

JESUS AND MARY

John 20:10-18

In the first nine verses of chapter 20 of his gospel, John tells us about the discovery of the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection. Giles gave us a talk on that last week for Easter Sunday. In our reading today the focus shifts from the empty tomb to Mary. So, as we study this passage together, the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen, or you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles.

Let's start by looking at verses 10-12:

“Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.” (verses 10-12)

After seeing the empty tomb the disciples return to their homes, but Mary remains behind. There's no mention of other women, so she's alone by the tomb after the others have left. She is weeping (verse 11). The loss of Jesus' body is the final indignity, the last straw; even her mourning for Jesus is violated. It's not hard to imagine the enormous emotional strain which the last few days had placed on Mary, not least the anguish of having looked on at Calvary. Her tears were more than understandable.

Mary decides to look once more into the tomb, although a few moments ago there was nothing but abandoned grave-clothes (verses 6 and 7). So, looking again into the tomb she sees two angelic figures, *seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot* (verse 12). The place of Jesus' death was between two thieves, the place of his burial was between two angels. Here John is making it clear that the empty tomb is not the result of grave robbers or any other natural happening – God has been at work.

The angels ask her about her tears, look at verse 13:

“They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.”” (verse 13)

From the angels heavenly perspective nothing is more out of place than tears at the empty tomb of Jesus. If there is one place in space and one moment in time when tears are least appropriate, it is at the empty tomb of Jesus on Easter morning! Mary repeats her concern at the disappearance of *my Lord*. It’s significant that her emotions and her devotion prevent her referring to a ‘body’. Jesus is still ‘her Lord’.

Before Mary has time to reflect on the significance of the angels she becomes aware of another presence behind her, look at verse 14:

“At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.” (verse 14)

A man is standing there. It’s Jesus, but Mary doesn’t recognise him. Mary would hardly have expected to see Jesus alive at that moment, but her initial failure to identify him fits in well with the records of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances generally – for example when he appeared initially unrecognised to the disciples on the beach in Galilee (John 21:4) or unrecognized for hours when he appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:16). This failure to recognize the risen Jesus immediately is not surprising. Jesus has not just been resuscitated, like Lazarus. He has passed through death and is now part of a new order of existence in the glory of the Father’s presence. He’s inhabiting a new resurrection body probably like the bodies we shall receive at Jesus’ second coming. The form in which Jesus appeared to Mary and to the disciples and others was connected and yet disconnected from his former self. Accordingly, his appearing ‘different’ in some indefinable sense is entirely what we ought to expect. Do we fail to recognize Jesus when he knocks on the door of our hearts?

Mary actually initially mistakes Jesus for the gardener looking after the garden in which his tomb is set – look at verse 15:

““Woman,” he said, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried

him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.””
(verse 15)

Again there is a question concerning her distress. *Woman, ... why are you crying?* Mary isn't yet conscious of the unsuitability of her tears. Jesus adds a further question: *Who is it you are looking for?* There is perhaps an implied challenge in Jesus' words. Mary's problem, in common with all the disciples, was that she didn't have a large enough view of Jesus; she is searching for a corpse instead of seeking a victorious Lord; although I think it's totally fair to ask, would we have acted any differently?

Still under the assumption that Jesus is the gardener, Mary asks if he is responsible for the disappearance of Jesus from the tomb. The irony here is that in the profoundest sense Jesus certainly was responsible for the disappearance of his body, although not at all in the manner Mary was thinking of. If Jesus' body had been moved, it would probably have been difficult for Mary to carry it unaided, but in her grief stricken state she wasn't thinking logically.

Then comes the moment of recognition, and it is beautifully told – look at verse 16:

“Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).” (verse 16)

One word uttered by Jesus remakes Mary's world and changes her life for ever after, and that word was her own name – Mary! This is a really memorable confirmation of the personal nature of Christ's dealings with his people. Mary responds in ecstatic joy, *Rabboni!* ('My own dear teacher!'). As John said back in chapter 10 Jesus calls his own sheep by name (John 10:3). I think Dodd's comment is especially appropriate: “There is something indefinably first-hand about it ... there is nothing quite like it in the gospels. Is there anything quite like it in all of ancient literature?”

Jesus gently disengages himself from Mary – look at verse 17:

“Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'”” (verse 17)

It's not quite clear what Jesus is saying here. Perhaps he means: 'The time of my final return to the Father (after which you will not see me again) has not yet come; this will not be my only appearance to you and the others, so you don't need to cling on to me as though you will never see me again.'

