

## There's Something About Mary

### A Study of John 20:1-17

#### Introduction:

- A. It was an early morning a lot like this one. It was a Sunday. The Friday before, Jesus had been crucified and buried in a tomb just outside Jerusalem.
  - B. Mary was the first to come to the tomb. I want to focus on what happened to Mary that morning. There's something about Mary—something about her that tells us a lot about ourselves. And a lot about Jesus.
  - C. Mary's story is recorded for us in John 20:1-17.
- I. Verse 1 says:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:1 ¶ Now on the first *day* of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark . . .

Mary was given the name, “Magdalene” because she was from the town named Magdala. “Magdalene” simply means “of Magdala.”<sup>1</sup>

There is no biblical basis for the tradition that Mary Magdalene is the same woman, often assumed to be a prostitute, who anointed Jesus' feet with her hair.<sup>2</sup> Neither is there biblical support for the idea that Mary Magdalene is the same adulterous woman whom Jesus saved from stoning.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible does tell us that Mary Magdalene was once possessed by seven demons and afflicted with infirmities. We can only imagine how such torment played out socially. Perhaps she was considered the crazy woman of Magdala, an outcast. Maybe she was ostracized. Maybe she did humiliating things in public and so her family tried to keep her isolated. Or maybe they disowned her. It's hard to imagine that any guy would be interested in marrying her. Today, I suspect we would say she needs psychiatric hospitalization.

But somehow, she met Jesus, and it seems He cast out the demons and healed her, and thereafter, Mary gratefully followed Jesus, helping Him in His earthly ministry by giving from what little she had.<sup>4</sup> **From her lowly state, Jesus had lifted her up.**

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, vol. 4, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 687.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:36-50.

<sup>3</sup> John 8:2-11.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 8:1-3;

And we are told that Mary faithfully followed Jesus to His death and burial. She was there to watch Him die on a cross on Friday.<sup>5</sup> She was there to watch Him buried in a tomb later that day.<sup>6</sup>

She was the last to leave on Friday and the first to come on Sunday. And what she saw was unsettling. Verse 1 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:1 ¶ . . . Mary Magdalene . . . saw *that* the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

The language used here gives us our first hint that something extraordinary had happened. If stones were to be removed by humans from the entrance to a tomb, they had to be rolled because they were extremely heavy. But John does not use the Greek verb one would expect for rolling the stone.<sup>7</sup> Instead he uses a verb that describes picking up or lifting up the stone.<sup>8</sup> Who could do such a thing?

**We're going to see that lifting up is a theme woven throughout this text.**

- II. Mary assumes that a number of humans must have done it, and so, she runs to tell Peter and John. Verse 2 records,

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:2 Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

- III. Upon hearing the news, Peter and John run to the empty tomb. Verses 3-8 tell us:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:3 Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. 4 So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. 5 And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying *there*; yet he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying *there*, 7 and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed.

This provides our second hint that something extraordinary had happened. Peter and John found the linen cloths lying there, with the handkerchief that had been around Jesus' head folded and sitting to the side. The scene is orderly. Not what you'd expect

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 27:56.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 27:61.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, 688.

<sup>8</sup> W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. "ἀρῶ," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

if grave robbers had stolen the body. Why would grave robbers bother to unwrap the body? And why would they be so tidy about it?

In fact, it's hard to even imagine *how* they could have been so tidy. We are told in John 19 that the body was wrapped with about a hundred pounds of aloes and myrrh which, in effect, glued the linens to the body.<sup>9</sup> Who would or could unwrap them?

- IV. The thought that Jesus may have risen from the dead did not occur to Peter and John. Verse 9 tells us:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:9 For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

- V. Peter and John went back to their homes baffled. But not Mary. In Verses 10 and 11, we are told:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:10 Then the disciples went away again to their own homes. 11 ¶ But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping . . .

Mary: always the last to leave. She weeps for the One who had liberated her from the demonic. She weeps for the One who had healed her of many infirmities. She weeps for the only One who had given her hope. And now it seems her hope is gone. And so is the body of Jesus.

- VI. Verse 11 continues:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:11 . . . and as she wept she stooped down *and looked* into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. 13 Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" . . .

Here we have another clue that something extraordinary has happened: Angels in the tomb. They ask Mary why she's weeping.

To the Jews, a proper burial was very important.<sup>10</sup> It seems that Mary suspects that the enemies of Jesus have taken His body to somehow make a mockery of His memory. This adds insult to her grieving, and so she explains why she's weeping in Verse 13:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20: 13 . . . She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."

- VII. Verse 14 continues:

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<sup>9</sup> Morris, 692.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, 697.

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:14 Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing *there*, and did not know that it was Jesus.

This is the final clue that something extraordinary had happened: Jesus shows up.

Of course it is extraordinary that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. That's why we're here this morning to celebrate. But there is something else extraordinary about His appearance that morning, something often overlooked: Mary is the very first person to whom Jesus appears after His resurrection.

