

April 4, 2010
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Mary Magdalene and the Risen Jesus
John 20:1-18

An Easter Prayer

Brightness of God's glory, and exact image of God's person, whom death could not conquer nor the tomb imprison, as you have shared in our human frailty, we rejoice to share your immortality in the Spirit. Let the shadow of the grave no longer terrify us, and no fear of darkness turn our hearts from you. Reveal yourself to us this day and all our days, as the first and the last, the Living One, our immortal Savior and Lord. Amen.

John 20:1-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

The Resurrection of Jesus

1. 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.
2. 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 Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."
3. Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.
4. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.
5. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.
6. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,
7. and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.
8. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;
9. for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.
10. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;
12. 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.
13. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."
14. When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.
15. 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."
16. Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).
17. Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"
18. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Easter Message

As we come to the Easter Story in the Gospel of John, let us view the story through the eyes of the key witness to the resurrection, Mary Magdalene.

Historically there has been a lot of misunderstanding about who Mary Magdalene was. Pope Gregory I in 591 mistakenly identified her with the woman who was a sinner, a prostitute, who anointed Jesus' feet with per-

fume out of gratitude for her new life of forgiveness and faith. But actually, the only background the gospels give about Mary Magdalene is in Luke 8 where she is described as one from whom seven demons had gone out, who along with Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others provided for Jesus and his disciples out of their own resources.

Those few words tell us a great deal. Mary Magdalene was from Magdala which means Fish Tower. It was a prosperous fishing town on the Sea of Galilee and also the site of a Roman garrison. Mary probably came from a good family but had the misfortune sometime in her life of being possessed by seven demons. The Bible does not explain demon possession in detail. The great English preacher, Spurgeon, who himself struggled with depression, describes her plight with these words...

Mary Magdalene is not brought before us in Scripture as a transgressor, but rather the type of person who for years is sore vexed in heart, greatly depressed in spirit, heavily burdened with despondency, bound with chains of melancholy, subject to distracting forebodings, to alarms of coming wrath, and to a despair insuperable.

Mark tells us that Jesus rescued her from this miserable plight by casting these demons out of her. She suddenly was in her right mind and felt an overwhelming sense of peace and happiness. Jesus was her Savior and she may have taken the words of Psalm 40 as her own:

The Lord drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.

We have all struggled with demons of one kind or another, some of us have fought drug and alcohol addictions, others of us have struggled with depression or anxiety. Some of us have had a complaining, critical spirit that makes us unpleasant to be around, and others of us have been afflicted with an overwhelming sense of insecurity and inferiority. But when Jesus pulls us out of that pit and sets our feet upon a rock, we feel a new strength and confidence in his love and people notice that we seem to be at peace with ourselves. We want to praise God and thank him for his goodness to us. That is the kind of person Mary Magdalene was.

Mary's form of gratitude to Jesus was that she would use her own financial resources to support Jesus and his disciples. Since she is mentioned with women the same age as Jesus' mother, I am thinking she was a middle aged woman who had inherited the wealth of her family and was in a position to use it to supply the needs of Jesus and his disciples.

The gospels, however, tell us more about Mary Magdalene, that she was a woman of great courage and fortitude. Her name heads the list of the women who stood fearlessly with Jesus at the cross. Spurgeon comments:

Where was Peter? Peter denied the Lord. Where was James? Philip, Andrew and Nathanael – where were they? I do not know, but I know where Magdalene was. She was at the tree of doom there, hard by her Lord, glad to confess a persecuted Christ. Here is the test of true love. To follow Jesus in peaceful times was easy, like the other disciples, like the male disciples, but to follow hard after him when he is despised and rejected of men, here is the pinch.

This is a testimony to the strength and courage of the women who stood their ground when all the men had fled in terror, but it is also a testimony to Mary Magdalene and her sense of gratitude to Jesus. He had rescued her from the pit and she was not going to abandon him in his darkest hour.