But I think Jesus is saying that from now on, although the resurrection appearances are a special exception, Jesus is not to be known by means of touch, by his physical presence, as had been the case. The resurrection, and the ascension which is to come, imply a new kind of relationship with Jesus, to be shared with all disciples in every age and place. A relationship of faith-union with Christ through the Holy Spirit sent by the ascending Christ – as Jesus told us back in chapter 14 of John's gospel (John 14:18-26).

Jesus further tells Mary to take the glad news of his rising to the other disciples. His use of the word *instead* here, seems to imply a concern that Mary should not go on and on clinging to Jesus and privately enjoying the blessing of it when there was a group of broken disciples no great distance away who had as much need and right as Mary to know of Jesus' resurrection. I think that has profound implications for us today. We shouldn't just be sitting in a huddle holding on to Jesus' presence. Rather we need to go out into the world to share the good news of the risen Christ with broken, needy hearts who have just as valid a claim to know of him as we do.

The implications of Jesus' message to the disciples are awesome. It is a word of victory. Jesus has conquered death. The king lives and continues in his reign. The initiative has been wrenched from the hands of the high priest Caiaphas and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Ascension and the assumption of authority at the Father's right hand now lie before Jesus. Let the disciples rejoice. Let all of us here today rejoice too!

The message Mary is given to convey is also a message concerning amazing privilege: *my Father and your Father, ... to my God and your God* (verse 17). Whereas Jesus' relationship to the Father had

previously been ‘holy ground’ that the disciples might not tread upon or even approach, his death and resurrection, which ascension will ratify even further, open up for us a new relationship with the Holy One. God the Father is now also *their* ‘holy Father’, he’s father to the disciples and he’s our Father too.

Although the relationship between Jesus and the Father would remain for ever unique, in a new sense that special communion between the living God and a man in the flesh, previously the sole preserve of Jesus, is thrown open also to the disciples and to us as well.

Like a good missionary, Mary acts on the Lord’s command and tells the good news to the disciples: look at verse 18:

“Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.”
(verse 18)

Mary’s message to the disciples is illuminated by her own radiant testimony, *I have seen the Lord!* When we share Jesus with others let’s illuminate his gospel message with the light of our own testimony as well.

So what have we learned about Jesus and his resurrection today. Firstly we can see that the resurrection was a real historical event. The stories including our reading today are full of eyewitness details that speak loudly of real historical events. The empty tomb and the post resurrection appearances of Jesus – of which we’ve read about the appearance to Mary – transformed the disciples from craven cowards who ran away at Jesus’ arrest and denied that they ever knew him into lions who preached the gospel throughout the known world and risked arrest, beatings, floggings and even death. Almost all of the disciples eventually died violent deaths for their faith. Jesus’ family who’d thought Jesus mad before the crucifixion and resurrection also became firm believers. I believe nothing could have caused this transformation other than the reality of the resurrection. Professor Charlie Moule, the famous New Testament theologian once said:

“The birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church... remains an

unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the one and only possible explanation to be offered the resurrection." The truth of the Resurrection ignited the early Church.”

Our Christian faith is the only major religion to base itself in historical reality – the knowledge that Jesus was alive and walked on this earth, that he was crucified, and that he rose from the dead and ascended to the Father – all on particular days in history nearly 2,000 years ago.

Secondly, we can see that the resurrection is *personal* in its implication. A main emphasis of John’s presentation of Easter is the life-transforming appearance of Jesus to Mary beside the tomb. Christ’s rising generated a new and personal discovery of Jesus for Mary, it transformed her life and it needs to create a similar experience and a similar transformation for us too. At the time Mary was weeping, a burdened woman because she believed she had lost someone she loved dearly. Somehow the hopes which Jesus had built within her had not been realized.

But Christ was there for her, and his coming was the banishing of her feelings of sadness and feelings of betrayal. The whole point of the resurrection at this level is that we can meet Jesus today. Of course, we can’t meet Jesus precisely in Mary’s tangible terms, but we can meet Jesus in a very real way through the Spirit and by faith. And the encounter can be no less life-changing. Triumphant over death, Jesus is alive for ever and so he’s still here with us. Jesus still comes to transform broken, sorrowing and fearful lives with the sheer uninhibited gladness of discovering him, alive and with us.

Thirdly we can see that the resurrection is *universal*. It’s for everyone. Our reading today ended with Mary sent to share the good news of the resurrection with others. Here John is anticipating the great commission which the risen Lord would give us. Mary’s words for ‘*I have seen the Lord!*’ must lead to ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matthew 28:19).

Also Jesus says to the disciples in verse 21:

“Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."” (verse 21)

The resurrection is the vindication of the life and death of Jesus as the one in whom God, in person, God in the flesh, entered our world so that salvation might be won for every tribe and people and nation. Easter is a gospel message, and it belongs to the world!

So let's all go out and tell the world about the risen Christ, this day and every day.