

Sunday 16th April – Sermon John 20:11-18 ‘Mary Magdalene’

Hello, everyone. Today it's my privilege to share some thoughts on this special reading with you. There are so many aspects of this wonderful story we could focus on, so much to unpack and analyse.

But today I would like you to use your imagination instead and put yourself into Mary's shoes on that strange, tumultuous morning. It might help you to close your eyes. That's fine – it's better than having to look at me! So let's go with her and experience the wonder and shock of the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene was there, standing at the foot of the cross with the other women, Mary his mother, his mother's sister, some others, clinging together for comfort. She saw him die, her Master, her Lord, the one who had changed her life forever. Saw him die a cruel, humiliating, and painful death. It was the end to all her hopes.

Now, the future is dark. She is in deep despair, and the Sabbath rest makes it worse. No everyday tasks to distract her. Just her own misery and black thoughts.

After another terrible night, she is awake very early on that Sunday morning. There is still one thing she can do for him. She can lay his body out properly. One final personal act of love. The end to this chapter of her life. The end to her walk with Jesus. A proper farewell.

She goes to the tomb while it is still dark, very early in the morning. Almost beyond tears, but still racked by painful sobs, as she thinks of what awaits her. She knows exactly where the tomb is. She saw the stone rolled across the entrance, the final dreadful moment of that hideous day.

It barely crosses her mind that she won't be able to move the stone.

But – what's this? It's been moved already. The dark doorway is uncovered, a black hole in the morning gloom. What's happened? Have the cruel Jewish authorities or the wicked Romans taken his body away? Denied her this last service, the last goodbye?

She runs quickly to fetch the disciples, Peter and John. Maybe they can find out what is going on. No one will listen to a woman. She needs help. She tries to tell them.

“They've taken the Lord out of the tomb and I don't know where they've put him!”

Peter and John are shocked, horrified, and set off for the tomb, running fast. Mary follows as quickly as she can. She wants to know the truth.

The disciples look in, see the grave clothes in the empty tomb and – then do nothing, they go away again, confused and uncertain. Jesus is definitely not there. But they haven't found the body for her. They don't understand how she feels about it.

She stands outside the tomb, worn out, tears running down her face. What on earth is she going to do?

She has to see for herself. What is in that tomb now? The disciples didn't say. Is there mess and blood? Marks where they dragged the body away?

Nerving herself for what she may see, she looks into the tomb for herself. So deeply upset, that it doesn't even bother her that there are two angels in there, right next to the neatly folded graveclothes, one at the foot and one at the head,. She's so exhausted and miserable that she doesn't question their presence or the fact that they are wearing in white clothes, bright against the shadows in the tomb.

They speak. “Woman, why are you crying?”

Silly question. Don't they know what has happened? Of course she's crying.

“They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they've put him,” she cries.

All I want is to see him again, to sort out his poor broken body and say goodbye, the only way I know how. Don't you understand? she thinks.

She turns round and sees another man through her tears. What are they all doing here? Are they the ones who did this? Has this man taken the body away?

He says: “Woman, why're you crying? Who are you looking for?”

Maybe he's the gardener. He must have an idea where else they might have put him. There's a sliver of hope. Ask nicely. Be polite. Don't accuse him of anything. Maybe, just maybe, he'll tell her where the precious body has been moved to.

“Sir, if you've taken him, please tell me where he is, and I will come and get him.”

She tries to sound reasonable, not angry.

He speaks again. Her name.

“Mary.” (Pause)

The world rocks on its foundations. The early morning sun suddenly seems incredibly bright, the colours dazzling. It can't be – but it is. Only one person has ever said her name like that. Only her Lord. Only Jesus.

“Teacher!”

It bursts out of her like an explosion. She is overwhelmed with emotions, joy, amazement, wonder, shock. She reaches out for him, wants to touch him.

But Jesus says, very gently, ‘Don't hold on to me just now. I haven't yet gone up to the Father.’”

She looks at him in confusion, astonishment. What is he saying?

“Go instead to my brothers. Go and tell them, “I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’

Falling to her knees, she looks up at him. Her Lord.

Anything. She will do anything he asks. She does not analyse what he has said, not then, just remembers it. Word for word. For the rest of her life.

A life which now has meaning and purpose, that is no longer dark and desperate. She'll never forget the trauma of his death and that dreadful time of mourning. But it has been transformed by what happened afterwards.

When he's gone, and she's alone again, she runs at once to the disciples. She has to share her news: ‘I've seen the Lord!’

They don't entirely believe her, she can see that in their faces. But it doesn't matter. She knows the truth. He's alive. He's alive, not dead. Jesus is alive. (Pause)

Quite a story isn't it? Very personal. And the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection is a woman. That's amazing in itself.

But all the resurrection stories are very personal, very real, and often intimate. Not big set-piece public appearances but visits to his friends and followers.

He appears next to a group of his frightened disciples, locked away to stay safe from the authorities.

He comes to Thomas. Surely not worthy of such a privilege, with all his very human doubts and disbelief.

He takes a walk with two friends on the road to Emmaus, who suddenly recognise him as he begins to eat with them.

He even has a barbecue with friends by the lake in Galilee. Uses the time to restore Peter after the catastrophic failure of his betrayal of Jesus, his denial that he even knew him. He restores him using his given name, gently, three times, cancelling out the treachery, ‘Simon, son of John’.

The risen Jesus brings with him healing and release – from the pain of grief and loss (for Mary and the women), from doubt and confusion (for Thomas and the other disciples), from guilt and shame (for Peter).

He calls our names now. Personally. One to one. Sometimes from ahead of us, because we are searching for him. Sometimes from behind, from over our shoulder, because we are looking in the wrong direction.

Like Mary, Thomas and Peter, we need to turn to him, fall on our knees, and call him Lord. To enter into a deeper relationship with him. Whether it is for the first time, or the hundredth. So let's stop, look into his glorious face and open ourselves up afresh to this personal and intimate relationship with the risen Jesus, our risen Lord.

(Pause)

Let us pray.

Risen Lord Jesus, we hear you calling to us by name. Fill our hearts with the fruits of your Spirit, love, faith, joy and hope. Bring us to a new, closer relationship with you this Easter, as we continue to celebrate the amazing truth of your resurrection. For your name's sake, Amen.