At the heels of His greatest triumph, Jesus does not first appear to the high priest to confront him. Jesus does not first appear to Pilate to show him who's really in charge. Jesus does not first appear to the Romans soldiers who flogged and crucified Him to exact revenge. Jesus does not first appear to the leading disciples who would advance His cause. Jesus does not first appear in the clouds with a thunderous shout of victory. Jesus first appears to the once-crazy woman of Magdala who is grieving, without hope, weeping, and alone.

Even in His greatest moment of triumph, Jesus seems more intent on serving the broken-hearted than celebrating.<sup>11</sup> **Jesus was the One who was raised, but He wants to lift up others.**

VIII. But Mary doesn't even recognize Him. Verse 14 says:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:14 . . . she . . . did not know that it was Jesus.

This testifies to a significant principle: It's easy to miss what you assume to be impossible. Mary was expecting the Lord to act in ways that fit her own preconceptions. When He did not, she did not recognize Him. How often do we miss the Lord's presence because we don't expect it?

IX. Then Jesus asks Mary a couple of questions. He doesn't push His identity on her. He patiently allows her the dignity of discovery. **Jesus was the One who was raised, but He wants to lift up others.**

The first question comes in Verse 15:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? . . ."

Jesus always asks great questions: simple, penetrating questions. Indeed, had Mary found what she was after, the dead body of Jesus, that would have been a true cause for weeping, for her and for the rest of the world. But this occasion of Mary's weeping is

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<sup>11</sup> Mark 10:45.

actually a time for rejoicing. And Jesus seems to be gently encouraging a change of mind.

For Jesus to address Mary as “woman” sounds rather cold in English, but not in Greek. Jesus had previously spoken to His own mother this way.<sup>12</sup> It was a tender, respectful form of address.

Then Jesus asks Mary a second question:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:15 “. . . Whom are you seeking?” . . .

X. Mary still doesn’t recognize Him. Verse 15 continues:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:15 . . . She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, “Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

XI. Then Jesus gently, patiently invites Mary to recognize Him, calling her by name. Verse 16:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him, “Rabboni!” (which is to say, Teacher).

The text says, “she turned.” The Greek verb is actually a participle in the passive voice and could be translated, “having been turned.” I suspect Jesus was the one who gently turned Mary to face Him, perhaps even lifting her head. **Jesus was the One who was raised, but He wants to lift up others.**

XII. Verse 17 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:17 Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father . . .”

This used to strike as a cold, stand-offish thing to say—something on the order of “Don’t touch me, I don’t want to be dirty for heaven.” But I don’t think that’s the picture at all.

The command, “do not cling to Me” is a present imperative, indicating that Mary had already been clinging to Jesus for some time and Jesus was asking her to stop. The suggestion is that some time passed between Verses 16 and 17—time in which Mary was embracing Jesus.

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<sup>12</sup> John 19:26.

I get the impression that Mary may have had Jesus in a desperate grip, thinking, “I let go of You once; I’m not letting go of You again.”

Jesus’ explanation, “for I have not yet ascended to My Father” may simply be His way of saying, “There’s plenty of time for embracing; I’m not leaving yet.”<sup>13</sup>

I don’t think Jesus has any problem with people touching Him before His ascension. Later on, others would touch Him.<sup>14</sup> Jesus would even invite them to do so.<sup>15</sup> I think Jesus asks Mary to stop clinging because He has something else for Mary to do. He wants to give her an important assignment. **Jesus is the One who was raised, but He wants to lift up others.**

XIII. Jesus gives Mary the assignment in Verse 17. He says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 20:17 “. . . but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’”

The question occurs to me: Why didn’t He just go deliver the message Himself? It’s a very important message and it would have been exciting to deliver. Just go pop in on all your friends who think you’re defeated and dead. That’s what I’d do.

Not Jesus. He gives Mary the honor and excitement of delivering the message herself. In that day, women weren’t even allowed to testify in a court of law because they were considered untrustworthy. Perhaps some would even suspect that Mary’s mental illness of the past had returned. But Jesus entrusts His message to her. **Jesus was the One who was raised, but He wants to lift up others.**

The “brethren” to whom the message is to be delivered are His disciples. But Jesus calls them brethren. Think about that. If you are believer in Jesus Christ, He considers you His brother or sister. **Jesus was the One who was raised, but He wants to lift up others.**

And the message He wants to give the brethren is a message that elevates them. He wants them to know that they are united with Him. They share the same heavenly Father. He says: “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.” Once again, **Jesus was the One who was raised, but He wants to lift up others.**

IX. Perhaps this morning you are in some way grieving and you feel hopeless as Mary did. Perhaps you’re feeling as empty as the tomb—so insignificant that you don’t even recognize the Lord’s presence because you’re not really expecting Him to pay attention

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<sup>13</sup> Morris, 702.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 28:9.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 24:39.

to somebody like you. After all, Easter is a big day, and Jesus was the One who was raised.

But Jesus is here. Here with you. And He calls you by name, gently encouraging a change of mind. This is not a time for weeping, but a time for rejoicing. It's a new day. **Jesus was the One who was raised, but He wants to lift you up.**