

Wednesday, February 5, 2025 | *Deep Dive: The Gospel According to John* | John 20:11-18

Vs. 11-13 – Initially, there were *three* wildly different reactions to the empty tomb: belief (vs. 8), bewilderment (cf. Lu. 24:12), and, as we'll now see, bereavement. Over the following five verses, John will use the Greek term **κλαίω** (*klaíō*) *four times* to refer to Mary Magdalene's weeping. Unlike the word **δακρύω** (*dakryō*), which refers to a *subdued* cry (see notes 11:35), *klaíō* describes a *loud* wail (cf. 11:33; 16:20; Ac. 9:39; Ja. 5:1; Rev. 5:4).¹ So, when John tells us that “Mary stood without at the sepulcher weeping,” we're to envision a woman in profound travail and deep mourning over not only Jesus' death but also the disappearance of his body. Such an occurrence implies foul play and, as Köstenberger explains, “abuse of the dead was considered an abhorrent offense.”² Thus, this was a woman experiencing multiple degrees of grief. It is perfectly reasonable that we find her weeping to such an extent.

But “as she wept [*klaíō*],” like John, Mary “stooped down, and looked into the sepulcher,” but, unlike the Beloved Apostle, Mary sees more than just grave clothes; she also sees “two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.” Like the *two-fold* apostolic witness before (see notes vs. 3-5), this *two-fold* angelic appearance gives further credence to John's account (cf. Deut. 17:6; 19:15). But practically speaking, sitting in this way, the angels framed the *vacuum* left by Jesus' disappearance.³ In other words, their very position highlighted his missing body. But rather than accentuating a miracle, thereby relieving some stress, as we'll see, this gesture only emphasized a loss, heightening Mary's sorrow.

Seeing Mary was not relieved, the angels ask her, “Woman, why weepest [*klaíō*] thou?” The question specifically draws attention to the *incongruity* of her lament. Audible weeping is usually appropriate at a cemetery. But considering the empty tomb, the abandoned funeral attire, the folded head covering, and now the appearance of two heavenly messengers, crying in such a fashion is out of place and begs an explanation. In response, Mary says, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.” This is the same message she gave Peter and John, but rather than saying “*the* Lord” and “*we* know not,” as before (vs. 2), Mary says, “*my* Lord,” and “*I* know not.” This moment didn't just impact the group; it hit her *personally*. But more than that, her nearly identical response demonstrates that even though some time had elapsed, this poor woman was in the same state she was in before. If anything, she appears to be even *more* upset. She was so upset that she showed little to no reaction to

¹ BDAG, p. 545;

² Köstenberger (2008), p. 567.

³ Brown, David; Fausset, AR; Jamieson, Robert, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 3 (SS Scranton; 1890), p. 169

this supernatural encounter despite conversing with two angels face-to-face. Fear was usually accompanied by an angelic appearance (cf. Ju. 6:22; Lu. 1:13; 2:9; Ac. 10:4); this is especially true at the resurrection (cf. Mat. 28:4-5; Mar. 16:5; Lu. 24:5). But Mary Magdalene was so distraught that not even a couple of angelic beings could break through that thick haze of sorrow.⁴ Indeed, this was despair of the most extreme kind.

Vs. 14-15 – The angels do not get a chance to respond. Instead, after giving voice to her grief, John says, “[Mary] turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.” Was Mary’s vision so clouded with tears that she didn’t know Jesus when she saw him?⁵ Perhaps. But it’s worth pointing out that Jesus’ unrecognizability is a common feature in the resurrection accounts (cf. vs. 20; 21:4; Lu. 24:16). Explanations for this phenomenon vary. Most likely, God concealed the knowledge for some unknown purpose.⁶ Or, Jesus’ resurrected body was familiar enough that no one doubted his identity when they finally recognized him, but, at the same time, his features had changed in some way that he wasn’t immediately identifiable (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-49). Or, considering that the last time people saw Jesus, he had been thoroughly beaten and crucified, the sight of him alive, walking, and talking might have been so jarring that the mind had difficulty comprehending what it was seeing.

