

The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

Chapter 4: Mary Magdalene Meets the Risen Christ

[Brian Schwertley](#)

But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the LORD, and that he had spoken these things unto her (Jn. 20:11-18).

Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not (Mk. 16:9-11).

The story of Mary Magdalene meeting the resurrected Christ is peculiar to John. Mark simply records the fact that it occurred and notes the reaction of the apostles to her testimony of the event. Of all the post-resurrection appearances of our Lord, this story is perhaps the most touching and heart-stirring of them all. This account is very precious not simply because we see the love that Mary has for Jesus but primarily because we observe the Savior's tenderness, mercy and grace toward His people in their suffering. There are a number of things that are noteworthy in our text.

Mary Waits Alone at the Tomb

The first thing to note regarding this narrative is how Mary sets a wonderful example of the need to love and seek Christ.

After examining the tomb and the grave clothes, Peter and John returned home. John, who now believed in the resurrection, obviously saw no need of staying at the tomb. Peter, who was perplexed, probably thought it wise to inform the others that the women's testimony was indeed true. Mary, however, who either arrived after they had already left or arrived when they were in the tomb, apparently did not speak with Peter and John when they departed. This raises the question: why did Mary stay behind at the tomb?

Given the broad context of Scripture and Mary's tears, it was her love and devotion towards the Savior which caused her to stay at the tomb and cry. At this point, Mary knew that the Lord's body was gone. But she did not yet understand what occurred or believe in the

resurrection of Christ. Therefore, she sobbed (“*klaiein* means loud, unrestrained weeping”¹) and remained by the tomb because this was the last place where she knew the Redeemer had been. Perhaps she had some hope that by staying near the tomb she could find out what had happened to Jesus’ body. “Where there is a true love to Christ there will be a constant adherence to him, and a resolution with purpose of heart to cleave to him.”²

Even though Mary’s knowledge was deficient, and her faith in the resurrection lacking; she acted upon the little knowledge and faith that she did have, and sought Jesus intensely and affectionately. We see in Mary a greater exhibition of love and devotion toward the Redeemer than even that of the apostles at this time. Dead or alive, she wanted to be near the Savior. Her knowledge was so deficient and her grief so strong that she simply resolved to wait near the tomb hoping to hear something about the whereabouts of Christ.

While Mary cannot be excused for her lack of knowledge and unbelief regarding the resurrection, we can still learn from her love and dedication. If there is something troubling us, or we are experiencing a trial, or we lack the biblical knowledge and faith that we ought to have, then we must imitate Mary and seek to be as close to Jesus as possible. While we obviously cannot linger near the tomb we can seek to be closer to the Savior through prayer, Bible reading and meditation upon His Word. We can pray that God would increase our faith and love toward the Mediator. We can meditate upon what Christ has done for us and ask God to increase our affection and devotion toward His Son. Mary Magdalene had been redeemed out of a great demonic oppression. She never appeared to forget or take for granted the wonderful things the Lord did for her. Oh, that we could have Mary’s love and appreciation toward Christ!

We must also linger long where the Redeemer’s Word is preached, where the doctrines of grace are exalted and biblical worship is practiced. We come closer to the Savior through the means of grace. When people talk about their great love toward Jesus yet care not for His doctrine or the worship that He authorized, then they are “talking the talk but not walking the walk.” To be closer to Christ, we must also spend time with God’s people, with the Savior’s body. People who do not go to church or who go to be entertained and then leave as soon as possible are not moving closer to Jesus. Mary had a strong, constant love and appreciation for the Savior. May God give us hearts like Mary’s so that we would never take our Lord for granted or neglect His ordinances. Hutcheson writes, “Albeit there are oftimes many errors in the way of affectionate saints, yet those whom Christ is to manifest himself most and first unto are such as cannot want [i.e. get] him but must incessantly wait till they get him...her affection...keeps her waiting on, and so though her failings were many, she gets the first sight of Christ.”³

Mary’s Angelic Encounter

As Mary wept at the tomb, she decided (probably out of curiosity) to stoop down and look into the sepulcher. In the sepulcher she saw two angels in white, one at the head and the other at the foot of where Jesus body had lain. The angels’ presence and their position are interesting and raise a number of questions.

