

## **POINTS TO PONDER**

“<sup>20.1</sup> 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.”

— *John 20.1*

“It is rewarding for the interpreter of John’s gospel to remember that he is intentionally mytho-poetic and uses highly symbolic language. As he began his gospel with “In the beginning was the logos,” so too he hearkens back to the creation story in order to tell of the resurrection of Jesus. “Early on the first day” is reminiscent of the first day of creation found in Genesis. It is John’s way of saying that Jesus has started a new creation, the one that will lead humanity and all of the earth back to Eden, that paradise in which all things lived in harmony with one another.

The irony is that this creation of a new world is inverse to the original creation story. In Genesis, God created something out of nothing. Here, we had something good, Jesus, and he was slain by the creatures of creation. But out of death, like out of nothingness, will come goodness again. Like before the first day of creation in which God created light, it was “dark.” The darkness is more about pervasiveness of evil, especially after the crucifixion, than it is about the literal absence of photons in the atmosphere. How could it not be dark after Jesus, the new Adam, was imprisoned, tortured, mocked, hung on a cross as a spectacle, unrobed, suffocated by his own weight by being nailed in that position, stabbed in the gut, and entombed? Disillusionment, hopelessness, despair, and futility were the spirit of the day for the disciples. It was as dark as dark could be.

And yet, it was the “first day” of a new week – an ethereal foreshadowing of the story John seeks to tell. On this first day, the new Eve, Mary Magdalene, is alone in the dark and has come to the tomb of her companion – murdered by the humanity that has gone astray. It is a bleak depiction, having her walking in the dark towards a tomb...towards death, as if to join her companion in death.

Mary does not worry about the stone in front of the tomb, nor in John’s account is she bringing any spices to anoint his body. On this first day, she walks towards death, totally in the dark – perhaps no longer feeling life is worth living now that evil has conquered goodness. Maybe she will take her own life on the other side of that stone if she can not roll it away to be with her loved one in death. She seeks for closeness to her companion, even if it means her being closer to death herself.

But when she arrives, despite the darkness, she sees that the stone has been removed from the entrance to the tomb. Is it death inviting her in?”

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*

“<sup>2</sup> 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 Rabbi out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.””

— *John 20.2*

“A rebelliousness to death overcomes her, and she runs from the tomb. She will not take her own life. She will run away from death, and back to her other companions. Death took her beloved Jesus, but it will not so quickly take her. Despite the darkness, she has a new passion for life. She is upset by the injustice of it all: that not only did they torture and murder Jesus, but now they have stolen his body so that none of the disciples can have any closure in being near to him again. It must seem to her beyond comprehension how vile the Romans can be. And yet, there is a dawn rising upon her.

She runs back to the others perhaps in hope of doing something about all of this injustice. Maybe they can fight against it together. Even if they die, it is better to die for a cause than to die of meaninglessness. She tells Simon Peter, the rock, and also the disciple that Jesus most loved, the closest disciples to Jesus, of the barbarity of the situation. After they had entombed him at the beginning of the Sabbath, giving him

some dignity in death; his enemies have now stolen his body, desecrating his resting place and violating his deceased body with the indignity of being removed from his tomb.

Mary has no notion that he is alive. She had witnessed the brutal assassination. Someone has taken his corpse, and left no word as to where they had taken him. He now is lost to them; even in body. 'How much worse can things get?', they must have been thinking. It is simply unconscionable what has happened, and continues to happen. What do they do now?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*

"<sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in."

— *John 20.3-5*

"Perhaps John the author is John the beloved disciple. (While this is unlikely given when John was supposedly written, it is an interesting conjecture given disciples of apostles would often write in their teacher's name). Rather than speak of 'himself' by name, he speaks of himself as "the other disciple." He and Peter set out and go toward the tomb – again, a double entendre signifying they may be moving towards death themselves. John, we presume, runs towards death faster than Peter. He arrives at the tomb first. In reverence, perhaps both to Jesus and to death itself, John bends down before the tomb. He looks into the abyss of the tomb, but rather than seeing nothing, he sees the burial linens lying there by themselves. What could this mean? As if in contemplation, he does not go in. Or maybe, like Mary, he is not as ready for death as he thought he was. What force of life is calling to him to not enter the tomb? Is it worth living in the mystery?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*

"<sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes."

— *John 20.6-10*

"Simon Peter is the one who had denied Jesus three times, declaring that he did not know Jesus when he feared for his own life. Apparently, he has aroused the courage of his convictions, and is ready to enter the tomb/death. He enters in and sees not only the burial linens that enshrouded Jesus' corpse, but also the wrapping that had been placed around Jesus' head; the latter being by itself.

In contrast to the resurrection story of Lazarus, who earlier had come out from the tomb with all the linens and wrappings enshrouded around him, here the cloths were by themselves with no body present.

