

John 20:10-18
“We Believe in the Resurrection (Part 3)”

Introduction

Last week we saw how the world says that because the gospel writers had a theological agenda (because they weren't just giving a neutral, unbiased presentation of historical facts), therefore their **history** is not to be trusted—and therefore, in turn, neither is their **theology** to be trusted. The world gets it right here. If the history cannot be trusted (if it's not real), then neither can the theology be trusted because the theology is rooted in the history. The apostate church, on the other hand, says that the gospel writers never intended their history to be read as real and literal history. The early church was creating stories to embody its faith and to be a vehicle for communicating that faith. Therefore, there are no real historical contradictions (because it's not real history); therefore, the theology can be trusted. In this case, the “church” has given up the high ground to the world. The world sees what the “church” is blind to—that the theology is rooted in the history, and that the theology, therefore, stands or falls with the history. “Theology” is simply what the history *means*.

Over the last two weeks, we've been emphasizing the history — the sheer historical facticity of the resurrection. We believe in the resurrection because of the overwhelming physical and eyewitness testimony which tells us that the resurrection which *must* happen *has* happened. This morning we'll be emphasizing the theology which is rooted in this history, and which reveals to us the necessity of this history. To put it more simply, this morning we'll be emphasizing the meaning of the history — the meaning of the resurrection.

- John 20:1–10 — Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. So 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.” So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. And the two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but folded up in a place by itself. So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

I. John 20:10 — So the disciples went away again to where they were staying.

Did John or Peter say anything to Mary about what they had seen in the tomb? If they did, then they apparently didn't tell Mary what they believed the explanation must be. They probably haven't even spoken to each other about what they're thinking in their own hearts. “The disciples went away again to where they were staying.”

II. John 20:11a — But Mary was standing outside the tomb crying;

Mary is called “the Magdalene” (*he Magdalene*; v. 1) because she was born and grew up in Magdala. Magdala was a fishing and port town on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee halfway between Capernaum to the north and Tiberius to the south [see page 9]. Recent excavations of the ancient site of Magdala have uncovered two synagogues dating from the time of Jesus [see page 10]. The Gospels never specifically record a visit of Jesus to Magdala, but given the relative importance of Magdala in Jesus’ day and especially given the testimony of Matthew and Mark, it’s certain that Jesus would have ministered in this city and that He would have taught in this very synagogue. Matthew tells us:

- Matthew 4:23 — Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.

We read in Mark’s gospel:

- Mark 1:38–39 — [Jesus] said to [His disciples], “Let us go elsewhere, to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for.” And He went, preaching in their synagogues throughout all Galilee and casting out the demons.

It was almost certainly when Jesus came to Magdala that He met Mary, from whom He cast out seven demons. Luke tells us that as Jesus was “going around from one city and village to another”:

- Luke 8:1b–3 — The twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s manager, and Susanna, and many others who were ministering to them from their possessions.

Whether seven demons is to be taken literally, or whether it’s a symbolic reference to “many demons,” the main point is the misery and wretchedness of Mary’s condition. It was from out of this misery and this wretchedness that Jesus saved her. The result of this for Mary was that she left her hometown of Magdala to follow Jesus and to support His ministry from her own private means. Luke tells us that Mary was with Jesus in Galilee as He was “going around from one city and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God” (Lk. 8:1-2). Mark tells us that “when [Jesus] was in Galilee, [Mary Magdalene (along with some other women)] used to follow Jesus and minister to Him” (Mk. 15:40-41). When Jesus left Galilee for the last time to go up to Jerusalem for the Passover, Mary was among the women who went up with Him; and she was there when Jesus was crucified. Matthew writes:

- Matthew 27:55–56 (cf. Mk. 15:40-41; Lk. 23:49) — And many women were there [at the cross] looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him. Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Mary was still there when Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus down from the cross and laid Him in the garden tomb. Matthew tells us that “Mary Magdalene... and the other Mary, [were] sitting opposite the grave” (Mat. 27:61; cf. Mk. 15:47). Finally, we know that Mary was at the tomb again early on the first day of the week (Mat. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Jn. 20:1).