First, why did these angels appear to the women (Mt. 28:5-8; Mk. 16:2-8; Lk.24:1-8) and to Mary (Jn. 20:12), but not to Peter and John? Although the Scripture does not give any specific reason, it may be that our Lord wanted the disciples to believe based on the physical evidence

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1349.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1211.

³ George Hutcheson, *John*, 416.

alone. Only the women saw the angels and were given specific instructions to tell the apostles about what they had seen. Also, the fact that one moment the angels were there and then soon after they were not to be seen indicates that the angels of God can appear and disappear, instantaneously and supernaturally at will. God had instructed them to appear to the women, but not to the men. It is likely that these two angels were in the tomb when Peter and John inspected the body, but purposefully remained invisible.

Second, why were the angels sitting at the foot and head of where our Lord's body had lain? The angels were likely sitting instead of standing in order to set Mary at ease. If they were standing, Mary may have thought they were about to leave. By sitting, they indicate that they were waiting for Mary to arrive and they were not in an aggressive posture. Their position at the head and foot of where Jesus' body had been possibly indicates that they were guardians of the Savior's body while it was in the tomb. In Psalm 91:11 God promised His Son, "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." Matthew 28:2ff, however, seems to indicate that the angels came from heaven right after the resurrection took place. A number of commentators have noted the similarity of the position of the two angels to the angels at each end of the mercy seat. Pink writes, "Who can doubt that the Holy Spirit would have us link up this verse with Exodus 25:17-19—'And thou shalt make a mercy-seat of pure gold...and thou shalt make *two* cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, *in the two ends* of the mercy-seat.' More remarkable still is the final word which Jehovah spake unto Moses concerning the mercy seat: 'And *there* I will *meet with thee*, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat from between the two cherubims' (Ex. 25:22). Here, then, in *John's* Gospel, do we learn once more that Christ is the *meeting-place* between God and man!"⁴

These two angels were placed in the empty tomb to honor the resurrected Savior; add to the glory and magnificence of our Lord's resurrection; comfort the saints and communicate the reality of the resurrection to God's people. "Christ crucified was the great propitiatory, at the head and feet of which were these two cherubim, not with flaming swords, to keep us from, but welcome messengers, to direct us to, the way of life."⁵ Are you trusting the resurrected, living Redeemer, who died to expiate the sins of His people and propitiate the wrath of God?

Third, why doesn't Mary act surprised, astonished or frightened at the sight of these angels like the group of women before her? These angels did appear as men; however, their white, dazzling apparel and their unusual location should have indicated to Mary that these were no ordinary visitors to the tomb. The only logical answer to this question is found in Mary's sorely troubled state of mind. Her grief was so strong and her desire to minister to the Lord's body was so focused that she was not thinking rationally. She was not paying close attention to what was happening around her.

The Significance of the Angel's Question

The angels ask Mary a question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" (Jn. 20:13). This question is meant to convey a number of things to Mary in a subtle, delicate manner.

First, this question contains an implicit gentle rebuke of Mary's grief. Mary's sorrow and tears were rooted in a lack of knowledge, understanding and belief in things that she had been instructed in by Jesus. Therefore, her weeping was inappropriate. She was weeping because the grave was empty. If she understood the truth, she should have been rejoicing, not weeping. In

⁴ Arthur Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:273.

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, 5:1212.

fact, if the Savior's body was still in the tomb, then Mary and everyone else *would* have reason to weep. For if Christ had not arisen, then we would all still be in our sins and there would be no resurrection unto life.