Regardless, Jesus asked Mary, “Woman, why weepst [*klaíō*] thou?” His question is the same as one in vs. 13. Of course, neither he nor the angels were ignorant; they knew the cause of Mary’s cry. Like the angels, the Lord wanted to engage Mary’s *analytical* skills. He wanted her to set her grief aside, inviting her to carefully consider the scene. To that end, the Lord follows up that question with another: “Whom seekest thou?” Once again, the Lord wasn’t gathering information; he knew she was looking for him. This question drilled down to the heart of Mary’s investigation: *Jesus’ identity*.⁷ Ironically, her inquirer was the very one she was looking for! But more than that, did she not believe the Lord was the Messiah? If so, why was Mary looking for the “living among the dead” (cf. Lu. 24:5)? These questions posed to Mary were a gentle rebuke that she had yet to fully comprehend who Jesus was.⁸

But rather than putting two and two together, Mary thought Jesus was “the gardener.” Likely due to her depressed state, she considered it far more likely that she was conversing with a caretaker than the risen Lord. As such, she says to him, “Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell

⁴ Mary’s lack of reaction implies that this angelic encounter is distinct from those experienced by the other women. Perhaps, while Mary was retrieving Peter and John, her female companions had a unique interaction.

⁵ Carson (1991), p. 641.

⁶ Luke says the disciples on the Emmaus Road were “holden that they should not know him” (Lu. 24:16), implying divine intervention.

⁷ Morris (1995), p. 740, “She was looking for a corpse whereas she should have been seeking a person.”

⁸ Carson (1991), p. 641, “Grand as [Mary’s] devotion to him was, her estimate of him was still far too small.”

me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.” This comment further illustrates how bereavement is often accompanied by illogical and irrational thought patterns. Mary was clearly not thinking straight. Granted, a gardener at this time and place seems logical. But by asking, “Where thou hast laid him,” Mary seems to think this man was also the graverobber (vs. 2, 13). If so, what sort of criminal returns to the crime scene? Additionally, if this man had gone through the trouble of taking Jesus' body, what's the likelihood he'd return it? And lastly, how in the world did Mary expect to move the deceased body of a grown man all by herself? Unsurprisingly, few things are more effective at clouding a person's judgment than grief.

Vs. 16 – “Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.” Though she heard his voice when he asked those questions, it was only when the Lord *spoke her name* that Mary Magdalene was brought to her senses. Though she had been looking directly at this man (vs. 14), it was only with the word "Mary" on his lips that she finally realized this was not some unfamiliar gardener but her beloved "Rabboni."⁹ The sheep follow the Good Shepherd not just because they know the cadence and tone of his voice—i.e., *how* he sounds—but also because he calls them by their name—i.e., *what* he says (cf. 10:3-5, 16). Though the Lord has a relationship with many, each one is unique, and each connection is *personal*. As Psalm 139:1-6 says,

“O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it.”

Vs. 17 – “Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father.”¹⁰ The phrase “touch me not” is a command to “stop clinging to me” rather than “don’t touch me.”¹¹ Later, the Lord invites Thomas to touch the place where the nails and the spear pierced his body (vs. 27). In a parallel account, women take hold of Jesus' feet and worship him without rebuke (cf. Mat. 28:9). Thus, Mary did nothing wrong in touching the risen Savior. Her mistake

⁹ Mary's use of the Aramaic word for "Master" to address Jesus rather than the more appropriate title "Lord" shouldn't be criticized. Not unlike the use of "Teacher" in 11:28, "Rabboni" is a term of endearment intended to convey a strong personal connection (Köstenberger (2008), p. 569).

¹⁰ Carson (1991), p. 641-642, regards this verse as one "of the most difficult passages in the New Testament."

¹¹ Morris (1995), p. 742.

(if it can even be called that) was *clinging* to him so possessively that she feared losing him again.¹²

Mary need not be so clingy because Jesus had "not yet ascended to [his] Father." Though Jesus was back, he would soon ascend to heaven (cf. 16:5-9). Jesus gently reminded Mary that, as overjoyed as she may be at this moment, this kind of reunion is *temporary*. Such a reminder need not cause her any worry or anxiety; his ascension ought to be cause for celebration (cf. 14:28). For though the days are long gone where she would physically travel alongside Jesus, soon she will be closer to the Lord than she's ever been before. Mary and the rest of the disciples had to ready themselves for the moment when he would no longer be with them outwardly, but he would dwell with them inwardly (cf. 14:15-17, 23; Jn. 17:22-23).

Furthermore, practically speaking, Mary could not cling to Jesus because he had a mission for her; it would be impossible to fulfill her objective if she didn't release him. The Lord commands her to "go to my brethren" with a message. Of course, the Lord wasn't referring to his half-brothers, though he does appear to at least one of them (cf. 1 Cor. 15:7), but given Mary's destination in vs. 18, it is clear the Lord was referring to the apostles as his brothers. Though the disciples had abandoned him (cf. Mar. 14:50) and Peter had thrice denied him (18:15-18, 25-27), the Lord still referred to them as "my brethren" (cf. Matt. 12:50). Truly, no one can snatch us out of Jesus' hand (cf. 10:28-30). Not even our foolishness cannot separate us from his loving embrace (cf. Rom. 8:38-39).

