

Resurrection  
*John 20:1-18*  
April 12, 2009  
Michael W. Mooty

“... *Mary*...”

I want to make sure that you heard the most important word in the story we just read. In fact, I might want to say that this is the most important word in the entire Bible. That word is *Mary*.

To tell you why I think that word is so important, I need to back up a bit and point out that John's understanding of the importance of the resurrection is different from that of the other gospel writers. Let's omit Mark. His gospel ends with frightened women fleeing from the empty tomb. No stories about appearances of the risen Christ in his gospel, so let's set Mark aside.

Matthew and Luke both tell stories about the risen Christ giving final instructions to his followers. In Matthew, it occurs on the mountain in Galilee. *Go, make disciples... baptize ... teach ... I will be with you.* Luke is more complicated. He first tells about two disciples walking the road to Emmaus on Easter afternoon. They are joined by a stranger whom they do not recognize. The conversation turns to the recent events in Jerusalem, how Jesus was arrested and put to death. This stranger begins to talk about how the Messiah must suffer and enter into his glory. Finally, as evening falls, they gather for a meal, and when he breaks bread, their eyes are opened. They recognize that their companion is Jesus, and he vanishes from their sight. Luke then says that Jesus then appears to the disciples and eats with them. After they eat, final words about how all that has happened has been the unfolding of God's plan and how their mission to preach the good news to all nations. Then, he leads **them** to Bethany, and is lifted up to the presence of God. For Matthew and Luke the focus is on the church. It is when the church breaks bread that the risen Christ is present and recognized. It is when the church proclaims repentance and forgiveness that it truly worships the one who has been glorified in his resurrection and ascension.

But John... John is different. In John, all of the final words have already been spoken at the last supper on the evening before his arrest. John believes that it is in his crucifixion, not his resurrection and ascension, that Jesus is glorified. For John, the resurrection means something entirely different, and that something is revealed in that most important word - *Mary*.

We don't know a great deal about Mary Magdalene. Only Luke mentions her during Jesus' ministry in Galilee. *The twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out...* Now what those seven demons were, I do not know. I've known several people with four or five demons... a few with six... but seven? All I can take from that is that her life was a mess. Tradition says that she was a whore. No reason to believe that, but it might explain seven demons. All I know is that Jesus gave her her life back - made it new. Took her from life worse than death and made her really alive. Maybe Mary was the first to be raised from the dead. But that's all we know, and that explains why she was gladly a part of that band of disciples who followed Jesus as he traveled around the countryside. The only other thing that we know about her for sure is that she was

with him on that last trip to Jerusalem. Three of the gospels mention her by name as a witness to the crucifixion. Evidently most of the men had fled, but Mary was there. All four gospels say that she was among those who went to the tomb on that Sunday morning, and in all the lists of various women who were said to have made that journey, she is always the first to be named. John says that she went to the tomb alone. Why she went, he does not say, but we all understand. In the early days of grief, there is an attraction to the place of burial, a kind of last connection to the lost loved one. How many of you, on the day after the funeral, have gone back to the cemetery, perhaps with a handful of flowers, just to be close, as close as one can be. John says that Mary went alone.

When she finds the tomb empty, she runs to tell anyone she can find that the body has been taken away. Peter and an unnamed disciple race to the tomb, see it for themselves and depart. But Mary lingers... weeps... looks in again, and this time sees two angels who ask her about her tears. She turns around and sees someone.

I'm sure you noticed when we read the story that Mary did not recognize him. Even when he speaks to her, asks her why she is crying, asks for whom she is looking, she does not recognize him. Thinks that he is a gardener and asks him if he has carried the body away. I'm reminded of those two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They too walk with Jesus and talk with Jesus, but don't realize that it is Jesus. Why is that, I wonder? Is it a reminder that resurrection faith is not automatic... that it doesn't come quickly and easily. Seeing an empty tomb is not enough. Bread must be broken, or a name must be called.

*Woman, why are you weeping?* And Mary thinks that he is a gardener. But then, the important word - maybe the most important word in the entire Bible: *Mary*. And she knows. I wonder how many times she has heard him say her name before? Did she go with him to the wedding at Cana? *Glass of wine, Mary?* \_\_\_\_\_ Was she there when the multitude was fed? *Mary, would you help hand out the loaves of bread?* How many times? And now, she hears it again, and she knows. She knows that she is in the presence of the one whom she followed. She knows that she is in the presence of the one she saw die. She knows him and he knows her. *Teacher*, she says. And that, for John, and for me, is resurrection.

When I say that God raised Jesus from the dead, I mean that death did not end the relationship that he had with Mary... with Peter... with Thomas... and his death did not end the relationship that he would have with you and with me. One the night before his death, he said to those gathered in that upper room: *No longer do I call you servants, I call you friends.* Friends of Jesus. If you can't believe anything else on Easter, believe this: No cross can end that friendship.

In that undying friendship, I continue to discover the person I am meant to be. In that friendship, I hear words of forgiveness and a call to forgive those who harm me. In that relationship, I catch a glimpse of the world as God intends it to be, and in that friendship, I begin to understand the part I have to play in making that world a reality.

Mary was the first to know it: Easter means that everything has changed because, in spite of his death, nothing has changed. I know, she did not recognize him. Something changed, but not the important thing. Jesus still calls her by name. Jesus still has the power to transform us and bring us into the presence of God. Jesus still has the power to set us free from the bondage of

shame and guilt. Jesus still has the power to create, in us, the will to live joyfully and love deeply. The important things have not changed.

You may have read the story this past week about a former Ku Klux Klan member - a violent racist and bigot - who now expresses shame and sorrow about his past because he realizes that he cannot go into the presence of God with all of that hatred in his heart. Why did he do that? I wonder if he did that because he heard someone call his name. Not someone who was dead. Someone who is still very much alive... someone who is still, who is always, looking for people to call his friends.