There are lessons in Mary's weeping for all believers. (1) A lack of right biblical knowledge and faith in the Word of God will lead professing Christians into many sorrows and anxieties. Life can be very difficult when people live in family turmoil because they refuse to believe the Bible and instead turn for help to the secular priesthood of psychiatrists and psychologists. People needlessly weep and suffer because they do not believe that God is sovereign or that Christ is ruling *now* as the victorious King. Their theological outlook on life is one of pessimism, defeatism and retreat. If we understand who Jesus is and the implications of the resurrection, then we will lead lives of faith unto victory. (2) We often demonstrate our lack of faith in God when we fret, complain or even shed tears when we really have no cause. The Savior commands us not to worry (Mt. 6:25-34) and Paul tells us by the Spirit to be anxious for nothing (Phil. 4:6). A solid knowledge of Scripture and a hearty trust in it will dispel false sorrows, false fears, false anxieties and vain tears. J. C. Ryle writes, "She wept when the angels spoke to her: 'Woman,' they said, 'why weepest thou?'—She was weeping still when our Lord spoke to her: 'Woman,' He also said, 'why weepest thou?' And the burden of her complaint was always the same: 'They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.'—Yet all this time her risen Master was close to her, with 'body, flesh, and bones, and all things pertaining to the perfection of man's nature.' (Article IV.) Her tears were needless. Her anxiety was unnecessary. Like Hagar in the wilderness, she had a well of water by her side, but she had not eyes to see it."⁶

Second, the angels' question is designed to point Mary to the truth without directly stating it. When the women had encountered the angels in the tomb a little earlier, they announced the resurrection immediately in a clear, dramatic manner (Mt. 28:6-7; Mk. 16:6-7; Lk. 24:5-6). But, here, they inquire about her sorrow. The question has the same sense of "do you really have a reason to weep?" They want Mary to search her heart ("Do you not remember the words Jesus spoke to you?") and take account of the evidence before her ("Do you not see the grave clothes lying there between us neatly in place? Do you really think that we would allow the body of Christ to be stolen?")

Third, the angels (and, in a moment, Jesus) ask Mary a question about her weeping instead of directly announcing the resurrection because our Lord wants to surprise her with His own presence. This was a great condescension and act of mercy on Christ's part. He overlooks her faults and gives her precisely what she desires and needs—Himself. Poor Mary was weeping when she should have been rejoicing. She was looking for the Savior in the wrong place—the sepulcher. She was looking into a place for the dead, for the living and risen Mediator. She was undergoing her own inward emotional agony because she wanted so much to be with Jesus. And all the sorrow and folly was her fault. It all was the result of spiritual blindness and a lack of faith. But in spite of Mary's failures, our Lord will have mercy on her and reveal Himself to her. Mary's love, dedication and commitment to the Redeemer are greatly rewarded, while her many faults are dealt with as gently as possible.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:412.

Mary's Answer

Mary said to the angels, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him" (Jn. 20:13). The word for "they" used here is indefinite, indicating that she has no idea who could have taken the body. There are two things noteworthy about her response.

First, Mary openly acknowledged that Jesus is her Lord. Earlier, when she had spoken to Peter and John she said, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb" (Jn. 20:2); but here when talking to complete strangers (there is no evidence from the passage that she regarded these visitors as angels) she says, "They have taken away my Lord" (Jn. 20:13). Although her weeping was unjustified, we still see in Mary a great faith and commitment to Christ. She had given herself to the Savior and had bowed the knee to Him as her royal sovereign. Although in her mind the kingdom was shattered or at least postponed, her attachment to the King never wavered. As Spurgeon says, "Whether you see him or do not see him, he is still yours; and you must hold to it that he is still your own. 'My beloved is mine, and I am his,' and if I do not just now behold the smilings of his face, yet he is my Lord.... Come death, come life, come darkness of soul, or joy of spirit, whatever happens, I am my Lord's. Such holy constancy will be rewarded."⁷ Can you say, "Jesus is my Lord?" Not one person on earth will go to heaven that does not speak of the Redeemer as "my Lord." With David we must say, "The Lord is my Shepherd" (Ps. 23:1). With Solomon we must say of Christ, "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Song of Sol. 2:16). Every knee must bow to the resurrected King and "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11). Oh Lord, commend Christ to our hearts above all things and make us resolve by the power of Your Spirit to wage war with every known transgression against His throne.

Second, Mary's obsession was finding Christ and ministering to Him, to the exclusion of all else. Mary's love for Jesus is so strong that just to be near Him, even near His dead body, is all she longs for at this moment. Her obsession and grief are so strong she doesn't even concern herself regarding who the two inquirers in the tomb are. She was so absorbed by her grief and so occupied with her thoughts about Jesus that she did not even concern herself with speaking to angels.