Clearly, it is significant that Jesus says, "My Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." But how we are to understand this saying isn't so clear. In one sense, Jesus seems to say that his followers are equal to him. But this can hardly be the case. The Lord is God's unique Son (cf. 1:18; 3:16; 5:19-30). Thus, the only other interpretation that makes sense is that Jesus refers to the apostle's sonship. The disciples were not being deified but *adopted*! In fact, John foreshadowed this very thing in his prologue: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (1:12; cf. Rom. 8:15-17; 2 Cor. 6:18; Eph. 1:5; Heb. 2:11-12). The resurrection validated Jesus' sacrifice. Through the cross, his followers had successfully been reconciled to God. They were no longer orphans but children of the Father. Mary was sent to declare that as the Lord called God "Father," so can all who put their faith in Jesus' name.

Vs. 18 – "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her."

¹² Carson (1991), p. 644.

Some argue that Mary's mission to the apostles gives credence to the idea that women should be considered for the role of elder/overseer/pastor role. Admittedly, the N.T. elevates the station of womanhood. Mary Magdalene wasn't only the first to witness the empty tomb but also the first to interact with the risen Lord. Sexism was prevalent at this time, so it is significant that a woman holds a place of such prominence in multiple first-century documents.¹³

However, applying this passage to church hierarchy ignores passages that specifically address this issue (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12; 3:1-7; Ti. 1:5-9). Furthermore, it conflates the calling to bring good news, which is the duty of all Christians regardless of gender, with the calling of pastoral leadership, which evangelism is only one piece of the whole (cf. 2 Tim. 4:1-5). Asserting that Jesus, either explicitly or implicitly, elevated Mary, and by extension all women, to a position of authority over or equal to that of the apostles misconstrues the text at hand. As important as matters of church polity may be, this scene has little to no bearing on such issues.

Ultimately, the thrust of this passage deals with the theme of *reversal*. Mary had been reduced to tears. But then she encountered the resurrected Lord, and now she's given the solemn task of bringing good news to her fellow disciples. Mary Magdalene's experience fulfills what Jesus said to the apostles during the Farewell Discourse: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy" (16:20; cf. Psa. 30:5). The truth of the resurrection transformed Mary, a woman once besides herself in grief, into a joyful herald of the resurrection. From that moment on, though she may sorrow again, she will not do so without hope (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13). The Easter story sustains the heart, even in times of great tragedy, keeping it from utter despair.

¹³ Mary Magdalene and Peter are conversing at the end of a fictitious late second-century non-canonical gospel. At one point, Simon Peter tells the apostles, "Let Mary leave us because women are not worthy of life." But then Jesus intervenes, saying, "Look, I shall lead her so that I will make her male in order that she also may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Gospel of Thomas, saying 114). For more on the Gospel of Thomas, see this: Huff, Wesley, "Why I date the Gospel of Thomas late," September 22, 2020, *Wesley Huff*, wesleyhuff.com/blog/2020/9/22/why-i-date-the-gospel-of-thomas-late, [accessed February 5, 2025].

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Initially, there were *three* wildly different reactions to the empty tomb: belief (vs. 8), bewilderment (cf. Lu. 24:12), and, as we'll see tonight, bereavement. From verses 11 to 15, there are four references to Mary Magdalene's weeping. Given that she was not only mourning Jesus' death but suspected foul play in the disappearance of his body, it is understandable that we find her weeping to such an extent. This was a woman experiencing multiple degrees of grief.

But this weeping will not last for long. Though it takes some convincing—e.g., the collapsed grave clothes, an angelic appearance, a personal interaction with Jesus himself—Mary eventually comes around. As such, the thrust of this passage deals with the theme of *reversal*. As the Lord turned a grave into the birthplace of new life, so the resurrection made Mary go from weeping to rejoicing.

Mary Magdalene's experience in this passage is a fulfillment of what Jesus said to the apostles during the Farewell Discourse: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy" (16:20; cf. Psa. 30:5). The truth of the resurrection transformed Mary, a woman once besides herself in grief, into a joyful herald of the resurrection. From that moment on, though she may sorrow again, she will not do so without hope (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13). The Easter story sustains the heart, even in times of great tragedy, keeping it from utter despair.

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