Between, the four Gospels, Mary is mentioned nine times in company with other women, and eight of these times, she comes first in the list (Mat. 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mk. 15:40, 47; 16:1; Lk. 8:2-3; 24:10; cf. Jn. 19:25). Was she the recognized leader of this group of women who followed Jesus and ministered to His practical needs (perhaps preparing meals; mending clothes, etc.)? Was she “first” among the women because she was also “first” in the fervency of her love for, and devotion to, Jesus? Ever since the day when Jesus came to Mary’s hometown of Magdala and delivered her from her misery and wretchedness, Mary has gone with Jesus wherever He has gone. And now, at the apparent end of everything, we see her standing outside Jesus’ tomb, crying.

Why is Mary crying? Earlier, when she came to Peter and John, she said, “They have taken away the lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.” Mary is crying not only because Jesus is dead, but because now even her last remaining connection with Him has been taken away.

III. John 20:11b–13a — ...and so, as she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, “Woman, why are you crying?”*

The angels do not tell Mary that Jesus is risen (as they did the other women (Mat. 28:5-6; Lk. 24:4-7)). Instead, they ask Mary a question: “Woman, why are you crying?” Certainly, we hear a tenderness in the angels’ question. But we also need to remember that the angels are not trying to learn the answer so they can comfort Mary. The implication of their words is that they know already why Mary is crying, but that she ought not to be crying – and even that she ought to know that she ought not to be crying.

If Mary did meet John and Peter on her way back to the tomb, then she may already know about the linen wrappings and the face cloth. And what does it mean when she looks into a tomb and sees “two angels sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying”? As one commentator puts it, this is powerful and unmistakable “evidence that God himself has been at work... [that] this is nothing other than the invasion of God’s power” (Carson). Indeed, how can there be two angels sitting here in the tomb, and yet it still be true that the body of Jesus has been stolen away by His enemies? In the question that the angels put to Mary, then, we hear a “gentle [and even a joyful] reproof” (Carson): *Why* do you not see that Jesus is risen? “*Why* are you crying?”

* That Mary knew these were angels is indicated by the fact that she doesn’t suspect *them* of taking away Jesus’ body (in the next verse, Mary will answer the angels: “because *they* have taken away my lord, and I do not know where *they* have laid Him”). Also, there is the fact that the angels were in white (cf. Mk. 16:5). John says very simply, “She saw two angels, and so we must assume that Mary knew they were angels.”

IV. John 20:13b — She said to them, “Because they have taken away my lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”

Why does Mary not understand? Why can't she see? Because to her Jesus was still “only” a man—even if He was her deliverer and lord. Mary's love for Jesus—as wholehearted and as devoted as it was—was a love that still remained at the human level, a love still defined by earthly and this-worldly categories. Mary still could not conceive of Jesus in any other way—despite two angels sitting in an empty tomb where all that remained was the linen wrappings lying where the body of Jesus had been and the facecloth folded up in a place by itself. The angels have called (and even exhorted) Mary to see that there's no reason for her to be crying, but she still clings only to the hope of finding the body of Jesus. She's still unable to transcend the nature of her previous attachment to Jesus. “[The angels] said to her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”

V. John 20:14 — When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.

How could Mary not know it was Jesus? Was she psychologically blinded to the obvious by her conviction that Jesus was dead? This is unconvincing. She would have at least recognized Him and assumed she was seeing a spirit (cf. Lk. 24:36-39). Was she physically blinded by her tears? This is also unconvincing. Even through our tears we recognize a person with whom we're intimately familiar. John says that “she *saw Jesus* standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.” How could she not know?

On the one hand there's an essential continuity between the body that was laid in the tomb on Friday and the body of the resurrected Jesus who stands before Mary. This is, after all, the whole point of the empty tomb. The same body that was laid in the tomb has now been raised up. So Jesus can say to the disciples in Luke chapter 24:

➤ Luke 24:39 (cf. Jn. 20:20, 27) — “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself.”

