

A Meeting with the Gardener

John 20: 11-18

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The Scriptures tell us that when Jesus died, His body was taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. To this very day we do not know where that tomb was located. Several possibilities have been identified. One of them is known as the Garden Tomb. Located just outside the oldest part of Jerusalem, it fits the Biblical description of the place where Jesus was buried. Carved into the side of a wall of stone with evidence of a large stone that once rolled across its entrance, it is the kind of place that a wealthy and prominent person like Joseph of Arimathea would have owned. Upon Joseph's future death, his remains would have been placed inside. Instead, if this is indeed the tomb where Jesus was buried, Jesus was the first and probably the only person to have ever resided within its confines. True to the account given in the Gospel of John, it is a tomb located in a garden. This morning let us imagine that we have gathered in that place to see once again what transpired when Mary Magdalene encountered the resurrected presence of her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus' most devoted followers. She, along with a number of other women, had accompanied Jesus and His disciples on that fateful journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Who was she? Although frequently mentioned in the Gospels, very little information is given about her background. Only two things stand out. Her last name, "Magdalene," appears to indicate that she was from a town near the Sea of Galilee named Magdala. This distinguishes her from the other women named Mary who accompanied Jesus—Mary, His earthly mother, and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph. The other thing that we know about Mary Magdalene is that she was among a group of women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases earlier in Jesus' ministry. In fact, in the eighth chapter of his Gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus delivered her from seven demons who had taken possession of her life. Based upon these two Scriptural facts, we can assume that Mary Magdalene was a woman of between forty and fifty years of age, about the same age as the other women who accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem. We should also assume that having been ravaged by a malignant presence in her life, perhaps for many years, she was not the voluptuous temptress that is often portrayed in movies about Jesus' life and ministry. One thing, however, is clearly evident. Mary Magdalene's devotion to Christ was

heartfelt and fearless. She did not abandon Him during the six hours He languished on the cross nor afterwards when He was hastily buried in a borrowed tomb. Furthermore she was one of the first to go to that tomb after the Passover was over. This is what transpired when she arrived.

Along with a number of other women, Mary went to anoint Jesus' body. Arriving at the tomb they discovered that the stone had been rolled away. Having received an angelic announcement that Jesus had risen, they returned to the Upper Room to tell the disciples what had happened. They were greeted with skepticism. The disciples did not believe them. They thought they were overcome with emotion and the vision of an angel or angels telling them of Christ's resurrection was an illusion. Nevertheless, their report did require investigation. So Peter, accompanied by John, the beloved disciple who along with his brother, James, comprised that inner circle of Jesus' disciples, started off for the tomb. They ran most of the way. Arriving first, John looked inside but did not enter. When Peter arrived, he went inside and James followed after him. They saw the grave clothes lying about, as well as the burial cloth that had been placed over the head of Jesus. It had been folded and placed beside the scattered grave linens. They both believed that something amazing had taken place but were not sure as to what it all meant.

As John recounts for us in his Gospel, they left, but Mary Magdalene who had followed them to the tomb remained behind. Still overcome with emotion, she was weeping. Looking inside of the tomb, she once again became aware of an unexpected presence. Two angelic beings were sitting on the stone platform where the body of Jesus had been laid, one at the foot and the other at the head. Turning towards her they asked as if with one voice, "Woman, why are you crying?" In response she said, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put Him." All she had wanted to do was to anoint Jesus' body with the sweet ointments she had prepared, one last act of kindness for the One who had meant so much to her, and now even this had been denied.

Sensing the presence of someone standing behind her, she turned and saw Jesus, but did not recognize Him. Perhaps it was the tears coursing down her face or perhaps it was a situation similar to what the two disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced. This seemingly unknown man said, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?" Thinking that this man was a gardener and looking back towards the entrance to the tomb, Mary said, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him and I will get Him." Clearly, she was not thinking clearly. How could she lift and retrieve a dead man's body? But clarity returned when this unknown man called her name, saying simply, "Mary."

Turning and seeing Jesus as if for the first time, she cried out in Aramaic, her native tongue, "Rabboni," teacher. Then falling to her knees, she reached out, clinging to the Man whom she loved with all of her heart. Gently admonishing her Jesus said, "Stop holding on to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." Then He added, "Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to My Father and your Father, my God and your God,'" which is, of course, exactly what she did.

For us today, why is this account of Jesus' resurrection important? First, it is a reminder that Jesus appeared not only to Peter and later to the other disciples, but to Mary, a person who had once been considered demonic, contaminated by an oppressive spirit that probably made her a repulsive menace to society. Having been healed by Jesus, Mary exemplifies the fact that Jesus can bring new life and wholeness into our lives no matter who we are or what we have faced in our past. Second, this account also tells us that Jesus' appearances were not limited to those who were men. The first people to meet Him after His resurrection were women and with regards to this resurrection account, one special woman named Mary. Jesus both then and now loves all who believe in Him. Furthermore, He has a special place in His heart for those who sometimes love Him best, the women of this world.

Finally, there is Jesus' request not to be touched. Was His resurrection not complete? Was there something still lacking in His appearance which had yet to be accomplished? No further explanation is given, but several commentators have provided an explanation I find appealing. Let me share it with you. When Mary reached out to take hold of Jesus, she was clinging to the past, to the person who had healed her and given her a new lease on life. She was clinging to the Jesus of Nazareth, not the resurrected Lord of all creation. She had not yet grasped or understood His spiritual transformation. He was now the divine Son of God in a way that was similar to, but also incredibly different from what He had been just three days before. No longer would anyone be able to think of Him as just a wise teacher or a godly servant of God. He was now the very Son, the very presence of God. He would now have to be recognized and known as Someone far greater and more wonderful than the limitations of human flesh.

Indeed, that is where we reside this day as we prepare to partake of the Lord's Supper. Christ is present but we will not see Him with our physical eyes or touch Him with our outstretched hands. We will perceive His presence in our hearts, knowing that what He said to Mary is still true for all of those who believe in Him, "I am returning to My Father who is now your Father and My God who is now your God."