

Text: John 20:11-18

Title: Believe because Mary Magdalene saw Him risen

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Introduction: The Gospel accounts are clear that women were the first to be given the news from the angels that Jesus had risen from the dead. One of these women did not see the angels, because she despaired that the body of Christ had been stolen when she saw the stone rolled away from the tomb. She had run to tell the apostles her tragic misunderstanding. And yet, upon her return this dear disciple, Mary Magdalene, became the first person to see Jesus risen from the dead.

On May 21, 1997, Pope John Paul II tried to give that honor to Mary, Jesus's mother. He explained in an address that the Gospels do not mention Jesus meeting His mother because "perhaps . . . such a witness would have been considered too biased by those who denied the Lord's Resurrection, and therefore not worthy of belief." As the address went on, however, it was clear that it was the pope's Mariolatry that was rooted in bias. He called for Catholics to celebrate Easter with the Regina Caeli, which ascribes praise to Mary as the "Queen of heaven." [[https://www.ncregister.com/blog/jesus-appeared-first-to-mary-after-resurrection.](https://www.ncregister.com/blog/jesus-appeared-first-to-mary-after-resurrection)]

The Apostle John knew nothing about a Roman Catholic bias for worshipping Jesus's mother, but as a Jew of the first century he would have been well acquainted with his culture's bias against the validity of female testimony. Luke tells us that when the other women reported to the other disciples what they had heard from the angels, "their words seemed to [the apostles] as idle tales, and they believed them not" (24:11).

The Jewish Talmud reads this way in regard to a woman's testimony: "The following are considered incompetent to be witnesses: gamblers with dice, usurers, pigeon breeders, those

who deal with the produce of the sabbatic year, and slaves. This is the rule: All evidence that cannot be received from a woman cannot be received from any of the above.” Whereas the rejection of these categories of men as testimonies had to be spelled out, the rejection of a woman’s testimony was axiomatic. A woman’s testimony was inadmissible in court.

In light of this cultural bias, were John to set down on paper a fictional tale designed to offer his fellow Jews false evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he never would have emphasized the role of a woman as he does in our passage. Simply put, John is not trying to deceive, but rather to tell what truly happened. The truth is the truth, whether admissible in a Jewish court or not. That women were the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a choice God made, and it is a choice that testifies to the authenticity and historical accuracy of not only godly women, but also of the Gospel accounts.

John wants us, his readers this morning, to believe that Jesus is the risen Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name (20:31), because Mary Magdalene saw Him risen. He tells us about the witness of Mary’s weeping, the witness of her confession, and the witness of her message.

I. The witness of Mary’s weeping (11-16a).

Illustration: Two Wednesdays ago, many of our neighbors celebrated Earth Day. While being good stewards of God’s creation is a Christian responsibility, we must also remember that Earth Day is a day for pagans to worship nature. On Halloween last year, *The National Geographic* published an article titled, “Paganism is on the rise – here’s where to discover its traditions.” The subtitle said, “TikTok – specifically #witchtok – is fueling interest in paganism. Here’s how to immerse yourself in full moon rituals, spellcasting, and more.” The article explained in part, “Travelers can visit Mother Grove Goddess Temple, near downtown Asheville, to join in

public rituals during the ancient holy days (and Earth Day) and participate in nature worshipping events such as full moon ceremonies.”

Application: The rise of the occult in our culture is one of the gospel challenges of the day to which we have been called to be faithful witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I believe this challenge is especially severe in New England.

During Jesus’s gospel ministry, paganism was forced to decline as He healed many who were demon possessed. Mary Magdalene had been one of those so healed. Luke 8:2 tells us that seven demons had gone out of her when she was saved from her sin by the Lord Jesus.

With the demons departed, Mary Magdalene now believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing she had life in His name. But what she had witnessed three days earlier at Golgotha must have seemed irreconcilable with the truth that had saved her, that Jesus was her Messiah. The faith of the faithful is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Heb. 11:1). But when evil wins a battle, it works as substantial evidence against things hoped for.

Even with her shaken faith, Mary Magdalene still loved the Lord. She had brought spices to the tomb. Believing that the tomb had been robbed proved to be more than she could handle without bursting out into tears of despair and confusion. Her weeping this way was witness to her love for Jesus and her trust in Him as her Savior, a trust that felt betrayed as she sorrowed. If Mary were cracking jokes about the empty tomb, her testimony would have been a much different witness.

John tells us that Mary stoops into the tomb where the two angels ask her why she is weeping. Mary’s answer to them was not about “our Lord” and “we do not know,” but rather about “my Lord” and “I do not know” (v. 13). Jesus was her

Lord. She needed to know for herself where they had taken Him. Is Jesus my Lord and your Lord in the same personal way? Do you and I love Him the way Mary Magdalene did?

Next, Mary meets Jesus. Looking with her swollen eyes through her tears, she believes Him to be the gardener. She is still confused when Jesus asks, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" The angels had asked why she was weeping. The Lord wants her to think on another question as well: "Whom do you seek?" If only Mary could have remembered who it was that she was seeking, what He was like and what He had promised, her distress would have found the comfort she sought. When we feel like we cannot find the Lord, we must remember the glory of whom we seek.

Then instead of repeating "Woman," Jesus says, "Mary." Perhaps in that moment she remembered this teaching of her Lord: "He that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and *he calleth his own sheep by name*, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice" (John 10:2-4). Jesus called Mary's name, one of His ewes, and led her out of her despair.