On the other hand, there's also a fundamental *discontinuity* between the body that was laid in the tomb on Friday and the body of the resurrected Jesus who stands now before Mary. When the writer of Hebrews speaks of Jesus “in the days of His flesh” (Heb. 5:7), he's not denying that the resurrected Jesus has “flesh and bones” (cf. Lk. 24:39). He's using “flesh” in the sense of fleshly weakness—the weakness of the flesh that is susceptible to death. But now, as Jesus stands before Mary, He is no longer “in the days of His flesh”; He has been raised up in a body that's no longer susceptible to death. Here is a wonderful mystery. Even before Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they had bodies that were susceptible to death. From the moment that God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, he had a body that was susceptible to death. Therefore, the resurrection of Jesus has brought about a wholly new reality in the history of the world. The resurrection body of Jesus is something hitherto unknown and even now incomprehensible. It's the beginning of a new creation (1 Cor. 15:35-57). The Apostle Paul speaks of our own future resurrection bodies as patterned after the resurrection body of Christ.

- 1 Corinthians 15:42–44, 47–48 — It is sown a corruptible body, it is raised an incorruptible body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body... The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly.

Alongside, then, the fundamental continuity and sameness between the body that was laid in the tomb on Friday and the body of the resurrected Jesus who stands before Mary now is also a fundamental and an immeasurably far-reaching discontinuity. While this is an impenetrable mystery, we *can* see some of the results of this mystery. Jesus can pass through the graveclothes in which He was wrapped, leaving them undisturbed (Jn. 20:5-8). The angel didn't remove the stone from the entrance of the tomb to let Jesus out, but rather to let others in (Mat. 28:1-6; Mk. 16:3-5). Jesus didn't need the tomb to be opened; He simply passed out of the sealed tomb in a manner inconceivable to us. When Jesus left the two disciples whom He had joined on the road to Emmaus, He “vanished from their sight” (Lk. 24:31). Later, Jesus will come and stand in the midst of the disciples while the doors are shut (Jn. 20:19, 26).

Apparently, another result of this redemptive-historical newness of Jesus' resurrection body is that even those who were closest to Him “in the days of His flesh” do not immediately recognize Him when they see Him (cf. Jn. 21:4-7).

- Luke 24:15–16 (Mk. 16:12) — It happened that while [the two disciples on the road to Emmaus] were conversing and debating, Jesus Himself approached and was going with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him.

Their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him because they were still “in the days of their flesh” while the Jesus who was physically walking and talking with them was living even then in a fundamentally different realm. He was at one time (as respected His body) “from the earth... earthy,” but now He is “from heaven... heavenly.” How, then, can those who are still “from the earth” recognize the one who is “from heaven”? The answer is, apparently, only through a work of God's sovereign grace. So we read again in Luke:

- Luke 24:30–31 — And it happened that when He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and after breaking it, He was giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him.

How can Mary see Jesus standing there, and not know that it's Jesus? Because she's thinking of Jesus in the old earthly categories. This isn't just an issue of recognizing that it's Jesus; this is an issue of recognizing that it's Jesus as she has never known Him before.

VI. John 20:15a — Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Whom are you seeking?”

We've seen already in chapter two (2:4) and in chapter nineteen (19:26) that “woman” wasn't a disrespectful or a demeaning form of address. And yet it wouldn't have been the usual way of addressing someone with whom one was intimately familiar. Would Jesus typically have addressed Mary in this way during the days of His flesh? It seems almost certain that He didn't.

But now, when He comes to Mary as her risen Lord, He addresses her not initially by her name, but as “Woman.” We need to remember that Jesus *has* come *especially* to Mary and that He *has* come *first* to Mary. And now it’s because of His deep love for Mary that He addresses her tenderly as “woman.” She must learn, now, to love Jesus not simply as a man (no matter how good and wonderful), but to *love* Him as the risen and exalted Son of God. She must learn to love Jesus not simply as the one who delivered her from seven demons in Magdala, but as the one who has made a full atonement for all her sins and who gives to her eternal life. It’s only in this way that Mary’s joy can be made full.

Jesus repeats the angels’ question: “Why are you crying?” The key to Mary’s joy is not simply the recognition that Jesus, who was dead, is now alive. The key to Mary’s joy is that Jesus, who was dead, is now alive and can never die again because through His death He has defeated death once for all and even inaugurated in His own person a new creation. *Why* do you not see that it is I? “Woman, *why* are you crying?”