What could this mean? Why would the body stealers not take Jesus' body with the wrappings around him? What would they want with the body? Why would they leave these linens as evidence of their act? Were they playing psychological warfare with Jesus' disciples? Were they meaning to taunt them even further by revealing they had stolen his body, and may now be doing who knows what to his body?

The author does not wish to let the readers draw such conclusions themselves, so he expresses the conviction in the minds of the disciples that Jesus had been stolen as Mary reported. When John comes into the tomb, he "believed," we must assume, Mary's words; for as the author explains, "they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

It is captivating writing to leave the characters in the story believing one thing, and giving the reader a different thing to believe. But even for the reader, not knowing the rest of the story, it must be wondered

whether Jesus has been raised from the dead as had Lazarus. There are definitely similarities – e.g., a death that didn't need to be, mourning of loved ones, an entombment with a rock that sealed the tomb, etc. But the burial wrappings, while both employed on both bodies, reveal a difference in that Lazarus wore his from the tomb, and Jesus had his wrappings removed before exiting the tomb. It is as if the author is saying to the reader that the resurrected life Lazarus had continued to be one connected to the old reality, whereas the situation of Jesus is one in which the old reality is left behind in the tomb of the past.

The disciples, however, are convinced that Jesus' body has been stolen; and with that realization, they know not what to do except go to their homes. Notice the plural. They are no longer residing communally together, but now have retreated back into their old lives – contrasting their lives with the presumptive new life that Christ now leads."

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*

"<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Rabbi, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus."

— *John 20.11-14*

"Mary, as we surmised earlier, has not gone back to her old life – as had Peter and John. As the new Eve, she is ready to live a new life, but is not sure yet what that may be. She waits outside the tomb. She, too, bends down to see into the tomb, maybe wondering if peering into the tomb of death might give her an answer about how now to live.

And her answer awaits her there. Two heavenly messengers dressed in white are sitting where Jesus' body had lain. One sits where his head was, representing his mind and soul, and the other sits at his feet, representing a place of reverence for him (i.e., the place where disciples would sit) and/or being a symbol of how he is on the move – whether spiritually, physically, or in other ways.

Mary, interestingly, is not startled. She does not recoil, express fear, or any other human emotion that we might imagine others having. This, too, symbolizes she is ready for the new life that awaits her. The messengers seem initially more concerned about her demeanor than the message they have to tell. They ask her why she is weeping; a reflection of the new life that is revealed in compassion for others.

Mary speaks to them as if they are normal people, perhaps already claiming her new home in the realm of the spiritual rather than the earthly. Still, she is concerned with the earthly, and expresses her concern that someone has stolen her companion, and that she is clueless as to where they have taken him. She weeps at not only his death, but also of the continuing injustice of this whole saga. Such deep mourning gives credence to the messengers seeing the need to tend to her emotional and spiritual welfare before passing on the message itself.

The word "metanoia" translated as "turned around" is the same word used to express when someone has a conversion experience – where people turn their lives around to live by a different set of values and virtues. It is the gospel writer's attempt to show how she has now found that new life she seeks. However, that does not mean that everything is now clear for her. Living by new values still may result in misunderstandings, befuddlement, and even perceptions that one cannot make sense of. Living by new virtues and values does not necessarily mean we know all we must do, and that we will recognize the next steps we need to make. It only gives us a foundation for deciding how, and in which direction, to move forward. Consequently, when she turns and sees Jesus, she does not recognize him. Mystery is still present for her, even if she has changed her turned her life around."

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*

<sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher)."

— *John 20.15-16*

"One who bears the spirit of Jesus also asks her why she is weeping? Again, compassion for her circumstances is more important than revealing other truths. Compassion is the way of the new life in Christ, and here both the heavenly messengers and Jesus reveal that this concern for another's spiritual and emotional state is more important than telling what truths we feel we have to give.

"Whom are you looking for" is to be taken metaphorically. She is looking for a new life, and the way to live that life, and Jesus sees into her transformed state where she is now ready to begin a new journey on this first day of the rest of her life.

Her continued focus on finding Jesus is testimony that, though in her mind he is physically dead, he is the one who has spiritually captivated her and whose spirit will lead her to that new life.

That John has them in a garden, reminiscent of the garden of Eden, and that Mary presumes Jesus to be the gardener (i.e., the Creator God who walked in the garden to find Adam and Eve), is highly mytho-poetic and helps the reader to see that Jesus is the way that brings us back to the paradise that God intended for all of us.

While she cannot recognize his resurrected appearance, when the Word becomes flesh through a single word, his calling her by name, "Mary," she instantly recognizes the logos that is Jesus. She has found what and whom she is looking for – the incarnated Word that is represented by the spirit of Jesus himself. Having her name spoken with such compassion for her reveals that this one speaking to her is a manifestation of the same one she has called her Rabbi. She, in turn, speaks one word, "Rabbouni," the Aramaic word for teacher/prophet/mentor/spiritual guide.

