

Easter Day: “Go: Tell them I am alive.”

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Easter Day: John 20.1-18

Early – so early that it was still dark

Early – so early that it's still dark – Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. In the early-morning darkness, Mary sees that massive, solid wheel of a stone in the wrong place; it's been rolled back from the entrance. And in the darkness of her pain, she can only imagine one reason; the violation of his precious body must have continued. It must have been grave robbers.

Suddenly, there is something she *can* do for Jesus. I have to get the others! Together, we can try to get his body back from the grave-robbers; lay him to rest again – but this time somewhere safe; somewhere secret. We couldn't stop his torture and death, but at least we can protect him in death.

When the others arrive, they discover strange things; the linen wrappings are lying on the body-bench in the tomb, but the cloth that had been on Jesus' head is in another place. Would grave robbers leave these valuable cloths behind? Nothing makes sense! One of the disciples sees this and 'believes', but we're not told more; it doesn't send him dancing in the streets. We're just told the two men go home.

Mary's alone again in her deep grief weeping outside the tomb. She bends down to look inside and sees two angels sitting on either end of Jesus' body bench. They ask her why she's weeping. She tells them her new grief, but then turns to find *him* standing there. But she doesn't recognise him.

He also asks her why she's weeping, and taking him to be the grave-yard curator, she asks him if *he's* removed Jesus' body. There are other times in the Gospels after Jesus has risen where his closest friends don't immediately recognise him. So it seems to be something about Jesus himself; he's at once very different, yet at the same time, still very much their friend who was crucified.

Mary Magdalene is the first one to confront this bewildering change; something neither she nor any of the others expected.

She's drowning in deep grief, and then he calls her by her name. Next thing, he's trying to manage her joy; 'stop holding on to me'. It's clear that this means holding on physically; you can just about see him trying to prise her loose. For so many people, I pray for the day they know this joy too – and I praise God for this day when such lovely hope is born. When everyone can hug their loved ones again.

It all starts very *early* – so *early that it's still dark*. For Mary Magdalene, the shadow parts at this moment. The agony is over. It's hearing her name that does it; hearing her name spoken again by the one who knows her and loves her.

Jesus gives her a mission. She's entrusted with the most wonderful message of all – *Go and tell the others; tell them I'm ascending to ... my God and your God*.

Tell the others of a physical resurrection – she's the only one with direct experience of this, remember. She has to let him go before she can look out the others.

Go and tell the others; tell them I'm ascending to ... my God and your God. Her message effectively means – *Go; tell them I'm alive. Tell them I'm taking mortal life with me into the presence of my God and your God; tell them I'm connecting all things living directly with the source of our being – my God; your God!*

... *my God and your God* ... we're directly connected with God; directly connected with Jesus. While that means we're not going to be saved from dying – Jesus wasn't – it does mean we can be set free from the despair that imagines anything stops at death. As descendants of Mary Magdalene and the other first witnesses, we are also called to bear this message to a world which needs to hear it so urgently right now. Death is not the last word; we are free to act in love. Jesus offers it as a free gift.

Easter is the time we focus on this gift. To take hold of it, we have to be ready to let go of it; like Jesus was. And you can see what becomes of death when he lets go of it. That's the freedom he intends for us; for our loved ones; for all. *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.* ^{Ps 27.13} Amen.