

The Gospel of John
Session Twelve – The Resurrection Narratives and the Epilogue
(John 20 – 21)



Saint Mary Magdalene at prayer – Reni, circa 1627 – 28, Wikimedia Commons

The Empty Tomb
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The Empty Tomb

The discovery of the tomb empty, the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, the appearance to the disciples behind closed doors, followed by a similar appearance a week later – all these narratives underscore the faith that Jesus who was crucified, has indeed risen. What the disciples have seen is the same crucified Jesus whom they had deserted as lost and left for dead. But although truly dead, he is no longer. The tomb is empty: Jesus has been seen alive.

John believes such things happened, although a comparison of his two accounts with Luke's account of the risen Jesus' encountering his disciples (Luke 24:36 – 43) reveals a somewhat different perception of what has happened. In John, Jesus does not protest that he is not a disembodied spirit, eating fish to prove the point. In John, Jesus finally offers his hands and side to Thomas's touch, but one never reads

that Thomas actually touched, only that he saw and believed. Clearly, John intends to establish the identity of the risen Jesus with the crucified. Paul has the same interest (1 Cor 15), even though he specifically and explicitly eschews talk of a physical resurrection. Nor does he even mention the empty tomb. John's belief and claim is, of course, that the resurrection is historical, that is, a given, in the sense that it involved Jesus as well as the perception of him. This holds true whatever modern people make of it, although consternation at this claim is not a strictly modern reaction.

John 20 begins with the account of the discovery of the tomb of Jesus empty. Although the two disciples come to faith on examining it – or at least the Beloved Disciple does – Mary Magdalene remains insistent that Jesus' body has been removed, presumably stolen. Her reasonable, honest explanation is only overturned by her encounter with Jesus himself outside the tomb. Jesus appears to his disciples and shows them his hands and side establishing his identity, before bestowing the Spirit. Thomas must, of course, be shown and persuaded separately. Thus, in this chapter, emphasis quite clearly falls on establishing the reality of Jesus' resurrection by showing the continuity between Jesus of Nazareth, who died and was scarred by crucifixion, with the Risen One. Yet after Thomas accepts the proof, the risen Jesus offers him and confesses Jesus as Lord and God, Jesus pronounces his blessing upon those who have not seen and yet believe.

Fittingly, the Gospel then closes with a statement of purpose. One could scarcely hope for a more appropriate culmination and conclusion of this Gospel. John has stressed the importance of the disciples' seeing Jesus, at least for their faith, but at the same time Jesus makes clear that those who have not seen will believe. Because of the disciples' testimony, which is contained in this Gospel. Rudolf Bultmann (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1971) succinctly points to the several indications in chapter 20 that the Gospel has reached its conclusion: the disciples receive what appears to be definitive and final appearances of Jesus; they are commissioned; Jesus' blessing of those who have not seen cuts off any expectation of a further appearance. The reader does not expect the narrative to continue, but it does.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

Magdalene: Do Not Cling to What Is, Journey into What Can Be

John then says that Magdalene turns and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not recognize him. She thinks he is the gardener. He speaks, asking the same question that the angels asked: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Her previous answer to the angels is assumed, but she adds a new and revealing dimension in her relationship to this Jesus by saying: Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have

laid him and I will take him away" (John 20:15). I want to be near the receptacle that contains all the remains of him, she says. The drama is then heightened as Mary hears her name being spoken. Death has not separated her from the person through whom she has been called to be. Her new identity, her new being, is still intact. Death has not broken it or torn it from her. She is known and loved; she has entered a new mystical awareness. She responds to the sound of her name by using a title of great affection: "Rabboni." She moves to be near him. No says the risen and mystical Jesus. No, "do not cling to me. I have not yet ascended to the Father, . . . but I am ascending" (John 20:17). The present participle of the verb is used: "am ascending." It is as if the text were saying, I am in the process of being transformed; I am escaping all human limits to enter into that which is universal, unending and ultimate. Magdalene then goes to the disciples with this message: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18).