Jesus Appears to Mary

As soon as Mary stops speaking, "she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, 'Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to Him, 'Rabboni!' (which is to say, teacher)" (Jn. 20:15-17). There are a number of things to note regarding this incident.

First, why does Mary turn around at this precise moment? The text does not specifically say. Perhaps she sensed someone standing behind her. Maybe she heard a footstep behind her. It could simply be that she was done examining the tomb and talking with the angels and turned to move away from the sepulcher. If the tomb faced the east, then our Lord's shadow would have

⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Magdalene at the Sepulchre: An Instructive Scene" in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1890] 1970), 35:677.

been observable on the entrance to the sepulcher. There is a distinct possibility that when the Savior appeared behind Mary, the angels saw Him and rose in respect to their Ruler and showed awe and devotion on their faces at the presence of Christ. This would have caused Mary to immediately turn to look behind her.

Second, why doesn't Mary recognize Jesus who is standing so close, right in front of her? In verse 15, it says that Mary thought He was the gardener (i.e. the caretaker of Joseph of Arimathea's garden property surrounding the tomb). The phenomenon of not recognizing the risen Savior was not limited to Mary. When our Lord appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke says, "Their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him" (24:16). Mark says that "He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked" (16:12). After Christ spent a long time with these disciples instructing them; "Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him" (Lk. 24:31). Similarly, when the disciples were fishing and Jesus stood on the shore, the disciples did not recognize Him until His instructions lead to a great catch of fish (see Jn. 21:4-7). Given these examples where our Lord was not recognized because He did not yet want to be recognized, it is best to view her non-recognition in supernatural terms rather than natural. While it is true that she was not expecting to see the Savior, this expectation cannot account for not recognizing Him from only a foot or so away.

Third, Christ's questions to Mary are calculated to focus her attention on Him. He repeats verbatim the question the angels had just asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Jesus, of course, knows why she is weeping. Thus, this question (as noted) is designed to teach Mary a lesson about the need to pay closer attention to what she had been taught and to believe it. Interestingly, the fact that this question is identical to the angels' indicates how perfectly the angels carry out their instructions from the Son of God. The second question, "Whom are you seeking?" is even more searching and revealing than the first. How did this Man that Mary thought was a gardener know that she was seeking anyone? Perhaps, Mary thought that He overheard her conversation with the angels. Once again, note that the Savior is stimulating Mary's mind to remembrance of the things she had been taught as a follower of Christ.

If we compare this passage with the Redeemer's encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we see by application that our Lord wants us to find Him through His Word. "How many are ever mourning and sorrowing, and have no comfort in their religion, while Christ is close to them."⁸ Thus, the Mediator draws her attention by His Word. We must remember that physical proximity to the risen Savior is not what is crucial to the Christian. For, it is His spiritual presence in the soul that brings life and understanding. Jesus' mercy condescends to Mary's weakness, but He does so in a way that is best calculated to benefit her spiritually. If the Redeemer is close to us and we do not sense it, then we must meditate on the Word of God and trust in its glorious promises.

Our Lord's question, "Why are you weeping?" demonstrates that the Savior is very concerned about each one of His saint's tears and anxieties personally. This is part of His high priestly work, to care for us, to comfort us and guide us into spiritual safety. With the crucifixion in the past and the foundation of our redemption complete and perfect, the exalted Redeemer is now very active in watching over, praying over and guiding His sheep. This incident with Mary ought to greatly strengthen our faith in Christ as our Savior. For in spite of her ignorance and unbelief, Jesus comes to Mary and tenderly gives her the desire of her heart. She asked for a dead body and received the living exalted King. She only wanted to minister to a corpse, but the living Savior came and ministered to her heart.

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:421.

Fourth, Mary assumes that at that early hour the person questioning her must be the gardener. Her answer reveals her continuing ignorance and her deep love. It is very touching. She said, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Mary is so caught up in her quest for Jesus and her grief that her offer is not in accordance with reality. She was ignoring the fact that the grave clothes were lying neatly in the place where our Lord’s body had laid. Also, even if the body of the Savior had been produced, she would have been unable to carry it off to a safe place. “Note, Troubled spirits, in a cloudy and dark day are apt to misrepresent Christ to themselves, and to put wrong constructions upon the methods of his providence and grace.”⁹ She was gravely mistaken because she did not interpret the things before her in light of divine revelation, but was speculating about a great redemptive event. Her heart was in the right place, but it was not informed by Scripture or the verbal teachings of Jesus.