And so the first witness of Mary to the resurrection of Jesus Christ was her weeping. Jesus could have prevented her weeping. He could have met her after those first couple of panicked steps toward Peter and John for help. He could have called her name then, but He did not. It was His will for her that she weep for a time in confusion and even despair, because her weeping bore witness to her love of Him.

The Lord allows painful weeping in our lives for the same reason, even when this weeping is caused by our despair and confusion. When we find ourselves weeping like Mary Magdalene, may we listen well for the voice of our Shepherd as He

calls our name to lead us out. Once we are led out of despair, the witness of our weeping will turn to our confession.

II. The witness of Mary's confession (16b-17a).

Application: The word *confession* is a Bible word. The Greek word is *homologia*. *Homo* means *the same*, and *logia* comes from *logos* meaning *word*. So a Bible confession is literally a *same-word*, or *a word that is the same as another's word*. Jesus must be glorified by our confession in at least three ways.

1. Paul tells us "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10). We become righteous when we believe in our heart that Jesus is who He says He is, and we are saved when we possess a word that is the same as His, namely that He came to die for our sins and rise again.
2. We must confess Jesus before men and not deny Him. Denial is the opposite of confession: "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33). Believers' baptism is important here.
3. As believers, we also must confess our sin. We must own the same description of our sin that the Lord has. Our fellowship with the Lord requires this: "If we say that we have no sin [deny our sin], we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). Notice that the great Apostle John says "our," "we," and "us." Like we, he needed this confession of his sin.

In our passage, Mary confesses the same thing about the Lord that the Lord says about Himself. She says, "Rabboni," which John tells us meant *Teacher*. Jesus knew He was Mary Magda-

lene's teacher, and Mary said the same word about Him. When she confessed that Jesus was her teacher, she necessarily confessed that she was His learner or disciple.

What is our confession about Jesus? Is He our teacher the way Mary meant it? He was not merely one of her many teachers. He was her supreme teacher. She was His disciple, His obedient follower. She wanted to know Him, to learn from Him, and to follow Him in obedience. Is her confession our confession? Have we ever truly addressed the Lord as "Rabboni"?

Mary's confession was not only in word but also in deed. She excitedly clings to the Lord in the relief and joy of finding Him alive again, and Jesus tells her to stop doing so because He had not yet ascended to the Father.

Commentators struggle to understand what Jesus meant, especially in view of the command He gives to Thomas to touch Him in v. 27. It is my belief that Jesus uses some humor with Mary, explaining that if she does not let go of Him, He will not be able to ascend to the Father. Evidently, she did not want to let go, and Jesus could not take her with Him.

The witness of Mary's confession is not only that Jesus is her teacher, but also that she never wanted to let Him go. She knew what it felt like to lose Him, and she never wanted to experience that again. John likely gives us this detail about Mary's confession to emphasize the physical corporal reality of the resurrected body of Jesus, another wonderful witness from Mary for our faith today. The sightings of the risen Christ were not visions. Jesus's dead body was alive again.

III. The witness of Mary's message (17b-18).

Application: John uses a special word to say that Mary Magdalene "came and *told* the disciples that she had seen the Lord." The word for *told* is the word *angello*. We get our word

angel from that word, and so did the Greeks. Two angels (*angelloi*) spoke to Mary in vv. 12 and 13, and now she, though not an angel, was entrusted to do what angels do – bring a message of truth to those who needed to hear. The Lord has given us a similar angelic mission as gospel witnesses. John’s letters to local churches in Revelation 2-3 refer to these churches as angels (“To the angel, which is the church . . .”).

The message Jesus told Mary to deliver was simple: “I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.” It was a message for those whom He calls brothers and sisters. And yet, He did not say “our Father” and “our God.” It is the same Father, but *My Father and your Father*, not *our Father*. It is the same God, but *My God and your God*, not *our God*. Although this is the same Father and God, Jesus describes two distinct relationships with the Father, Jesus’s and ours.

The Father is Jesus’s Father in a way that is different from the way He is our Father as believers. He is Jesus’s Father because He is the Father’s unique and eternal Son, the Second Person of the shared deity of the Trinity. He is the believer’s Father because when we believed we were adopted by Jesus as His brothers and sisters for whom He died and rose again.

Also, God is Jesus’s God in a way that is different from the way He is our God. He is Jesus’s God because Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient unto death for us, even the death of the cross. He learned obedience to God by the things which He suffered after becoming a man.

God is our God because He is our Creator. We were privileged to be called to obey Him in a loving way, which no other part of His creation could, for we were made in His image. But we disobeyed and became estranged to our God. Jesus became the God-man to be the one Mediator between God and man, to save you and me from our sin and restore our relationship with the true God, our Creator.

Mary faithfully delivered the details of the Lord's message. So must we. We must not alter the message we have been called to deliver for any reason, least of all to accommodate people.

Conclusion: We possess in our laps this morning, these many centuries later, the witness of Mary Magdalene, faithfully conveyed to us by the Apostle John. The challenge for our hearts is whether we shall believe her or our own presupposition that the dead simply do not rise. Mary's weeping, confession, and message faithfully delivered bare witness to us this morning. She tells us plainly - "I saw the Lord." How shall we respond to her witness?

John is clear that there can be only one adequate response. We must believe that Jesus is the risen Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name, because Mary Magdalene saw Him risen. We are without excuse if we fail to believe that she saw Him, for no other explanation exists for what we have read about her witness this morning.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching