

## Meeting Jesus

*“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.”*

Do you know the story? Have you heard it before? Early on Sunday morning, Mary went to Jesus’ tomb, found the stone had been removed – and then lots of things happened. There was running backwards and forwards, some angels, and then Jesus – though for some reason Mary didn’t recognise him at first – but then she did! Just because he said her name!

And that is, more or less, what happened in this morning’s reading from John’s gospel. And most of us will have heard it all before. But I think when we read the scriptures, particularly the familiar stories, there’s a danger in not paying attention to them, because we sort of know how it fits together.

So, when we hear someone begin the reading, *“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb ...”* we can get ahead of things. Our familiarity with the events can stop us appreciating the significance of them, to take away the surprises that would have been there for the early hearers of the gospel – or indeed the people who were present on that first Easter morning.

Think for a moment, what that morning would have been like for Mary Magdalene, who was the first one to go to the tomb, and for John – the disciple that Jesus loved the most – and for Peter, the one on whom Jesus said he would build his church, but also the one who’d denied Jesus three times only two days before.

Jesus had been arrested, tried, beaten by the authorities. His followers had deserted him. He’d been put to death – crucified at Calvary along with common criminals. His body had been taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and put in a tomb. A tomb carved out of rock, with a large stone rolled across the opening.

It was a rushed burial, because it happened on a Friday - just before the Sabbath. There hadn’t been time for the usual rituals to take place.

In less than a week the followers of Jesus had gone from the highs of the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday, with crowds praising Jesus’ as the Messiah, and throwing down their cloaks and branches as he entered Jerusalem, to the lows of the crowds shouting “crucify him!” on Friday.

The disciples had scattered. They were in hiding. Jesus had been arrested and killed. The disciples would have been worried that the same thing would happen to them. So on Sunday morning, John and Peter and the other disciples were in their houses, with doors locked.

Mary, though, was heading out to the tomb. John’s gospel only mentions Mary Magdalene, but the other gospels tell of other women (Luke), Mary the mother of James

(Mark), Salome (Mark), and another Mary (Matthew), and we learn that they were going to the tomb with jars of spices to anoint Jesus' body – to give Jesus a proper burial.

So that's why Mary Magdalene was at Jesus' tomb early on that Sunday. And when she got there, she saw the stone had been moved.

Her first thought wasn't that Jesus had risen from the dead. Her first thought was that Jesus' body has been stolen. She would have feared the body would be dragged through the city or beheaded and displayed as a warning to those who spoke against the Romans or the temple authorities, or maybe it would be thrown on a local rubbish heap, deprived of a proper burial.

She was distressed and so she ran to tell the disciples, and she went to Peter and John.

Now, Peter and John, and John's brother James, seem to have made up Jesus' inner circle. They were the first to be called, they were with him at the transfiguration, and when he told them of the end times, and of course they were the last ones to leave him in the Garden of Gethsemane. So it was natural that they were the ones for Mary to go to first.

Having seen the stone moved aside, she runs to them and , *“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”*

We read that John and Peter set out to the tomb. They ran. They ran fast. In the end, John was faster and got to the tomb first – he didn't go in, but he looked in, and he saw the linen wrappings lying there. And that is an odd detail.

At this point, the most likely explanation for the open tomb for the disciples, is that Jesus' body was stolen. But think about it: If you were stealing a body from a tomb, would you bother to unwrap it first?

Then Peter got to the tomb. Whenever we encounter Peter in the gospels, we find that he doesn't hold back. He spoke out. He rushed in. He even jumped over the side of the boat to walk on the water with Jesus. He was impetuous.

When Peter got to the tomb, he didn't hesitate – the tomb was open so he rushed straight in. We read that *“Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.”* So, coming back to my hypothetical: If you were stealing a body from a tomb, would you unwrap it first? And if you did, would you then fold up the wrappings and place them neatly?

And then John follows Peter in; we read that John *“saw and believed;”* he didn't see the risen Jesus, but he saw the empty tomb, he saw the linen wrappings, and he believed. He believed, but it was still an incomplete belief. John writes that they had not put all the pieces together of the prophecies concerning the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. That would come later.

They knew that he had risen, but they hadn't put it all together.

And then there's an anticlimax, because we heard simply that "Then the disciples went back to where they were staying."

"Hallelujah! Christ is risen" but instead of declaring "he is risen indeed" they say, "Let's just go home and lock the door".