Jesus Makes Himself Known

The Savior has been present before Mary, but she has not recognized Him and His questions have not brought her to an understanding of the truth. Therefore, “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to Him, ‘Rabboni!’ (which is to say, Teacher)” (Jn. 20:16). There are a number of things to note regarding how Mary came to know that it was the Lord.

First, Christ makes Himself known by the use of only one word which was Mary’s own name.¹⁰ It is likely that two things about this caught her attention. For one, a gardener would not have known who she was. Thus, the stranger was not a stranger at all but a friend. Also, there was probably something distinctly recognizable in the manner in which Jesus called her name. She had heard the Savior speak her name many times before and, thus, the Lord’s voice was immediately recognizable. “One single word was enough to open her eyes, to let the whole truth shine upon her mind, and to reveal the great fact that her Savior was not dead but alive, and that He had won a victory over the grave.”¹¹ “Never was there a one-word utterance more charged with emotion than this.”¹²

The Redeemer is teaching Mary and every one of us something very important about the doctrine of salvation. He wants us to know that salvation is very personal and definite. When Jesus said, “Woman,” which is indefinite and can be applied to the class of adult females in general, Mary was not enlightened. But when our Lord addressed Mary by name, the Savior’s love and the knowledge of the resurrection came home to her heart. “The life that the good Shepherd has laid down for the sheep had laid been down for each separate sheep;”¹³ and now that He has risen He applies that salvation to the elect sinner personally, lovingly, savingly. “It is as though he had said, ‘I have called thee by thy name: though art mine.’”¹⁴ This was as our Lord promised, “The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (Jn. 10:3-4). “Jesus, as the good shepherd, has an intimate personal knowledge

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1213.

¹⁰ “The original Aramaic name [‘Miriam’] by which her parents and friends must have addressed her many a time, the name which Jesus always used in speaking to her, is employed also in this instance. Jesus addresses her by her native name, in her native tongue” (William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 455).

¹¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel: John*, 3:423.

¹² R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1960] 1988), 221.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Magdalene at the Sepulchre: An Instructive Scene,” 35:682.

of all those whom he intends to save. And just as the shepherd leads his own sheep out of the fold, so also the tender and loving shepherd, Jesus, gathers his flock, leading them out of the fold of [apostate] Israel (10:3; cf. 1:11-13; Mic. 2:12) and of heathenism (10:16).”¹⁵

When our Lord calls us personally through the Word of God accompanied by the enlightening, vivifying, drawing power of the Holy Spirit, we will hear His voice and will obey His call and pick up our cross and follow Him. The Scriptures must be to us the same in importance, power and authority as if Christ was speaking directly to us from only a few feet away. Calvin writes, “Thus in Mary we have a lively image of our calling; for the only way in which we are admitted to the true knowledge of Christ is, when he first knows us, and then familiarly invites us to himself, not by that ordinary voice which sounds indiscriminately in the ears of all, but by that voice with which he especially calls the sheep which the Father hath given to him. Thus Paul says, *After that you have known God*, or rather, after that you have been known by him (Gal. iv.9.)”¹⁶

With one word Jesus shows His boundless compassion toward Mary. He knew that Mary had been careless regarding His teaching on the resurrection. He knew that she had not believed and had forgotten His promises that He would rise from the dead. Yet, He forgives her unbelief and carelessness and graciously rewards her seeking and loving of Himself. God is slow to anger and indeed is very kind, compassionate and merciful. He covers her sins and rewards her obedience. What a precious Savior. This incident ought to greatly stimulate our faith, for Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). These events were recorded for our benefit. The Lord does not love us any less than He did Mary. He knows our infirmities and weaknesses. He knows when we are full of sorrow and heartache. He will not leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5; Mt. 28:20). If you are ever tempted to doubt the love of Christ, then remember this passage and trust in its teaching.

