

## **John 20:1-18**

The author of the Fourth Gospel viewed the crucifixion as the moment of Jesus' glorification. So how did he view the experience that came to be called "resurrection?" If "resurrection" means resuscitation of a deceased body back into the physical world of time and space, it stretches credibility beyond the breaking point. Such an understanding would violate everything we modern people know about how the world operates. It would require not just one mighty miracle, but hundreds of millions of tiny miracles. For example, we would have to believe that time itself could be reversed. It would mean that feet pinned to a cross by spikes could walk as if no injury occurred.

The later in time the descriptions of the resurrection, the more supernatural and miraculous are the details. In the earliest Christian writings which precede all four Gospels, Paul, argues for a transformation: "We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." Paul even talks about and tries to describe the transformative process. The dead shall be raised "imperishable," since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." That which is "mortal" must put on "immortality." Trying to stretch his vocabulary as he moves beyond the categories of time and space in which human life is lived, Paul speaks of a "spiritual body."

Paul is quite clear that God has raised Jesus to new life, but nowhere does that mean resuscitation back into the life of this world. Jesus was

raised into the life of God and was made universally available. He was not resuscitated to walk again the dark streets of Jerusalem or the dusty trails of Galilee.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote: “Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him ...The life he lives, he lives to God.” This was not about someone restored to physical life in the this world. Bodies that have been resuscitated to this world must eventually die again. Paul was clearly talking bout something other than a deceased body walking out of a grave in an act of supernatural restoration to life.

Mark, the first Gospel writer, narrates an Easter experience that has no mention of anyone seeing the resurrected Jesus. The women who came to the tomb only saw a “young man ... dressed in a white robe.” This man is not an angel. He will become an angel about a decade later when Matthew heightens the story and describes this young man as having the appearance of lightning with his raiment as white as snow. About a decade after Matthew, Luke will turn this messenger into two angels, who were in “dazzling apparel,” as the story continues to grow.

In Mark, the women do not see Jesus; they flee from the empty tomb trembling and astonished. In Matthew Jesus appears in Galilee on top of a mountain, not in the flesh, but out of God, or out of heaven. In this story, the raised Jesus spoke for the first time and gave them the great

commission. Just as in Mark, none of the details of this Matthean story of the resurrection indicate a physically resuscitated body.

Luke, writing later, is the primary one who transforms the resurrected Jesus into a very corporeal being – one who was restored to a physical, earthly life that ultimately, since he cannot die again, must somehow be extricated from this world. To accomplish that, Luke develops the story of the ascension. Literalising tendencies were inevitable as decades passed after the crucifixion, but ultimate truth is never well served by literal words developed by limited human minds. The author of the Fourth Gospel, that is, John's Gospel, was aware of this, so in the latter years of the tenth decade when he relates the Easter story, he makes that very clear. His passion against literalism will not be compromised by his telling of the Easter story.

John has four distinct resurrection stories. They have been clumsily linked in order to be read as a continuous narrative to serve a liturgical purpose in corporate worship. These four resurrection stories were originally separate parts of the tradition.

The opening story is that of a woman alone at the tomb. She is Mary Magdalene. Her story is interrupted by the narrative of Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" coming to the tomb. But when that story is removed – the account of Magdalene at the tomb can easily be seen as a story standing alone.

The second story, again reveals the particular dynamic between Peter and the “beloved disciple.” It also looks at the resurrection through a very different understanding. This story also originally stood alone.

The third and fourth stories we will read next Sunday involve the other disciples and Thomas’ unbelief in the resurrected Jesus. John makes very clear that resurrection is not about physical resuscitation. It is about entering and participating in the “new being.” It is about the transformative power that is found in Jesus, that which issues in new dimensions of what it means to be human.

Mary Magdalene had so far been an obscure character in John’s Gospel, introduced standing at the foot of the cross. No one reading John’s gospel on its own would have ever heard of her. Mark identifies her as one of those standing by looking at the cross “from afar.” Matthew, writing a decade later quotes Mark, adding no new details. Luke introduces her as a woman out of whom Jesus cast seven demons. This may have been the first step in the demonization of Magdalene that ultimately resulted in her designation as a prostitute.