Whom are you seeking?” Mary is seeking, as it were, an “earthly” Jesus — Jesus in the days of His flesh. This is why Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus standing before her. This is why she still doesn’t recognize the voice of Jesus when He addresses her as “woman.” The key, therefore, to Mary’s joy is that she learn to seek not an earthly Jesus, but the heavenly Jesus, and to seek after Him always, by faith.

“Woman, *why* are you crying? *Whom* are you seeking?”

VII. John 20:15b — Thinking 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.”

Mary grasps now at a new hope. Maybe the body of Jesus has not been carried away by enemies; maybe the gardener was under orders to take His body and lay it in some other place.

VIII. John 20:16a — Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

We know that Mary was already turning away from Jesus because in the next half of the verse she turns back to Him again. It’s as she was turning away, then, that Jesus called to her. “Mary!” Jesus still knows and calls her by name, even as He knows and calls all of His sheep by name (Jn. 10:3). Jesus loves Mary, just as He loved Mary before. And so the lesson Mary must learn is not that there is now a distant formality between her and Jesus. The lesson she must learn is that the good news of the resurrection is not simply that the earthly Jesus is alive again, but that He is alive again with a fundamentally different kind of life. He is alive forevermore as Mary’s own Redeemer and Priest and King, and through faith in Him Mary can be, herself, a new creation. Mary must learn to recognize Jesus in this new and wonderful way.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’”

IX. John 20:16b — She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).

We know from the next verse that Mary was immediately clinging to Jesus. But she still clings to Jesus only as she had known Him before. She addresses Him still as “Rabboni” (Teacher). She doesn’t want the Jesus she knew before to be taken away from her ever again. What Mary still doesn’t see is that the Jesus who stands before her now is not the “same” Jesus she knew before. She believes now in the fact of the resurrection (history), and this has personally brought her joy, but she still doesn’t understand what it means (theology); therefore she has not yet entered into the true joy. Perhaps now, then, we can hear the love, and even the joy, in these words of gentle reproof.

X. John 20:17 — Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for 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, and My God and your God.’”

On the one hand, Mary *need not* cling to Jesus because He has not yet ascended (perfect tense) to the Father. On the other hand, *if Jesus is going to ascend to the Father*, then Mary’s clinging to Jesus is not only futile, but wholly misguided and out of place. Mary’s clinging to Jesus in her joy is the very thing still robbing her of the true joy. Remember what Jesus said to the disciples only three days earlier:

➤ John 14:28 — “You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have *rejoiced* because I *go* to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.”

What does the resurrection mean? It means that Jesus is going away. It means that Jesus is going to the Father. The resurrection is the continuation of Jesus’ ascension — an ascension that began when He was “lifted up” on the cross and that will be completed when He is taken up into heaven (Lk. 24:51; Acts 1:9-11).

Mary is clinging to the “old” Jesus — Jesus in the days of His flesh. But what she needs to learn now is the joy of clinging by faith to the Jesus who is going away and ascending to the Father as our advocate and representative, as our king and high priest, as the one who gives the Holy Spirit, and as the one who is coming again. Mary is clinging to the Jesus that she knew in the days of His flesh. What she needs to learn now is the joy of clinging by faith to the Jesus who, by His resurrection, has ushered in a new creation. This is why Jesus says to Mary—not just for the disciples’ sake, but for Mary’s sake:

“Go to My *brothers* and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father *and your Father*, and My God *and your God*.’” What does the resurrection mean? It means that as we are united with the resurrected Jesus by faith, we share with Him in the exalted privileges of His Sonship (“My Father and your Father, and My God and your God”). It means that we can address God, now, as “Abba, Father,” and that we are heirs with Jesus of all things (Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:4-7; Heb. 1:2; 1 Cor. 3:21-23). It means that as we are united with the resurrected Jesus by faith, we ourselves have become a new creation.

Here, then, is the glorious theology which not only grows out of the historical fact of the resurrection, but which reveals to us the absolute necessity of that resurrection. In the final analysis, we believe in the resurrection because our eyes have been opened to *see* what the resurrection means. And because we believe, our joy is made full. I believe we can see the beginnings of this same belief and joy in Mary when we read in verse 18:

XI. John 20:18 — Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and that He had said these things to her.