Second, when Mary heard Christ say her name she “turned herself back” to look into the eyes of Jesus. This indicates that after briefly conversing with our Lord, whom she supposed was the gardener, Mary turned back toward the sepulcher. Her turning to focus on the Savior teaches us that if the Redeemer is to occupy the first place in our lives, then we must look away from the things of this world and place our faith and spiritual affection solely upon Christ. “How searching is this: if Christ really occupied the throne of our hearts, the poor things of this world would make no appeal to us. It is because we are so little absorbed with Him, and therefore so little acquainted with His soul-satisfying perfection, that the things of time and sense are so highly esteemed.”¹⁷

Once we understand who Jesus is and behold Him with the eye of faith, we must never turn back to our old unregenerate, unprofitable lives. We cannot find truth, salvation and peace by looking back at our old dead self; trusting in our feelings; or, delighting in this present evil world which is passing away. Like Mary, who was seeking the Savior with every fiber of her being, we must look to Christ as the pearl of great price (Mt. 13:46) and the apple of our eye. Seek Jesus until you find Him and then when you find Him never let go of Him. When the Spirit moves upon your heart, you will not rest and will never be content until you cling tightly to Christ. Christ has died, has risen and now in a special redemptive sense is ours. Let us learn from Mary’s love, so that our love will never grow cold.

¹⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 105.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:258.

¹⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:275.

Third, Mary answered Jesus in the same manner that she was accustomed before the passion. Her one word response, “Rabboni,” corresponds to Christ’s affectionate “Mary.” John gives the translation of the word telling us it means “teacher.” “All the love and faith and joy of which her illuminated heart and mind were capable were poured into that word: ‘Teacher!’ The Shepherd had called his sheep by name, and the sheep heard and joyfully responded (Jn. 10:3). Jesus thereby re-established the personal relationship that Mary thought she had forever lost; only now it was to be set on a deeper level than had been possible when Mary knew Jesus as ‘Rabbi.’”¹⁸

Do Not Cling to Me

When Mary greeted Christ, she (following eastern custom) fell prostrate before Jesus and clasped his feet. This act was the normal response of affection and indicated both Mary’s joy to see the Savior and her desire never to lose Him again. This clasping of our Lord resulted in an interesting response from Christ. “Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’” (Jn. 20:17).

This section of Scripture has presented difficulties to commentators and raises two important questions. First, why is Mary told not to cling to the Savior when only minutes later the other women who had been inside the tomb beheld Jesus and “came and held Him by the feet and worshipped Him” (Mt. 28:9)? When our Lord appeared later to the disciples, He invited Thomas to place his finger into the scars on His hands and his hand into the wound on His side (Jn. 20:27).

The key to understanding why Mary was not to cling to the Redeemer is found in the verb used and the reason the Mediator Himself gives for her to release Him. The Greek word (*haptou*) rendered “touch” in the KJV means “fasten oneself to, cling to, hang on by, lay hold of, or grasp.”¹⁹ “The verb is not *thinganein*, to touch lightly, or *pselaphan*, to feel over, but *haptesthai*, to cling to, to grasp tightly.”²⁰ Mary had missed Jesus so much and sought Him with such passion, that when she found Him she tightly clung to Him hoping never, ever, to lose Him again. She wanted things to return to what she considered “the good old days” before the tragic events of Golgotha. She wanted Jesus to stay with her and the disciples and be with them just as He had before the crucifixion. Therefore, given these considerations, at least part of the reason that our Lord tells Mary to stop clinging to Him is her need to realize that, now that redemption has been accomplished and Jesus has arisen from the dead, things cannot go back to what they were. Everything is now different. As Paul says, “Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh [i.e. during His earthly ministry], yet now we know Him thus no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16).

The resurrection and ascension are the transition points from the Savior’s earthly ministry to His work in heaven at the right hand of God. It is the point of demarcation from humiliation to exaltation. As the exalted King, the Mediator will rule the earth and minister to His saints by His

¹⁸ George R. Beaseley-Murray, *John*, 375.

¹⁹ Liddell and Scott as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:425.

²⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1360. Our Lord’s command to Mary, “Do not cling to Me,” demonstrates that the resurrected Savior had a real human body and was not an apparition, hallucination, or merely a spirit. The resurrected Mediator could be touched, handled and clung to. Obviously, Jesus would not command her to stop doing something that was impossible in the first place.