This is the first way that the author of the Fourth Gospel seeks to convey the meaning of resurrection. For him it has nothing to do with physicality. It has nothing to do with seeing the resuscitated body of Jesus with the sight of physical eyes. It has rather to do with recognizing that no tomb could hold the meaning present in the life of Jesus, just as no barrier could stand between him and those who had found new life in him.

The one who has stepped into this new dimension of life is now related to Jesus in the same way that a branch is related to a vine. No, I do not think that Mary saw angels at the head and foot of where the body was supposed to have been laid in the tomb. I do not believe she saw Jesus physically and mistook him for the gardener. I do not believe that she sought to cling to his actual body, only to be told that this was not possible. Finally, I do not believe that in any literal way Jesus was in the process of "ascending" to the God he had so regularly called "the Father."

John is painting an interior experience in external colors using objective words. Mary Magdalene is portrayed as the first witness of the resurrection. She is the first one to see that Jesus' glorification was revealed in his ability to give his life and his love away. She is the first to see that in his freedom to step beyond the human drive to survive, he reveals a new dimension of life and consciousness. This was his revelation. Beyond the defensive barriers of our survival-driven humanity there is a new dimension of life waiting to be entered. In this new dimension a mystical oneness with God and all that is can be experienced. The life I live, says Jesus in the portrait John has painted, is the life of God. The love I share is the love of God. The being I reveal is the being of God. I have entered a new humanity; I have discovered a doorway into a new being. I no longer have a need to cling either to the past or to the symbols of the reality that once was all I knew existed. I now know who I am. I know who God is. I step into that experience and claim it for my own.

That is what the story of Mary Magdalene reveals under the skillful pen of this gifted author and gospel writer. He told us much earlier, we recall, that this book is not intended to be read literally. It is the work of a Jewish mystic. One is to read it by

listening to the experience that it is seeking to open, so that the reader can enter that experience and live into it. Mary Magdalene now understands the experience and so she asserts: “I have seen the Lord,” but what she has also seen is the meaning of life. She steps into that life and claims it for her own. That is how Easter always dawns.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

Breakfast at Tiberias

John 21 probably comprises a second ending to John, written later to highlight Peter (remember in John the Beloved Disciple is the exemplary follower), since eventually Peter becomes the “representative disciple” in the tradition. As the story begins, seven disciples are accounted for. Where are the others? Who exactly are the “two others”? One must be the Beloved Disciple, given verse 7. I am struck this time around by the author’s comment that Jesus “manifests” himself again. The word is *phaneroo* as in “epiphany” and *theophany*. Jesus shows up. It’s what he does. Then the author specifies: “This time, he showed up in *this* way,” It goes to show that Jesus can show up in innumerable ways, so be on the lookout.

By now you are accustomed to John’s patterns, so you notice that while the disciples work in the dark (metaphor, anyone?), they “catch” nothing. But when they come to the light, blessings abound. Jesus, the Light of the World, appears on the shore, on solid ground at daybreak. We know he’s in the habit of asking questions that he already knows the answers to, for our sake, so he asks them about their catch. Without him, they have nothing. With him, there is more than enough.

As is typical for John, the Beloved disciple gets pride of place; not surprisingly, then he’s the first to recognize Jesus. Peter does his Peter thing. Peter is naked (metaphor, anyone?). I find that such a poignant detail. When he sees Jesus, he puts on clothes to jump in the water. Recall Genesis and the way the nakedness and guilt/shame work together in the story of the fall. If chapter 20 with Mary Magdalene is act 1 of the UNfall drama, this is act 2. Peter clothes his nakedness (well, at a physical level) to face his Friend, Savior, Lord, God. As if.

The disciples come ashore. Throughout Scripture water represents chaos (the Flood, Jonah, Leviathan, the Stilling of the Storm), and like God, Jesus is shown to have the ability to control that water (and presumably the monsters therein; cf. Jesus walking on water in 6:16 – 21). Take in 21:9. First, they see a charcoal fire there. Remember Peter standing by a charcoal fire as he is denying Jesus three times (18:18)? The “charcoal fire” appears only in these two places in all of Scripture, and it’s not accidental. Charcoal fire: the site of failure and site of redemption. Theology of place. Do you have such a place in your life?