John's suggestive language offers the interpreter to supply their own conclusions as to what Mary is experiencing. Whether it be the literal Jesus resuscitated to new life, the spirit of Jesus resurrected within her and others who are ready to receive and give compassion, a dream being told as a waking experience, or any number of other possible renditions, it is clear that this experience is transformative for Mary. The author reiterates that she once again "turns" (GK: metanoia) towards Jesus. His spirit, whether embodied or being a purely spiritual or inner presence within her, is what points towards the life that she needs to live. His stories and teachings, his values and virtues, are what she needs to emulate with her own life. She now understands him in a way in which she grasps at his very being."

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*

<sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Creator. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Creator and your Creator, to my God and your God.'"

— *John 20.17*

"There is likely some culturally contextual meanings to Jesus' response that we may not be privy to in making sense of his asking her not to touch her. On the other hand, it may be that John simply wants to identify Jesus with God in such a way that he is warning Mary not to touch that which is Holy and Sacred – much like Adam and Eve were warned not to touch the sacred fruit of the Tree of Life, and the Hebrews were taught not to look at the face of God (much less touch God). Immortality still is not the desired outcome for humanity, but life eternal (i.e., life lived meaningfully, significantly, and abundantly) is what God desires for us.

Ascending to the Creator is highly symbolic language, which likely suggests a complete union with God. Jesus has shared and emulated God's virtues and values in his life, but this complete union with God is effectively saying that his reality and God's reality will be One – a common theme in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism before Christianity.

What Jesus tells Mary to tell the others is reminiscent of what Ruth said to Naomi – “your God will be my God, and your people my people.” It suggests that all peoples are to be united together as one and with their Creator – all of us being more than simply siblings of one another under the same Creator, but also that we “are” one another; our being and essence intermeshed, like a water droplet that merges into the ocean. When we see others as ourselves, and ourselves as others, and all of us as being part of the collective known as God, then we recognize that to love and show compassion for any is to do so for ourselves and everyone and everything. It is this Eastern mysticism that makes John's gospel unique from the synoptics; though there are evidences of it in them as well.

It is clear that John wants to represent Jesus' way as the way for all peoples, not just Jewish people who can be convinced that the no longer present Jesus was the Messiah for which they had been waiting. The Logos is to become flesh in all of us. Truth/reason/word, and the virtues that are derived from them such as love, peace, and justice, are to be lived by each and every one of us. We are not only the children of God and siblings of each other. We all are Logos – living, breathing, resurrected Logos that was thought to have been murdered (again and again throughout human history's horrific partnership with evil), but lives still today in we who take these virtues into our own spirit, and practice them in all of our earthly relationships. We are all to ascend to the virtuous life that Jesus represented. This is how we all live resurrected lives – meaningful, purposeful, beautiful, spiritually profound, and ethically esteemed lives.

Has John convinced us? Are we ready to live resurrected lives? If Mary Magdalene, often portrayed as a woman who had demons and who was a sinner, can be resurrected to this life; then why can't we?”

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*

“<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Rabbi,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.”

— *John 20.18*

“Mary Magdalene is the first to witness the resurrected Jesus, and also the first to bear witness to the resurrected Jesus. This is remarkable in that patriarchal society that the gospel writers have women to be the ones who first see and tell about the resurrected life they've discovered in Jesus. It speaks to the egalitarian society which Jesus was trying to create, where women are seen as equals in worth to men, slaves as equal to rulers, the poor as equal to the wealthy, and the sick as equal to the healthy.

Mary also becomes the first person to report words from Jesus after he was resurrected. She, in effect, becomes the first post-resurrection apostle who spreads the news about the power of resurrected life. She is, in her own way, resurrected and transformed into newness of life – living by Jesus' vision and ideals within the community of disciples, and being the heroine of John's resurrection story. For all the legends and folklore that has been accumulated about Mary Magdalene over the last two millennia, it is surprising that we do not place greater primacy on her relationship to Jesus and being the first apostle to resurrected life.

What can we learn from Mary Magdalene in this story? Are we willing to see resurrected life in people and in happenings where we don't expect it? Are we willing to live it in ourselves? If only Jesus is resurrected to newness and beauty of life lived virtuously, then what is the point to the gospels telling us the story? If it is only a reality possible for one person, and not human society and earthly creation as a whole, then how can this be inspiring for us to “go and do likewise” and Jesus told us so often to do? If we, too, are not transformed from earthly lives of caterpillars into the heavenly lives of butterflies, then have we not missed our calling from God?

Are we ready to go forth as Easter people – those whose lives are transformed by the gospel of love, peace, and justice?”

— *Bret S. Myers, 4/4-5/2023*