And so we come to our text where Mary Magdalene comes early in the morning on the third day to the tomb. She is surprised to see the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. She runs to tell Peter and John. They run to the tomb and see that indeed the tomb is empty. They see that the burial cloths remain. It is not as if someone had carried Jesus away but as if he had simply evaporated. The burial cloths are lying there in the same position as if he were there still in them, but he isn't. The apostle John sees this and believes that maybe Jesus is alive. As Gail O'Day writes:

When John saw the empty tomb, he knew what it signaled: that Jesus had conquered death. The beloved disciple did not know what form Jesus' conquest of death had taken nor how Jesus' conquest of death would be manifested among the living; he did not even know how to speak

about what he saw in the tomb. All he knew was what the burial cloths told him: that Jesus had defeated death.

And then like typical males who have had enough for one day, Peter and John returned to their homes, but Mary Magdalene remained. She was concerned about what had happened to Jesus. She was weeping, fearing that Jesus' enemies had not only killed her Lord but had also decided now that the Sabbath was over to desecrate his body. As she wept she leaned over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, sitting on the burial shelf, one where the head would have been and the other where the foot would have been.

And these angels spoke to her. They asked her why she was weeping and she told them about her fears of what had happened to Jesus' body. And then she sensed someone behind her outside the tomb so she turned around and saw only a garden keeper. He also asked her why she was weeping and who she was looking for. She thought maybe he had taken the body away for some reason and asked him where he had taken it.

And then the garden keeper called her by name, as a shepherd calls his sheep by name, as the Lord called Israel by name in Isaiah where the Lord says, "Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name and you are mine." The garden keeper says, "Mary," and suddenly she recognizes him as the risen Jesus. He is alive. Her savior has not succumbed to death. He is alive and well.

She cries out, "Rabboni," and falls to the ground and clings to his feet like a child who will never let her mother leave her again. She is like us who after all these years still love Jesus and cannot let him go. As Peter wrote many years later:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

But Jesus gently removes her hands from his feet and says, "Do not cling to me, for in a little while I am going to ascend to my Father." And then he commissions her as the first apostle of the resurrection, the apostle to all other apostles. He asks her to go and tell the disciples that he is alive and he is returning to their Father and his Father, their God and his God, because from now on they will be his brothers and they will have the same fellowship with God that he had with God while he was living with them.

What a great privilege is Mary's. As Spurgeon writes:

Oh, the power of grace! Mary, once possessed by demons, becomes a preacher to the apostles. I dub her doctor of divinity, indeed, for she instructed those mightiest of messengers in the faith.

Mary, who much of her life had lived with seven demons, wretched and miserable, forsaken by all, was now the apostle to the apostles. She revealed to them what they did not know, that Jesus was alive. Later Jesus would appear to each of them, even doubting Thomas who had to put his finger in the wounds of Jesus before he would believe. And then these apostles went out and changed the world forever.

They continued the ministry that Jesus had began and handed over to them. His resurrection was the validation they needed to go out and finish the task that he had given them to do, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, and to let the whole world know that God is not a distant, angry despot, but that he loves us and came to earth to save us.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we have gathered 2000 years later to celebrate the resurrection of your son Jesus Christ. Thank you for vindicating his ministry and validating his preaching of your love for the poor, the outcast, and the needy. We gather in celebration but we also gather needing a new outpouring of your love this Easter morning. Some of us are weak, some of us are lonely, some of us have lost loved ones, some of us are struggling with financial difficulty, some of us are concerned about our children, some of us are concerned about our health, and some of us are still fighting our demons like Mary Magdalene did. But we believe with Mary what you said to the prophet Hosea,

After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn...

Reach down and touch each of us as we press on to know you Lord. Call us by name, reveal yourself to us, enter into our lives and make all things new, that we may live before you. Amen.

Easter Benediction

*As the dew upon the grass,
As the fountain to the garden,
As the candle in the dark,
As the light within the lantern,
As the treasure in the vault,
As the honey in the honeycomb,
As the sunshine in the heavens,
As the Risen Lord and Savior,
May Jesus Christ be yours,
Now and always. Amen.*

Please feel free to interact with Pastor Bruce after you have read this Easter Message by emailing him at brucespear57@msn.com or by calling the church at 303-646-4825 to make an appointment with him.