In the earlier synoptics we learn that when Magdalene does make her entrance into the story at the crucifixion, she is identified as one of the women who in Galilee provided for Jesus “out of their means,” and then as one of the women who followed Jesus all the way from Galilee to

Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene is just one more in a long line of John's literary creations. A bit player in the synoptic gospels, she is now cast by John in a major, even a starring role. In a way, John's Magdalene might have reminded his readers of the Samaritan woman by the well. Both become evangelists to whom the message of Jesus is entrusted. One speaks to the people of her village, the other bears the message of the empty tomb to Peter and the disciples.

We find Magdalene alone and weeping at the tomb of Jesus. The stone covering the opening to the tomb has been removed. The story is interrupted as Magdalene conveys the message of the tomb's emptiness to Peter and the "beloved disciple." Mary is always referred to as Mary Magdalene, as if Magdalene were part of her name, which it is not. At that time, people did not have last names. It has been suggested that it refers to her place of origin - Magdala. However, no such place existed at the time. The town of Magdala was established much later, its name taken from the Gospel stories. The word "Magdalene" may have been attached to her to give us an insight into her role in the story of Jesus. The Hebrew language actually has no vowels, only vowel pointers. The Hebrew word *MIGDAL* has the same consonants that are found in Magdalene - *MGDL* - in the correct order. The word *MIGDAL* used in the Hebrew scriptures is generally translated as "tower" but can also be translated as "tall," "large," or "great." So Mary Magdalene could have a title, such as "Mary, the great," revealing her significance in the life of Jesus and his followers.

This is the way she is portrayed in early Christian history, until her female presence, in close association with Jesus, bothered church leaders so deeply that they trashed her reputation, calling her a prostitute. That tradition entered Christian mythology with the support of popes like Gregory the Great, who made official the identification of Magdalene with the “woman of the street” – which she was not.

In his deeply Jewish and significantly mystical gospel, what is John trying to communicate through this character? Jesus has been crucified. He is dead. He has been buried. Magdalene goes to his tomb to mourn her loss. The tomb symbolically holds her fragmented dreams as well as those of Jesus’ followers. That tomb has served to place limits on Jesus’ meaning. It stands as an ultimate barrier against all of the things for which he stood. It means that his love was finite, his forgiveness was finite, his life was finite. It was now all over. Magdalene mulls over all of these things. When she arrives at the tomb it is “early” and “still dark.” She finds the tomb open. The stone has been removed from its entrance. A crack has appeared in the finality of finitude.

Her mystical insight has not yet developed. This empty tomb means to her only that the sanctity of the tomb has been violated, perhaps even that the grave has been robbed. That is what she reported to the disciples. Her despair heightens. And when she again looks into the tomb, she stares into the face of death, and this time she sees mystical

figures – two angels sitting at the head and foot of where the body of Jesus was supposed to lie. These mystical figures inquire as to the meaning of her tears. She tells them of her loss. Jesus is dead, now his body is missing. He was, she still believes, bound by that body. She can be near to him only by being near to his physical remains.

Magdalene then turns and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not recognize him. She thinks he's the gardener. He speaks, he asks the same questions the angels asked: "Woman, why are you weeping?" But, in her answer, the same one that she gave the angels, she adds a new and revealing dimension in her relationship to this Jesus by saying: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." She wants to be near the receptacle that contains all that remains of him.

The drama is intensified when she hears her name spoken. Death has not separated her from the person through whom she has been called to be. Her new identity, her new being, is still intact. Death has not broken it or torn it from her. She is known and loved; she has entered a new mystical awareness. She responds to the sound of her name by using a title of great affection: "Rabboni." She moves to be near him. No, says the risen and mystical Jesus. No, "do not cling to me. I have not yet ascended to the Father ... but I am ascending." In other words, I am in the process of being transformed; I am escaping all human limits to enter into that which is universal, unending and ultimate. Magdalene then goes

to the disciples with this message: “I have seen the Lord.”

