

## **Where have you put him? (John 20:1-18) – Encounters with Jesus 7: Mary**

*Mary is distraught at the death of Jesus. Her one consolation is that she can care for his dead body. Then she discovers it is missing! Yet, in the midst of her grief she discovers an amazing truth.*

### **The Pandemic and Separation**

This last year has been a tough year for all of us as we have been hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

One of the hardest thing about the year for many, has been the separation between friends and families caused by the lockdowns:

- Children have had long periods where they have not able to see school friends
- Grandparents and grandchildren have not been able to see each other, especially when they live far apart
- And those who have relatives in nursing homes have been prevented from seeing loved ones

And of course the worst loss people have faced is the death of a loved one. For some this has been because of Covid-19, but the reality is that people die all the time, not just from covid-19 and whatever the cause death causes terrible loss and separation from loved ones.

### **Mary: separated from Jesus**

In the passage we have just read, the main character is Mary Magdalene. She is mentioned by name in the first and last verse of our reading. We don't know much about her. In fact the only time she has been mentioned before in John's gospel was as one of the few women at the foot of the cross when Jesus died.

However, she was clearly a key witness of the resurrection and is mentioned as one of the women visiting the tomb of Jesus early on the first Sunday in all four gospels. The only other thing we know about her is from Luke who says she was among a group of women who travelled around with Jesus and the disciples and helped to support them. Luke also tells us that Jesus had cast seven demons from her. Before meeting Jesus she must have been seriously messed up.

In this passage the key thing we see about her is her grief. She had watched Jesus die a horrible death on the cross, the one who had rescued from the power of evil spirits, had now been cruelly taken from her. As far as she was seen she had been permanently separated from her Lord and saviour never to see him again.

How was she going to cope with this tragic loss? Well in the way that people of her time normally coped with death, by honouring the body of the deceased. She had gone to the tomb as soon as she was allowed, in order to care for Jesus's body. This was to be her only consolation, Jesus may have been taken from her by death, but at least she could show him devotion by caring for his body.

But when she arrives at the tomb, she discovers that even that consolation has been taken from her. The stone is rolled away and Jesus's body is gone and she immediately assumes that someone has taken it.

Notice that almost everything she says expresses her concern at the loss of the body of Jesus:

In verse 2 to the disciples:

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" (John 20:2)

In verse 13 to the angels:

""They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him." (John 20:13)

In verse 15 to the person she thinks is the gardener:

"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."  
(John 20:15)

Mary is desperate for to find the one thing that will offer her some consolation from the terrible separation she is facing because of the death of Jesus on the cross.

### **Mary: in tears of grief**

But there is no sign of the body. Peter and John come to look at the tomb, but offer no help in finding the body. She is left outside the tomb and in verse 11, it twice mentions she was weeping.

Then in verse 13, the angels ask her why she is crying and also the one she thinks is the gardener asks her why she is crying in verse 15. In a few verses John uses the word for 'crying' four times to describe Mary's condition. This is actually 10% of the times the word is used in the New Testament! It is a word normally associated with mourning. In fact one of the other times it is mentioned in John's gospel is to describe people weeping at the grave of Lazarus.

This is the reality of grief, the emotion of loss writ large. For anyone who has suffered loss, particularly the loss of a loved one in death, you can understand something of what Mary Magdalene would be going through as she was overwhelmed with grief.

But there is one other time the word for crying is used in John's gospel. It was used by Jesus to predict how his followers would be feeling after his death. In John 16:10 he says:

*"You will weep and mourn while the world rejoices.  
You will grieve but your grief will turn to joy."* (John 16:20)

Jesus knew he was going to die on the cross. His death was not an accident, but a great achievement. It was how he would win salvation from sin and death for all those who believe in him.

That was not to deny the reality and power of separation that death brings about and the immediate effect it would have on his followers.

But with Jesus's death, it would be different. Despite expectations, Jesus had promised that the separation would not be permanent.

### **Who are you looking for...**

But, Jesus's followers had not taken this in.

When Mary meets the risen Jesus, she does not at first recognise him, but he asks her a powerful question: "Who is it you are looking for?"

Mary is so caught up in her grief, that she has become obsessed with the wrong question. She wants to know where they have taken the body, but she has not understood whose body it is she is looking for.

Mary was clearly devoted to Jesus, but she did not really understand who she was devoted to.

But she should of realised. Jesus was different. She would have heard of and seen all the signs that showed that, from the turning of water into wine to the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus was no ordinary man. And he claimed things about himself and his relationship with God, that no ordinary man in their right mind would ever claim.

Mary did not understand that her grief would turn to joy, because she did not understand who it was she was looking for. Then finally, when she does realise that it is Jesus she is speaking to, she still does not really understand who he is. She responds to Jesus, by saying, "Rabboni!", which simply means "Teacher!"

If Jesus has bodily overcome death, surely he is more than a good teacher! Surely he has more to offer than words of wisdom. But, it is too soon for Mary to fully take in what is happening, we'll have to wait until next week's talk to fully grasp the implications of Jesus's resurrection.

### **Stop clinging, start belonging...**

But, Jesus does explain one important implication of the resurrection. In a sense he says to Mary, stop clinging start belonging.

He says, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father..."

Mary had been seeking an earthly consolation for the death of Jesus. She wanted to care for his dead body. This is the only way she understood to deal with the separation of his death.

But, Jesus gives her something far more wonderful. He gives her a place in the Divine family. Being a Christian is more than understanding who God is and what he has done, it is more than a personal spiritual experience or even personal relationship with God, it is about becoming part of God's family.

Jesus in John 10, describes himself as the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep and care intimately for each one:

*"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." (John 10:3-4)*

When does Mary realise she is not talking to the gardener, but to the risen Jesus? When he used her name: "Mary!" In the same way, the risen Jesus is calling you by name. Will you hear his voice and join his flock?

And it is more than a flock it is a family. In verse 17 he says:

*"Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (John 20:17)*

This is not just for Mary, but for all those who follow Jesus. Now Jesus has died and risen, now the crucified one is on his way to the Father, we can become part of a new family.

A family where we share the same relationship with God the Father as Jesus the Son. Notice Jesus says, "My Father and your Father, my God and your God." So, we become Jesus's brothers and sisters.

Jesus tells Mary to stop clinging and start belonging.

It has been a tough year, many of us have lost things and experienced difficult separation. We hope for a return to normal, but this Easter will you hear the voice of Jesus offering you a real hope to something beyond the expectations of our normal world? Will you stop clinging to human means of dealing with grief and loss and will you hear the voice of the crucified and risen one and accept his invitation to belong to his family, a family that you will never be separated from, not by Covid-19, not by lockdowns, not even by your own death?