

Mary Magdalene

A common human wish is that if only we could see Jesus with our own eyes, touch him, and audibly hear him



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speak our name, then faith would be so much easier. You might want to converse with the apostles about that. The past four weeks we have read the amazing stories of people who stood face to face with Jesus.

Three of them were changed: the Roman Centurion whose servant was miraculously healed, an outcast Samaritan woman who found God's love and acceptance and the tax collector Zacchaeus who found a new heart and life by grace. Pontius Pilate, Roman Governor of Palestine, saw Jesus as a complex political problem and failed to open either his mind or heart.

Today we witness the transformation of Mary from Magdala (a region on the north end of the Sea of Galilee, probably near where Jesus fed the multitude) to the first person to see the risen Christ. Go to the first of John 20 to read how Mary first came to the tomb, found it open and rushed back to tell Peter and John in Jerusalem. They ran ahead of Mary to see what was happening. Had someone moved the body or desecrated the tomb?

John arrived first and saw the grave wrappings as though the body had evaporated, leaving them in place with the face cloth carefully folded to the side. Peter seems to have boldly entered the tomb as they struggled to understand what they were seeing. Some scholars believe that John was the first to believe that Jesus had truly risen because of the condition of the grave wrappings.

Peter and John went back into Jerusalem to tell the others, but Mary remained, overwhelmed with grief and wanting to find the body of Jesus so the final preparations could be completed now that Sabbath was over.

Perhaps her grief, deepened by the sight of the stone rolled away from the tomb entrance, had kept her from looking within until Peter and John said Jesus' body was in fact gone! Now, with the two disciples' departure,

overwhelmed by grief, she saw two figures seated on the burial shelf where Jesus' body had been placed. She probably did not understand the two were angels until they spoke and even then her mind was confused.

As she turned from the tomb, through her tears she saw someone standing behind her. Was he a gardener come to make sure all was in order after the rushed burial on Friday? The man asked, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" (v. 15). Her grief was so intense that nothing made sense until the voice she thought never to hear again spoke her name, "Mary," and she knew! (v. 16). Her voice could only form one word, a word so shaped by hope and love that it must be true, it must be Jesus: "Rabboni" (v. 16).

This Mary probably knew Jesus from early in his public ministry. The gospel writers name her 14 times. She had been freed from seven demons by Jesus, traveled with him some, is mentioned as a financial supporter, helped prepare his body for burial and now is the first recorded witness of the risen Christ. In fact, she is the first person to tell others that Jesus is risen!

Faith often comes into focus at the most unlikely times and places. Perhaps we will one day hear her share how Jesus changed her life, not just the expulsion of seven demons, but how she grew in faith and learned how to serve God (Luke 8:1-3). There is much debate over Jesus' words to Mary, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (v. 17). The Greek is a present imperative, which literally means "stop touching or holding on to me."

Various theories have been formed that this meant Jesus did not have his full resurrection body or had not finished his work until he was in the throne room of heaven. My personal impression is that Jesus is saying to her that there is more to come and she must let go as Jesus' follows the Father's continuing plan to reveal his Son to the rest of the disciples and the world.

Formations

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Scripture: John 20:11-18

In fact, Mary acted on Jesus' instruction, her tears now gone, her heart and mind exhilarated by his resurrection, announcing to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord" (v. 18).

While this is a factual story and not a parable, it pushes us to consider the character and depth of our faith. Is faith solely a matter of holding on to Jesus and thus knowing that we are safe? What about living as a person whose values, behavior and relationships have been reshaped by this Jesus? What about sharing the grace of God with our world? It is not enough to simply declare the tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and in him we are empowered to be a different kind of people.

Resurrection is not a philosophical idea. Life is real, death is real, God is real, eternity is real and, although we may struggle to understand God and his creation, even science cannot define or explain existence.

Jesus not only overcame death, he crossed the great chasm between us and God and made it possible for us to find true life beyond every material limitation. We only begin to understand the truth when we study Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Like the Apostle Thomas, I would like to touch Jesus, but that is not how we know him. There is so much more to faith and growing in our relationship with God.

Those earliest believers learned so much from Jesus in their daily following him, but they learned even more in the years after Jesus ascended to heaven. The struggles and obstacles of life build our faith and push us to trust God in all things. We think it would be so wonderful to hold on to Jesus in the garden, but that will not help us grow or change our world. Like Mary from Magdala we must tell the world, "I have seen the Lord" and share what God continues to teach us in this world.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.