Holy Spirit. Mary needs to view her relationship with the Redeemer in its proper redemptive-historical context. She needs to place the kingdom of God's interest above her own heart's desire to spend time in Christ's personal physical presence. This interpretation is supported by our Lord's own reasons why Mary needs to let go.

When Christ explains his request He says, "for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go tell the brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (Jn. 20:17). This statement about the ascension raises the second difficult question about our text. How or in what manner does the ascension have any bearing on Mary's clinging to Jesus? This statement has resulted in a variety of interpretations and speculations.²¹

Perhaps the best view is that Christ is telling Mary not to detain Him at that moment for He must ascend and still has important work to do with all the disciples. "Do not spend so much precious time clinging to My feet, but rather go be a witness of My glorious resurrection to the disciples and go and tell them that I am going to ascend to our covenant God. Indeed, My ascension has been definitively accomplished in the resurrection. In a sense, I am on My way. I am in the process of going, so make haste—go!" "Think of others; and do not occupy yourself, as you are disposed to do, in touching my feet and gratifying your own feelings. Natural as it is, there is other work to do now."²² As noted, part of this explanation is related to the fact that Jesus is not returning to His old life of humiliation, but has begun His exaltation, His heavenly mode of existence. "The resurrection has made possible a new more intimate spiritual union between Jesus and his disciples; the old physical contacts are no longer appropriate, though touch may yet (v. 27) be appealed to in proof that the glorified Lord is none other than he who was crucified."²³

Jesus' Message to the Disciples

The message to the disciples contains more than the announcement regarding the ascension. It also contains some crucial information about Christ's and all true believers' relationship with the Father. As the Mediator of the New Covenant who has perfectly accomplished the work of redemption and has risen from the dead victorious, our Lord said, "Go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (Jn. 20:17). There are a number of noteworthy things about this statement.

²¹ Some of the views of this passage are as follows: (1) One view is that Jesus having accomplished the sacrifice "was on His way to present the sacred blood in heaven; and, between the meeting with Mary in the garden and the meeting of Mt. 28:9, He had so ascended and returned" (C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1989], 1304). This view is extremely unlikely because a) Mt. 28:9 occurs only minutes after this scene; b) It presupposes a literal blood offering in heaven; and, c) It assumes more than one ascension which is not provable. (2) Some think (e.g., Melancthon) that Christ was speaking about His second coming and kingdom, "when all who have known and loved Him on earth, shall at length dwell with Him in holy familiarity, and go out from His presence no more" (J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:426). This view has to be read into the text. (3) Still others teach that until the actual ascension the Savior's work was not complete. Therefore, our Lord commands Mary not to slow His work and detain Him on the earth. This view is refuted by the fact that others were permitted to touch Him and even hold His feet.

²² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:426. C. Stanford writes, "It is almost as if He had said: 'Mary, there is no time now for tender intimacies, and protracted intercourse; I have this more important employment for you; go to them at once, for they must make haste if they would see Me; and you must make haste if you would give them fair notice'" ("From Calvary to Olivet," p. 125 as quoted in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. *The Sermon Outline Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 8:287).

²³ Barrett, as quoted in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 841, footnote 42.

First, this is the first time that Jesus calls His disciples' brethren. Likewise, when our Lord conveyed a message through the women in Matthew 28:10 only moments after this, He once again refers to the disciples as "My brethren." This terminology indicates that as a result of the cross, believers have been adopted into God's own family and have a new special relationship with Jesus and each other. The Redeemer by His vicarious sacrifice and by His victorious resurrection makes us sons of the Father and the people of God. This statement is all the more remarkable when we consider that it was made toward a group of men that had abandoned Him at Gethsemane and fled for their lives. It is obvious from this statement that salvation is solely through Christ and is not something achieved by good works or "covenant faithfulness." The Savior graciously confronts His errant apostles by speaking of their filial relationship to God as their Father. As Paul says, "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15). Luther writes, "If now Christ is our brother, I would like to know what we still lack? Brethren in the flesh have common possessions, have together one father, one inheritance, otherwise they would not be brethren; so we have common possessions with Christ and have together one Father and one inheritance, which does not grow less when divided, but whoever has one part of the spiritual inheritance has it all."²⁴

