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John 20:1–18

SOMETHING TO SAY

A PASTOR IS SOMEONE who has something to say. At least that is what the congregation presupposes! This is never more apparent than when congregations sit as captive audiences and allow their pastors to preach the gospel, especially the good news of the resurrection. The congregation assumes, and rightly so, that the pastor has something to say about Christ, his death and resurrection, and the salvation he brings.

In the resurrection account of John 20:1–18, Mary Magdalene is someone who has something to say. She proclaims that she has seen the Lord, but only after she has experienced the confusion and grief occasioned by his death. In a sense, Mary is an example of what it means for pastors to have something to say.

The resurrection account of John 20:1–18 is part of a larger unit (20:1–29) which narrates the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to Mary (20:1–18), the disciples (20:19–23), and Thomas (20:24–29). The first of these units (20:1–18) probably derives from two traditions which once circulated independently: the empty tomb tradition and the appearance to Mary. This would explain the tensions in the narrative such as the sudden appearance of the angels in verse 12. As the text now stands, it is the person of Mary which serves as the point of unity for these two older traditions. At the beginning of the account, she runs from the tomb to tell Peter and the other disciples, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him” (20:2). At the beginning of this account, Mary has nothing to say, other than that the body has been stolen, because she does not understand the sign of the empty tomb. By the end of the story, however, we find that Mary has passed from confusion and grief to recognition as she announces, “I have seen the Lord” (20:18). By the end of the narrative, Mary has something to say because she has heard the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, call her by name (20:16), and she has learned that the risen one is returning to the Father (20:17). This unit in which Mary Magdalene is the center of unity focuses our attention on three points: the sign of the empty tomb; the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd; and the Johannine understanding of resurrection as return to the Father.

1. *The Sign of the Empty Tomb (20:1–11)*. The story of the empty tomb as recounted by the Fourth Evangelist contrasts two responses to the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection: that of Mary (and perhaps of Peter), and

that of the Beloved Disciple. At the beginning of the narrative, Mary comes to the tomb while it is still dark. The darkness, a Johannine image, suggests the situation of Mary and every person who does not yet dwell in the light of resurrection faith. Arriving at the tomb, she encounters the first evidence of the resurrection: The stone which enclosed the tomb has been removed. Mary's reaction to the evidence is rational and comprehensible: Grave bandits have stolen the body of the Lord, and so she makes her report to the disciples. Her startling news results in a kind of race to the tomb between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Although the Beloved Disciple wins the race, he does not enter the tomb. Yet, peering in, he discovers the second piece of evidence: the burial cloths which once enveloped the Lord. Although Peter is the last upon the scene, he is the first to enter the tomb, and there he discovers the third piece of evidence. Not only does he see the burial cloths, he discovers the cloth which covered the Lord's head neatly wrapped in a separate place. Yet still, like Mary Magdalene, Peter is not able to interpret the evidence. The one who arrived at the tomb first, the Beloved Disciple, is the last to enter. Taking account of all of the evidence, he sees and he believes (20:8). On the basis of the empty tomb, the burial cloths, and the head covering, the Beloved Disciple interprets the situation correctly. No one has stolen the body of the Lord; the Lord has been raised from the dead.

The Beloved Disciple provides an example of how to respond to the evidence of the resurrection which God provides. To be sure, the evidence is not conclusive. From a purely human point of view, the response of Mary is as legitimate, if not more so, than that of the Beloved Disciple. Why should an empty tomb lead anyone to believe that Jesus is alive? Why should the burial cloths and the cloth which covered Jesus' head bring anyone to faith? In a sense, these signs confront these people with the type of challenge that others faced during Jesus' ministry when he performed signs for the world to see. On the basis of those signs many believed, but others did not. The Beloved Disciple, the ideal disciple, knows how to respond to this evidence. Like the disciples who saw Jesus' first sign in Cana of Galilee and believed in him (2:11), he sees the signs at the empty tomb and believes that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Resurrection faith means accepting the evidence which God provides that Jesus is risen and alive. There is no proof for the resurrection that can release Christians from the need to trust and believe that God has raised his Christ, and there never will be. Furthermore, all evidence and signs of the resurrection are necessarily polyvalent: open to many meanings, not all of which lead to faith. Nevertheless, God has provided evidence, signs for those who believe, that Jesus is alive: the witness of Christian martyrs through the centuries; the lives of ordinary as well as extraordinary Christians; the ministry of the church to the poor and oppressed, and the

indomitable spirit of hope and trust that characterizes so many. If pastors are to have something to say, then they must interpret these signs of the resurrection for their congregations. Like the Beloved Disciple, they must interpret the evidence which God has provided; and like the author of the Fourth Gospel, they must show their congregations that these signs have been given that they may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this faith they may have life in his name (20:30–31).

