

Mary Magdalene: The First Witness of the Resurrection

Juicy news spreads fast. When Anglican Bishop David Jenkins dismissed Christ's resurrection as a "conjuring trick with bones," the secular media savoured his crude rejection of the heart of the Christian faith. When the founder of the Prison Fellowship, the well-known American Christian, Charles Colson, visited Sri Lanka, he quickly discovered the damage Jenkins's remark had done. He asked Desmond Goonasekera, an Anglican rector and chairman of the Sri Lanka Prison Fellowship, about the growth of the Christian church in Sri Lanka. The rector shook his head. He told Colson that aggressive Muslims were visiting Christian communities and they were using Bishop Jenkins's quote as an authoritative proof that Christians no longer need to believe in the resurrection. This experience is a sober reminder what happens when one man's heresy travels halfway around the world. What if Jenkins is right? Then Christianity has no message to bring to a dying world. But Jenkins is wrong! Christ has risen from the dead. The tomb is empty. Life overcame death. Many saw the risen Lord. If there is one story in all literature more exciting than the story of Mary Magdalene and her encounter with the risen Lord, than I don't know what it is.

What does the Bible say about this Mary? We don't know a great deal about her. She was from the ancient town, Magdala, on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee, not far from Capernaum. It was a prosperous place, which sent its tribute in wagons to the Temple at Jerusalem. Since among Jesus' followers there were several Marys, she was called Mary of Magdalene to distinguish her from the others. She was a comparatively rich woman, who was plagued by seven demons. What to do? It is not surprising that Mary went to Jesus when she heard about His power to heal and to cast out demons. The Lord had pity on her and released her from demon possession. Mary, who had been so distraught and desperate, was saved from a living death. Immediately after her restoration to health, she became an enthusiastic and committed follower of Jesus, who – with other women followers – gave generously of her wealth to supply the everyday needs of the Lord and His twelve disciples (Luke 8:2). Out of gratitude for all that He had done for her, she dedicated every moment of her life to serve Him. She was not a fair-weather follower. She stayed with the Lord even when He was led to Jerusalem like a lamb to the slaughter. She accompanied Him to Golgotha. She saw Him stumble under the weight of the cross and Simon of Cyrene take over His burden. She heard the crowds roar, "Away with Him! Crucify Him!" The strain on Mary must have been severe. But she had more courage and commitment than most of the Lord's followers. When the storm of adversity broke over the heads of the apostles, they fled, except John. But Mary and other women followers did not desert Him in the hours of His trial. They even watched the Lord's crucifixion. Mary heard the hammer blows. She saw His anguish, His suffering, and agonized over the brutal actions of the soldiers and the bystanders. She wept, overwhelmed by grief. What kept her at Golgotha? Not curiosity. Not faith in a sudden miracle. She was motivated by love. She loved Jesus for the peace and happiness He had given to her. But her hopes were dashed. She felt that life was not worth living without Him. But even after His death, she did not return to her hometown. She still wished to do something for Him. She and the other women bought spices for

proper burial rites. They did this just before the shops closed for the Passover Sabbath. Some time that evening they watched as Jesus' body was taken down from the cross. They followed the procession of mourners to see it hurriedly put into Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. They saw how the tomb was sealed with a huge stone.

But this is not the end of the story. The Gospel of John's description of Mary's visit to the tomb on the morning of the third day is the most beautiful, moving, and vivid account of despair turned into joy. When Mary arrived at the tomb, she immediately noticed that the big circular stone had been removed from the entrance. What had happened? Had friends or enemies taken away Jesus' body? What to do? She ran to the apostles, Peter and John, and told them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!" She ran back with Peter and John. John, who was younger than Peter and could run faster, was the first to arrive. He stooped down, looked into the tomb, and saw strips of linen lying there, but he did not enter. When Peter arrived, he didn't hesitate and saw not only the strips of linen, but also the burial cloth lying there. As Peter Marshall described the scene: "The stone was rolled away from the door, not to permit Christ to come out, but to enable the disciples to go in." When Peter and John saw the material evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, they believed. And they left for their homes. When Mary arrived, she found the two apostles and the other women gone. She felt deserted. But she stayed near the tomb. She was unable to tear herself away from the scene of so much grief, her heart broken by the thought that all her hopes built on Christ's teaching and ministry should have ended the utter shame of the crucifixion and a rifled, desecrated tomb. Once more she stooped to look into the tomb, where she saw two angels in brilliant white, seated where Jesus' body had been. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put Him." She shed tears of sorrow, desolation, loneliness, and disappointment. She was seeking her Lord's dead body but could not find it. Blinded with tears, she turned around and saw Someone standing there, whom she thought to be the gardener, for the tomb was a rock garden. He said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Still thinking that she was speaking to a gardener, Mary said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." The "gardener" said to her, "Mary." Instantly she recognized the voice of Jesus. What a relief; what amazement, and joy were in her response: "Rabboni!" (which means teacher). Her spiritual eyes were opened. Her faith had died, but now it was alive again. Hope had evaporated, but now it was focussed on the living Lord! She had found and saw the risen Lord. She was the first witness of the resurrection. What a privilege!

Miracles of miracles! The grave could not hold its mighty prey! Death had been conquered. The resurrection therefore is not a "conjuring trick with bones." It is a reality. Christ has risen from the dead. Today Christians around the world serve the living Saviour. "If the story of Jesus had ended on Golgotha," observed Malcolm Muggeridge, "it would indeed be of a Man Who Died, but as two thousand years later the Man's promise that where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them, manifestly still holds, it is actually the story of a Man Who Lives."

In humble adoration Mary was prepared to fling herself at Jesus' feet, but Jesus stopped her with the words: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17). And in the brightness of the first Easter morning, Mary ran back through Jerusalem's city gates to tell the disciples that she had seen the Lord and had spoken to Him. This honour was given to Mary Magdalene, which no one could take away from her. She was not only the first to see the risen Lord, but also the first to announce the joyful tidings of the Lord's resurrection.

Christianity is an historical religion. Jesus Christ did arise from the dead. The tomb is empty. The evidence is clearly before us. It can withstand the most rigorous investigation. It is evidence for our own resurrection and of a life with Jesus in glory. The good news of the Easter message has not changed! Our sure hope is still in Jesus' words: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11: 27).

Johan D. Tangelder
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