The fact that Jesus makes this statement after His blood sacrifice on Golgotha and the resurrection refutes the modernist, ecumenical, pluralistic theology which teaches "the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." No. Only those who place their trust in Christ and His sacrificial death and resurrection are adopted into the family of God. God's family is based on the blood of the Son of God, not fallen humanity. "We are not naturally born into God's family. We are alienated from God and are born outside it as heirs of sin and death. But God is gracious; therefore, by the death of Christ and by the application of that death to us by the Holy Spirit, God brings us back into fellowship with himself and grants us family privileges."²⁵

It is interesting that in Psalm 22 (one of the great messianic psalms), after a very graphic description of the crucifixion (vs. 1-18) mingled with prayers for deliverance (vs. 1, 11, 19, 20, 21a, b), the Messiah says "You have answered Me" (21e) and then we hear the words, "I will declare Your name to My brethren" (v. 22). With Calvin we see in John's passage a fulfillment of that prediction.²⁶

What is implied by the word "brethren" is stated explicitly in the message itself, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (Jn. 20:17). Because of the work of Christ, His Father in heaven is now our Father, His God is now our God. "Now therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). We must always remember that it is solely on the basis of Christ's shed blood and the imputation of His perfect righteousness that we are designated sons by adoption. This is because judicially, in God's sight, we are clothed with the Savior's righteousness. When God looks upon us He doesn't see our filthy rags but rather the ethical perfection of His dear Son.

²⁴ Martin Luther, as quoted in R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1361.

²⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, 99), 5:1578. Calvin's thoughts on this passage are excellent: "It is, unquestionably, an invaluable blessing, that believers can safely believe that He who is the God of Christ is their God, and that He who is the Father of Christ is their Father. Nor have we any reason to fear that this confidence will be charged with rashness, since it is founded on Christ, or that it will be proud boasting, since Christ himself has dictated it to us with his own mouth" (*Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 2:262).

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 2:260.

Second, the message conveyed is focused on the ascension of Jesus and its effects. Only moments before when our Lord appeared to Mary, the angelic message to the other women was: “He is not here, but is risen” (Lk. 24:6; cf. Mt. 28:6; Mk. 16:6). The virtual replacement of the language of resurrection with that of ascension is an indication that we should view these two as one fundamental act of glorification. The adoption of sons that the Savior mentions only comes about as a result of the resurrection, the ascension, the Redeemer’s rule at the right hand of God and His bestowal of the Holy Spirit unto His church. Further, Jesus mentioning of the ascension should instruct the apostles that the reason He rose was to ascend and rule. The Mediator must enter into His heavenly Kingship in order to apply redemption to all His sheep and bring them into the heavenly family with Him. Thus, the apostles and all Christians must not view the resurrection only as an isolated event, but as part of the seamless garment of His glorification and salvific Kingship.

The Redeemer, as God, raised Himself from the dead and now He is the Lord of life, “a life-giving Spirit.” As the ascended, victorious Savior He raises and quickens every believer. Life is given to us by Christ our brother who has taken our nature and earned a title to eternal life by His sacrificial death and His sinless life. Jesus said, “A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also” (Jn. 14:19).

Third, in considering our text we must not overlook the fact that Jesus first appeared to a woman and conveys His message to the apostles through her. (The message of the resurrection given to the other women by the two angels was also to be delivered to the disciples [cf. Mt. 28:7; Mk. 16:7; Lk. 24:10]). Although the narratives give no specific reasons for this, one can infer that Mary and the other women were rewarded for their devotion to the Redeemer and the apostles were, in a sense, rebuked for their lack of faith in the resurrection. The women were guilty of unbelief also, but they had not received the same training and responsibility as had the apostles. Calvin writes, “This is a mild and gentle chastisement, when Christ thus sends his disciples to the school of the women, that, by their agency, he may bring them back to himself. Here we behold also the inconceivable kindness of Christ, in choosing and appointing *women* to be the witnesses of his resurrection to the Apostles; for the commission which is given to them is the only foundation of our salvation....”²⁷

Copyright © Brian Schwertley, 2007

[HOME PAGE](#)

²⁷ Ibid, 2:262.