2. *The Voice of the Good Shepherd (20:11–16)*. For reasons which the Evangelist has chosen not to explain, Mary has not yet comprehended the sign of the empty tomb. Instead she stands outside the tomb weeping (20:11). When finally she peers into the tomb, she sees two angels sitting where Jesus' body once lay. In effect, the angels function as did the burial cloths and the head covering; they are signs that Jesus is risen. Yet Mary continues in her grief; and when the angels ask why she is weeping, she responds that someone has taken her Lord away. Suddenly, Jesus himself appears, asking Mary the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and adding, "Whom are you looking for?" As in the case of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:1–35), Mary does not recognize the Risen One, even though he stands before her. Resurrection is transformation, not resuscitation, as Paul had to teach the Corinthians (I Cor. 15:35–50). "It [the body] is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual one" (I Cor. 15:43–44).

Although the crowds could recognize Lazarus when Jesus restored him to life, even though he was bound head to foot with burial cloths (John 11:44), Mary cannot recognize the Risen Lord, freed from his burial cloths, until he reveals himself to her. The New Testament writers are insistent that Jesus' resurrection is not a return to his former way of life. The resurrection of Jesus is a new creation, as it will be for all believers. So, as Jesus revealed himself to the disciples in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30–31), he reveals himself to Mary when he calls her by name.

Mary recognizes the Lord because she hears the voice of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd enters through the gate because he is the shepherd of the sheep. "The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (10:3). Suddenly Mary recognizes that the one she has mistaken for the gardener is the great Shepherd of the sheep, the one who has freely laid down his life for the flock (10:17). No one has taken Jesus' life from him: not Pilate, not the Jews. Jesus laid down his life freely in order to take it up again (10:18).

Resurrection faith is a gift. It occurs when God speaks to the hearts of believers, calling them by name. Resurrection faith is a gift, and unless the

Lord calls us by name, we cannot recognize his presence. Pastors have something to say when they proclaim the word in such a way that parishoners hear the voice of the Shepherd once more. Pastors have something to say when they reflect upon their own experience of having been called by name and communicate this to others.

Previous to recognizing the Lord, Mary weeps with profound grief because of her personal loss; but when Jesus calls her, her grief is transformed into joy as he promised it would be. "Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy" (14:20). Having something to say derives from experiencing this joy.

3. *Resurrection as Return to the Father (20:17–18)*. Mary Magdalene has recognized the Lord, but she has not yet understood the nature of his risen status. Overjoyed at finding Jesus, she clings to him for joy lest she lose him once more. Consequently, Jesus commands her, "Stop holding on to me" (20:17a). The use of the present imperative (*mē mou haptou*) here is important because it emphasizes that not only has Mary touched Jesus, but she is continuing to hold on to him so as not to let go. Mary has not yet understood that her relationship with the Risen One must, and will, be different from what it formerly was.

Jesus' words to Mary, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father," are often misinterpreted to mean that Jesus cannot be touched until after his ascension. That Mary has already touched Jesus, and that Jesus will invite Thomas to examine his wounds (20:27), indicate that this cannot be the case. In fact, the phrase is merely a parenthesis intended to introduce the main point: "I am going (*anabainō*) to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17b). Once more the present tense is important. Jesus tells Mary that he *is* returning from whence he came. Thus the sense of the conversation is as follows: "Stop holding on to me. Rather, tell my disciples that I am completing my return to my Father as I promised I would. And once I have returned, I will send the promised Spirit."

During his farewell discourse to his disciples, as reported by John, Jesus describes his death as the hour of his glorification. His death will be not a defeat but a return to the Father so that he can prepare a place for his disciples (14:1–3). Although the disciples will not understand the significance of his death when it occurs, Jesus assures them that it is to their advantage that he return to the Father, for only after he has gone (*anabainō*) to the Father can he send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth (14:15–31). Jesus' death will be the hour of his glorification (17:1–5), the moment when he reigns as King from the cross.

The message that Jesus now entrusts to Mary is an assurance to the disciples that the Lord is fulfilling his promise to them. He is returning to the Father, and very shortly he will send the promised Spirit upon them.

By this verse (20:17), found only in the Fourth Gospel, the Evangelist makes a connection between his theology of Jesus' death as departure and glorification and the synoptic theology which tends to separate Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into distinct events.

At last Mary has something to say! Not only has she recognized the Risen Lord, but now she understands the salvific dimension of his resurrection. The resurrection is more than vindication; it is life-giving. The resurrection is Jesus' return to the Father (13:1), the completion of his work. Because of the resurrection, Jesus can send the Spirit.

Pastors have something to say when they teach their congregations the paradox of the resurrection: Jesus is most present to the church precisely because he has returned to the Father. Although the church no longer experiences Jesus in a physical way as the disciples once did, its experience of him is real and intimate because of the life-giving Spirit he has sent upon it. Pastors have something to say when they can show their congregations how the Lord is still present and alive to the church, not in spite of his physical absence but precisely because of it. Pastors have something to say when they can plummet the depth of the resurrection and report with Mary, "I have seen the Lord!"



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