Jesus is there, ahead of them (and us), with the fire going and the fish and bread cooking. How did he already have fish? He is the Bread from Heaven, as we learned in chapter 6, so we are not surprised by his provision of bread/manna. Every table is his table. He is always there before us. But notice that he instructs them to add what they have to what he has provided. It's a partnership. That's the true spirit of radical hospitality, isn't it? The eucharistic overtones are striking.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

The Importance of Context (from the Appendix)

At the time of Jesus, the temple in Jerusalem is still standing, and numerous varieties of Judaism exist. The power of the Sadducees is temple-based; thus when the temple is destroyed in 70, they fade from power. The Zealots, Sicarii, and the Fourth Philosophy are nationalists who oppose Roman occupation and favor civil war. The Essenes are a reformist, ascetic sect residing primarily in Qumran near the Dead Sea. The nationalists and the Essenes are decimated by the Roman army in the war of 66 – 70. The Pharisees are Torah-based teachers whose power derives from their ability to interpret the law – kind of a cross between lawyers and Bible scholars. When the temple is destroyed, they are the ones best positioned to assume leadership. The destruction of the temple effectively ends the period known as the Second Temple Judaism and makes way for rabbinic Judaism, the kinds of Judaism that perdure to this day.

The original Johannine community consisted of Jews who worshiped in synagogues with their fellow Jews; they were Christian Jews because they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Claiming that “the” or “a” Messiah had come was certainly not foreign to first and second-century varieties of Judaism. John of Gischala in the first century and Simon Bar Kochba in the second were declared messiahs. This was not grounds for dismissal from the Jewish community. So what happened? It is impossible to say with certainty, but clearly the Johannine community began to experience conflict with its parent tradition. The author of the Fourth Gospel claims that the members who made up John’s community were put out of the synagogue, *aposynagogos* (a word unknown in early Jewish or Christian literature apart from John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), due to their high Christology, perhaps even confessing Jesus as God. It is clear that a full confession of the identity of Jesus as defined by John led to extremely painful conflict between the parent tradition and the sect that formed as a result of their expulsion from the synagogue.

According to J. Louis Martyn, John can be read as a two-level drama. First, there is the story of the historical Jesus, what happened “back then.” Second, there is the reality that the Johannine community is experiencing near the end of the first century, sixty to seventy years after Jesus’ death and twenty to thirty years after the temple has been destroyed; the Pharisees (not the Sadducees) are in power, and the synagogue (not the temple) is the seat of power for the religious authorities. The story of the Johannine community living in the late first century gets retrojected onto the story of Jesus and the first disciples.

For example, when one is reading in chapter 9 the story of the blind man being persecuted and put out of the synagogue, unsupported by his parents, one should imagine a Johannine Christian who is openly professing faith in Christ and being persecuted by members of the parent tradition. The story is anachronistic, because the Pharisees and the synagogues were not such centers of power in Jesus’ own day; the Sanhedrin and temple were. It is also anachronistic because no one could give a confession of Jesus as Lord (as the blind man does), Son of God, God (as Thomas does), Messiah, Son of Man, and more until *after* the passion, resurrection, sending of the Paraclete (*Spirit or Advocate*), and return of Jesus to God. In other words, the story could not have happened historically the way it is narrated. One should therefore be careful about making historical assumptions based on texts that have a different rhetorical aim. Certainly, the text caricatures anyone who opposes Jesus, the hero of the narrative. The Pharisees are not excused from the Fourth Evangelist’s lampooning.

Remember that the Gospel is a story and follows narrative conventions, including characters drawn for symbolic purposes, conflict that the hero must overcome, and so on. It is not a historical rendering, and it takes great poetic license in its depiction of history. Interpreters will be able to understand that only when they learn about the historical context from historical sources that, happily, scholars have provided in abundance.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

Primary Sources:

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