But the story didn't end there, and the focus of John's gospel returns to Mary.

Mary was standing outside the tomb crying. Now, I don't know how all the comings and goings fit together – because Mary went to the disciples, and they ran back. Maybe Mary ran with them. Or maybe she walked, but then she would presumably have met the disciples when they were going home again.

However it all fitted together, the story picks up with the disciples having left, and Mary weeping outside the tomb. And finally, she leans in to see the place where Jesus' body had been. And she sees two angels sitting there.

*"Woman, why are you crying?"* they ask – or more poetically in other translations *"Why are you weeping?"*

She explains that they have taken away Jesus' body, and she doesn't know where they have put him.

And then for some reason, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but strangely she didn't recognise him. Maybe it was because of the tears in her eyes, maybe it was because of the sheer impossibility of seeing Jesus alive, maybe it was because his resurrected appearance was different – he had changed in some way.

But Jesus asks the same question the angels did: *"Woman, why are you crying?"* and then *"Who is it you are looking for?"*

Mary thought he was the gardener, so she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

And then Jesus said one word, one word which makes it all click for Mary Magdalene, one word which makes her understand, one word that makes her believe.

Verse 16 tells us Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

He makes a personal connection.

Look back to earlier in John's gospel – when Jesus spoke of himself as the good shepherd and said "...the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

In Jesus saying her name, Mary puts it all together.

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means 'Teacher').

She returned the personal connection.

Jesus reached out to Mary, and Mary responded to him.

And that would seem to be the happy ending to this story, a fitting climax after the anticlimax of the disciples going home. But it doesn't end there.

It's likely her tears of anguish and sorrow would have turned to tears of joy. I can imagine Mary saying "Rabboni" and grabbing onto Jesus, holding onto him as if she's never going to let go.

But Jesus' physical presence, on an early morning in a burial ground outside Jerusalem, wasn't the complete fulfilment of God's plan.

Jesus said *"Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*

And so Mary, who was the first witness to the risen Jesus, was also the first one to share that good news. We read in verse 18: *Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Mary was the one who alerted the others to the disturbed tomb. And then she went back to the tomb and stayed there even after John and Peter had returned home. In a society which typically treated women as insignificant and unimportant, the most important event in all of history was revealed first to a woman.

No one saw it coming. No one. On the Sunday following the crucifixion of Jesus no one really expected what actually happened (or at least it they didn't fully comprehend it). They should have. Shortly after confirming to them that he was the Messiah, Jesus said: Mark 8:31 *"The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be killed, and rise after three days."*

But come that first Easter morning, no-one was expecting it. There wasn't a crowd of disciples waiting outside the tomb for Jesus to walk out.

They'd heard Jesus. They knew the scriptures that Jesus had explained. And yes, at one level they 'knew', but at another... well they didn't really understand, or take it to heart, or have faith.

And I think we can be just like that today. We can 'know' things about Jesus, about God, at one level, but at another... we just don't get it. We sing 'Amazing grace', but how often do we contemplate how amazing God's grace really is? And we say, *"for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, and that whomsoever believes in him shall not die, but have everlasting life"*. But do we really, at a practical level believe in him – put our trust in him? Put our faith in him?

The resurrection of Jesus is the most pivotal moment in human history. It meant that Jesus' sacrifice on that first Good Friday for our sins worked. Just as he said he would, the Son of Man gave his life as a ransom for many.

God doesn't demand acts of service and piety and sacrifice to earn his favour. God's favour is freely given to us in his son – all we need to do is turn to him in faith, to make that personal connection, just as Mary did.

Jesus meets us where we can best relate. For Mary it was on a relational level. What she needed was to see Jesus.

John, on the other hand, came to believe in Jesus' resurrection through what he saw in the tomb. A rational or logical conclusion based on his knowledge of Jesus, and the evidence that was in front of him. John didn't see Jesus through tear filled eyes, but through gazing into that empty tomb.

And so it is for us today. All of us who come to know Jesus, come to know him through different paths. For some, it might be a sermon, or a Sunday School lesson, for others the faithful witness of a parent or grandparent or friend, for others through reading the bible, or a faithful author, and for others perhaps an emotional or spiritual experience. This Easter, know that Jesus is reaching out to you, in the way that you can most relate to.

But how ever Jesus reaches out to you today, all you need do is respond to him in faith, and put your trust in him.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed.

Amen.