees Mary and shows concern for her wellbeing.

“And for whom are you looking?” This is the very same question Jesus asks of the first two disciples he calls at the beginning of John’s gospel. Jesus doesn’t just see Mary; Jesus sees Mary as a worthy disciple.

Mary persists. “Please, sir, if you’ve carried my Lord away, just tell me where he is, and I’ll take care of him. I must do this. I must find him.”

“Mary. It’s me!” And all at once, Mary hears her name spoken by the risen Jesus. And hearing him speak her name, Mary is even more resolved to complete this last act of devotion. She reaches out to embrace her friend.

But Jesus instructs Mary not to touch him. He’s in the process of ascending to the Father – the cross, and Sunday morning, and the revelations in the season to come, and ultimately his Ascension from the Mount of Olives are part of a series of interconnected events. Jesus’ resurrection and transformation are not yet complete. If Jesus is going to transcend from this realm, he’s going to have to let go of it, and this realm must let go of him. “Mary, I need you to tell everyone that I’m ascending to my God and your God, our God. It’s all happening.”

I believe it’s really important to reiterate that Jesus is not rebuking Mary’s behavior here. Mary Magdalene, like Mary of Bethany, has known the love of Jesus in the most profound, pure, and wholly incorruptible way imaginable. Mary demonstrates authentic friendship and selfless service. Jesus recognizes Mary’s extraordinary gesture and honors it with his presence and attention. And then, Jesus trusts both her competency as a disciple and the prophetic witness of her voice.

Jesus is asking Mary to let go of him in the present in order that he can become the Jesus he’s called to be in the future. He’s asking Mary not

to limit his abundance just to the intimate spaces of his inner circle, but to let him become a source of abundance for every neighbor. And Jesus can't do this if he stays in the past, even the most profound and precious moments and relationships of that past.

And Mary accepts this request. Gladly. She doesn't cling to Jesus or beg for an easier way. She accepts the role of disciple and witness.

I want to remind you of some connective tissue in this story.

When the Gospel of John begins, John the Baptist is hanging around one day, chatting with two of his disciples. And all of sudden, this Jesus fellow walks by, and John, says, "That's the person, that's the Lamb of God." And John's two disciples immediately begin following Jesus. Jesus turns around, and he asks the two disciples a question, "What are you looking for?"

And the two disciples respond, "We want to know where you are staying, and what you are doing." And Jesus responds, "Come and see." See where I live. See the company I keep. See the places I travel to. See the ways in which I choose to love. Come and see your extended family.

Disciples are invited to see. And their sight leads to belief.

Well, let me tell you something, Millbrook. Mary has seen. And Mary has believed. And knees knocking, heart pounding, she walks out into an unbelieving world and becomes the very first witness to the resurrection of Jesus. And it's Mary's belief, Mary's courage, Mary's persistence, Mary's voice that galvanizes a movement now more than two millennia old.

What might Mary Magdalene's story mean for us, an Easter people, in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Raleigh, NC? Three things:

*Alone, but not absent.* Don't discount the fact that Mary was alone on Easter morning. In some way, we all experience dark Fridays, long Saturdays, and anxious Sundays, moments of isolation, and grief for the abrupt end to the people, places, and ideas that give us a sense of gravity and purpose. Sometimes the world feels broken, and it seems we're the only people who both notice that brokenness and desire to work for healing. Our belief in love, in what is good and just, in the bright possibilities of our Creator, is no less valid, no less potent, no less Easter-y in solitude. God is present at the empty tomb, and God faiths in our righteousness.

*Letting go.* God has come and dwelled among us. Mary refuses to cling to her most dear form of divine connection – experiencing Jesus as a close personal friend – in order that others might also experience a deeper communion with Jesus, in order that the Jesus of First Century Palestine might also become Jesus for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Raleigh. Millbrook, I love this community, and I love our 150-year mission of loving God and neighbor. But like Mary, we ought to ask:

What traditions are we clinging to, what ways are we claiming Jesus exclusively for ourselves, that prevent the next generation of Jesus-followers from experiencing the divine in equally profound and transforming ways? Does our desire to sit with Jesus exactly as we did in 1975, or 1985, or 1995 inhibit our ability to develop a reverent, relevant, and compelling expression of Jesus in 2025, and 2055, and 2085, and 2095? Can we, too, let go of Jesus, so that Jesus can be Jesus for others.



Mary braved a post-Easter reality: Jesus' ability to draw out the very best of Creation in ever-changing ways.

*Voice.* Mary used her voice. Mary proclaimed the Risen Christ. She proclaimed God's ability to resurrect every new possibility, to experience the full potential of every created being. So, what will we resurrect on this Resurrection Sunday, Millbrook?

Is it finally time to resurrect a sense of morality in our world? Is it finally time to resurrect a love that reaches beyond the enclosure of a sanctuary?

Is it finally time to resurrect an Easter theology, not as testament of an impending death and necessary sacrifice, but rather as an invitation to experience the life abundant?

Is it finally time to abandon our insistence on following the same old leaders and voices, the ones that race toward tombs, and declare predictable falsehoods based on lazy investigations, and scurry back to the safety of their status quo, and instead, believe, finally....finally, finally believe in the voices of witnesses like Mary, the ones who though lonely and grief-stricken and emptied of their selfless love, stand like sentinels, wet with the armor of divine tears and scented with week-old nard, ready to proclaim truth in word and deed?

Is it finally time, Millbrook, for us to resurrect a language of discipleship where we stop insisting folks follow Jesus just like us, you know "the right way," and instead, we invite people to follow Jesus as the very people God has created them to be, those with bodies, minds, and spirits wonderfully, intricately, and beautifully created in the image of God?

**Easter People**  
**Resurrection Sunday, 4/20/2025**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**John 20:1-18**



Is it finally time, Millbrook, for us to resurrect ourselves as Resurrection People?!?

Miss Mary met the Risen Christ. And she used her voice to ensure that others would, too. May God help us to do the same. And may we raise our voices today.

Christ the Lord is risen! Christ the Lord is risen, indeed!

Amen.