

Mary Magdalene: First to See the Risen Christ

[John 20:1-18](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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I want to say right off the bat that I ADMIRE THIS WOMAN'S STRENGTH. Her face was awash in tears, but don't take that as a sign of weakness. How could one not be moved to tears when one's best friend is impaled on a cross and left to die inch by inch? Mary was there that Friday when they crucified Jesus. She was one of the few who stuck it out to the bitter end, one of the very few willing to be with Jesus when he died. And not only had Jesus been put to death; now, to add insult to injury, it was Sunday morning, and his body was missing. So of course she wept. Remember, only the weak hold back their tears. The strong express all their emotions and do so unashamedly.

Mary's very presence at the tomb is a sign of her strength. For fear the authorities would stamp out every trace of the Jesus movement, all the male disciples were in hiding. But not Mary. There she was at the tomb in the full light of Sunday morning. She came to complete the embalming of his body, and no platoon of soldiers or, for that matter, demons from hell, would prevent her from offering her final tribute of love.

Her strength shows also in her insistence that someone tell her where the body was so she could get it back and give it a decent reburial. This was no Timid Tess. This was Mary of Magdala, so tempered in the ways of the world that she could stand toe to toe with anyone that morning in order to do justice to her dead friend.

And if I'm impressed by her strength, I AM ALSO ENCOURAGED BY HER SHORTSIGHTEDNESS. By shortsightedness I mean that she was apparently so blinded by her tears that she didn't recognize the two angels inside the tomb. At least she wasn't amazed or frightened as you and I would surely have been. And when she turned away from the tomb and saw Jesus standing nearby she mistook him for the gardener. In other words, she couldn't see straight. All the evidence of God's resurrection power was right there in front of her nose, and she couldn't see it. But that made no difference to her risen Savior. She might not know him but he knew her and called her by name.

That's encouraging, for it means that God is tolerant of our shortsightedness. When I walk under a magnificent spring sky without seeing the hand of the Creator, the Creator doesn't use that hand to slap me down. I eat three hearty meals and day, and if I do not thank the Benefactor, the Benefactor doesn't send a famine. I receive love from my wife and children and if I do not acknowledge the Author of love, the Author keeps sending love anyway. I revel in my freedom and good health and if I do not recognize the Giver of every good and perfect gift, the gifts don't stop coming. I'm encouraged and I hope you are too because, in spite of our shortsightedness, the Savior is always there for us, calling our names as he called Mary's name, and his tone of voice is never dictatorial or menacing, but always tolerant, generous, forgiving, and kind.

Finally, I AM PERSUADED BY HER TESTIMONY. "Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.'" And twenty-one centuries later her testimony rings true.

"Ah," you say, "but people were so gullible back then. They weren't scientifically trained as we are, so it was easy for them to believe in fairy tales and ghost stories." To that I reply that one doesn't have to live in the 21st century to know that when people die they do not come to life again, not on this earth. If anything, people are more gullible today than they were back then. Think of cult groups who commit suicide in the belief that they will then be transported to a space ship where they will live forever. Think of people who are investing in cryonics, the deep-freezing of dead bodies with an eye to their resuscitation in the future.

Mary had no such illusions. She was there Friday morning when they drove the nails through his hands and feet. Over the next six hours she saw life slowly drain out of his young body. She heard him exhale his final breath at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. She watched as they wrapped his body in suffocating shrouds, and she was at the tomb when they interred him just before sundown. She saw the stone rolled across the mouth of the tomb, and then saw it sealed so no fresh air could get in. She saw the guard march up and deploy around the gravesite. There could be no doubt in her mind that Jesus was well and truly dead. So when she arrived at the tomb on Sunday morning, the very last thing she expected was to have another conversation with Jesus. No wonder that when he spoke to her she thought he was the gardener because as far as Mary was concerned, Jesus was dead and that was the end of it.

So I believe her when she says, "I have seen the Lord." I am persuaded by her testimony that Jesus is not dead but alive. And I am convinced that this living Jesus, this risen Savior, is calling you and me by name as surely as he called Mary on that first Easter Sunday. It all comes down to this: the risen Christ knows you, knows you personally, knows you intimately, knows you better than you know yourself. He knows things you don't want him or anyone else to know. He knows it all, the hidden stuff, the repressed stuff, the shameful stuff. And contrary to what you may think, contrary to what you may have been taught as a child, it doesn't stop Jesus from calling you by name, and from doing it with genuine courtesy, heartfelt forgiveness, and unconditional love.

Did you arrive at worship today depressed, apprehensive, discouraged? Does your smile hide your heartache? Are you carrying a load so heavy that you are constantly on the verge of tears? Then listen to the Apostle Paul: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who lived us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Too good to be true? Too incredible to believe? Tell that to Mary. Tell it to the billions the world over who have put their lives in the hands of the risen Christ, and have gone on to meet life, not without pain, but with absolute confidence that they are on the winning side.

James S. Stewart wrote, "Christ alive from the dead is the word of the Lord to you. And everything you may ever need is here—hope when all hope seems broken, courage when you are terrified, light when you are in darkness, forgiveness when you have blundered badly, friendship when you are feeling lonely and forsaken, and at the last, a wonderful welcome home, from the Lord of life eternal, when your day has run to sunset, and the evening star is in the sky."

To that I add, don't wait for the evening star. Invite Jesus Christ into your life today...now. Let this be the moment when you hear him calling your name, and when you respond, "My Lord and my God!"