

WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

by Steve Zeisler

For nearly two thousand years, people have been uncertain about the significance of the empty tomb. Many who know the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ wonder, "What makes an empty tomb good news?"

Consider Mark 16:14:

Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

Jesus rebuked his followers for their unbelief. The Greek word translated "rebuke" is a strong word that refers to an energetic confrontation. Early that morning, the news had come that Jesus' tomb was empty. His followers had heard about the witness of angels at the empty tomb. Peter and John had gone to investigate the tomb for themselves. Yet by the end of the day, as the Eleven gathered together, they still did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. Paul later wrote, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54), but on this first Easter Sunday, despite the evidence, the Eleven did not yet believe it.

Now turn to John 20:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.). Then the disciples went back to their homes.

Let's review the event that took place on this Sunday morning after the crucifixion. The tomb in which Jesus' body had been placed was actually a cave in a garden owned by Joseph of Arimathea. A circular slab of stone covered the entrance of the cave, and guards had been posted in front of it to prevent any of Jesus' followers from stealing the body and claiming that he had been resurrected. Sunday began with a group of at least four women who set out before dawn for the tomb. They brought with them embalming spices to prepare Jesus' body for final burial. Mark 16:3 tells us that the women were wondering how to move the massive stone away from the tomb, and it may be that the women hoped the guards would help them move it.

Mary Magdalene was the first of the women to arrive at the tomb. When she saw that the stone had already been moved, she feared the worst, and as the other women began to arrive, she raced out of the garden ahead of them to look for Peter and John. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb," she said, and Peter and John ran immediately to the tomb. When they arrived, they found the strips of linen that had wrapped Jesus' body.

Uncertain of the significance of what they had just seen, they both left quietly and went home.

Note that the strips of linen and the head cloth were left behind in an orderly fashion, clearly indicating that the body had not been taken by grave robbers. If the body had been stolen in order to hold it for ransom, there would have been no need to unwrap it, and if the purpose had been simply to desecrate the body, the wrappings would not have been neatly replaced where the body had lain. Peter and John both realized that the empty, orderly tomb was meaningful, but they were unsure exactly what it signified. They went back to their homes and didn't tell anyone because they didn't know what to say.

In addition to the physical evidence of the empty tomb and angels who told them that Jesus had risen, just as he said he would (Matthew 28:6), we have a mysterious encounter on the Emmaus road. Two of Jesus' disciples were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus and discussing the events of the previous days. As they walked, they were joined by a stranger who began talking to them. Beginning with Moses and the Prophets, the stranger took these travelers through the entire Old Testament, showing how it predicted that Messiah would come, that he would suffer at the hands of sinners, and that he would be raised in glory. In fact, on the night he was arrested, Jesus himself told his disciples, "You will all fall away But after I have risen I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (Mark 14:27-28).

In time, Paul would preach to the Greeks that Jesus' authority to judge the world was made certain by his resurrection from the dead. Peter would preach to the Jews that Jesus was the One sent by God. Eventually, the disciples would be filled with courage and certainty and hope, but not on that first Sunday after the crucifixion. Why not? They had enough evidence. Why was there no hope that Easter night? We can get some insight into that question from the story of Mary Magdalene. Look back at the text, beginning with verse 11:

...but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 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.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary was the first to receive the resurrection evidence as good news. Even though she told the other disciples that she had seen and spoken with Jesus, it would take a while before their lives were changed by her story. This woman, first among disciples, believed that the empty tomb was significant in terms of hope for believers, in terms of our right standing with God, in terms of Jesus' rule in heaven and our future with him. Mary was the first to be changed by the resurrection.

What do we know about Mary Magdalene? Some think that she is the woman whose story is told in Luke 7, a woman of the streets, who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. However, the text never identifies that woman, so there is no reason to assume that she was Mary Magdalene. All we know about Mary is that she was from the town of Magdala and that seven demons had come out of her (Luke 8:2).

It is worth noting that Mary is always alone in the Bible. Other women are identified as the mother, sister, or wife of someone, but apparently the only family Mary Magdalene had were those who had befriended her in Christ. Before she met Jesus, her life was a hellish torment. She owed everything to Jesus, and her life revolved around him. She was near him when he died, and she was the first to go to his grave. She wanted nothing more than to honor the memory of her Master, and when she saw the empty tomb, she was distraught at the possibility that a grave robber had desecrated that memory.

First the angels asked Mary, "Woman, why are you crying?" Then Jesus himself asked, "Woman, why are you crying?" Mistaking him for a gardener, Mary hopefully inquired if he knew where the body had been taken. Then Jesus spoke her name, and immediately she knew who he was. Why is this important?

When Jesus spoke Mary's name, he was telling her that he knew her as an individual. She wasn't just some unknown mourner; she wasn't just part of the crowd. She mattered to him personally. He cared for the specific woman Mary, called Magdalene, and he had returned for her.

Now think again about that first Sunday night when the disciples met, when they still lacked understanding and felt defeated. They knew the tomb was empty. At least two of them had been there and seen it for themselves. They had heard about angels. They had been reminded of Jesus' words. They had been reminded of the prophecies about Messiah. Yet despite all the evidence, they were not changed people. Why?

Perhaps they believed that life and death are chaotic, that the world is senseless and incoherent. Perhaps they thought that the pagans were right, that heroes died and rose and died again in an endless cycle without purpose. Even if Jesus has left the grave, they will kill him again next time. They always do. This isn't good news. It isn't life transforming news.

Perhaps they thought, "He is alive, but because we failed him, he is going to find disciples who are more worthy. We couldn't even pray when he asked us to. We didn't love him enough." They saw the empty tomb, but they didn't know yet that it was good news.

What ultimately changed them is the same sort of personal encounter that Mary had. When Jesus spoke to Mary in the garden, he told her, "Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" His Father was their Father; his God was their God. He called them his brothers. He had not rejected them. He knew them by name. He loved them and he had a purpose for them. He had returned from the dead, and he would ascend to heaven to rule forever.

The tenderness and personal nature of Jesus' love for us makes the empty tomb more than merely a fact of evidence. When I realize that Jesus knows my name and that he came back for me, the empty tomb becomes a compelling, life-changing event. He knows every burden, every struggle, every humiliation I have ever had. He is committed to us. It is our destiny to become like him. The empty tomb means new life from the grave, and that is the best possible news.

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John 20:1-18
18th Message
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