This is the first way that John seeks to convey the meaning of resurrection. For him it has nothing to do with physicality. It has nothing to do with seeing the resuscitated body of Jesus with the sight of physical eyes. It has rather to do with recognizing that no tomb could hold the meaning present in the life of Jesus, just as no barrier could stand between him and those who had found new life in him.

The one who has stepped into the new dimension of life is now related to Jesus in the same way that a branch is related to a vine. No, Mary did not see angels, she did not see Jesus physically and mistake him for the gardener. She didn't seek to cling to his actual body only to be told it wasn't possible. Jesus was not in any literal way in the process of “ascending” to the God he had called “Father.”

John is painting an interior experience in external colours using objective words. Mary Magdalene is portrayed as the first witness of the resurrection. She is the first one to see that Jesus' glorification was revealed in his ability to give his life and his love away. She is the first to see that in his freedom to step beyond the human drive to survive, he reveals a new dimension of life and consciousness. This was his revelation.

Beyond the defensive barriers of our survival-driven humanity there is a

new dimension of life awaiting to be entered. In this new dimension is a mystical oneness with God and all that is can be experienced. The life I live, says Jesus, is the life of God. The love I share is the love of God. The being I reveal is the being of God. I have entered a new humanity; I have discovered a doorway into a new being. I no longer have a need to cling either to the past or to the symbols of the reality that once was all I knew existed. I now know who I am. I know who God is, I step into that experience and claim it for my own.

That is what the story of Mary Magdalene reveals. John told us that this book, this gospel, is not intended to be read literally. It is the work of a Jewish mystic. One is to read it by listening to the experience that it is seeking to open, so that the reader can enter that experience and live into it. Mary Magdalene now understands that experience and so she asserts: "I have seen the Lord," but what she has seen is the meaning of life. She steps into that life and claims it for her own. That is how Easter always dawns.

Our second resurrection episode interrupts the story of Mary Magdalene. Mary reports the emptiness of the tomb, and Peter and the "beloved disciple" immediately run to investigate. Peter is the disciple in whom an internal battle rages. He will examine the empty tomb, but characteristically will not understand its meaning. The "beloved disciple" is the ideal disciple, who in contrast to Peter, always understands immediately. When they receive Mary's message that the tomb has been

opened, they run to see for themselves. The “beloved disciple” arrives first. At the entrance of the tomb, he waits stooping down to peek in. He sees the burial cloths on the ground. The “beloved disciple,” does not rush into the tomb or into this mystery. Then Peter arrives and following his normal behaviour pattern barges in. There he sees exactly the same things that the “beloved disciple” has seen. The two disciples return to their homes and neither is ever referred to again in this gospel except in the much later-appended epilogue.

No one is said to have seen the resurrected Jesus. The only thing the witnesses saw was an empty tomb. They saw human limits that could not contain Jesus. There was no body, deceased or resurrected. There was only the impact of his life, an impact that death could not remove. That appeared to be enough for the ideal disciple, the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” the disciple who believed, but it was not enough for Peter. For Peter, Easter dawns as an experience of a rising and unresolved tension, a conflict between a human yearning and a lived reality; it is an experience of a struggle to believe, of an attempt, usually unsuccessful, to see meaning beyond the limits inside which life seems to be bound. There are no apparitions that appear to move Peter along. There are no revelations to give birth to or even confirm his struggling faith. All Peter sees is a grave that cannot hold Jesus, grave clothes that cannot bind him. That was enough for the “beloved disciple.” Peter was a harder case. Resurrection is not easy – not for him and not for us. Its truth dawns slowly. Death as the doorway to life does not seem apparent. Yet

that is the way John suggests that the meaning of Easter broke into human awareness among those who came to be known as the twelve.

Perhaps John is trying to say that the resurrection we seek is not so much that of Jesus as it is of ourselves. Easter!! Resurrection!! – the experience that is seeking to open the door to a new dimension of life awaiting to be entered – a new dimension, a mystical oneness with God and all that is!

The life I live, says Jesus, is the life of God.

The love I share is the love of God.

The being I reveal is the being of God.

**Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!!**

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

Loving God, With joy and unending praise we raise our voices to you today, as together today we sing “Hallelujah! He is risen!”

**Amen.**