

A Woman's Witness

John 20:1–18

Resurrection 2018

EVER since the first century, people have been trying to convince themselves and others that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. The first example is found in the Gospel according to Matthew. Judean Jewish leaders gave the Roman guards at the tomb enough money to convince them to say, **"His disciples came by night and stole him away while they were asleep"** (Matt. 28:13). We reason backwards that if you were a first-century Christian author trying to promote this myth, all you would mention would be this conspiracy. But why does Matthew go on to include this: **"And if it comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble?"** (Matt. 28:14) For a Roman guard to lose a criminal or a body from a tomb he was guarding was a capital crime. Why include this detail if it's just a fanciful story? Because this is what happened!

Ever since that first failed conspiracy people have tried to convince themselves and others that Jesus didn't rise again. The *Qu'ran* says Jesus didn't even die to begin with. Skeptics abound on tv every Easter saying, "It's impossible. Have you ever seen a dead man raised?" No, but have you ever seen a Big Bang? Have you ever seen an animal from the water climb out and become a land animal? No, but we're assured that's what happened. After all,

science has never made a mistake! Others say the resurrection is a symbol of the community of Jesus rising again in spiritual rebirth. Others say he was crucified but never died. A book called *The Resurrection Plot* says on the cross Jesus passed out due to blood loss. This has come to be known as the “Swoon Theory.” He “swooned” or fainted on the cross, looked like he was dead, and so when he came out of the tomb—apparently using his Arnold Schwarzenegger-like muscles to move the huge seal stone—his disciples proclaimed him to be the resurrected Savior. Even sentimental hymns deny it: “You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.”

Maybe you’re skeptical too. Right from the beginning front today I declare to you that Christianity is a public religion. Its claims are falsifiable or verifiable. We don’t have a religion like Islam or Mormonism where we’re told to believe what one man said happened to him when no one else was around. We don’t have a religion like Buddhism or Hinduism, which are not historically based religions but philosophies you either believe or don’t. The Scriptures make claims about God creating the world, about our being sinners in need of forgiveness because of our first parents’ sin, and about Jesus of Nazareth being born of a virgin, living a perfect life, then dying as the Savior of the world. All of this either stands or falls with one thing: the resurrection.¹

SHE'S THE FIRST WITNESS

I want us to focus on just one character in the story: Mary Magdalene. She has such an important place in the narrative of the resurrection here in John's Gospel. Why? **SHE'S THE FIRST WITNESS** of Jesus' resurrection. Over in Luke's Gospel we read that while Jesus traveled through towns proclaiming God's kingdom had arrived, his twelve hand-picked disciples and "some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities" accompanied him (Luke 8:1). One of them was Mary Magdalene "from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2). And she traveled with them all to Jerusalem for the Passover as John 19 tells us she was at his feet as he hung from the cross. Then comes the next scene: **Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb** (v. 1). It's interesting that in the apostle Paul's great text of the resurrection—1 Corinthians 15—he says after Jesus was raised he appeared to a litany of witnesses: Peter, five hundred at one time, James, all the apostles, and finally to Paul himself (vv. 5–8). But listen to our text again: **Now on the first day of the week who came to the tomb early first? Mary Magdalene!** She's the first witness. "Christianity is anti-woman!" Its first witness *was* a woman! Why is that so important? What status did a woman's witness in first century Jewish court proceedings have? None!² "Jesus never

rose again but a small group of men conspired to pull one over on the world!” Yeah, and if you were male disciples conspiring to start a first century Jewish religion among the Roman Empire, the first place you’d start would be to write down that a *woman* was the first witness of Jesus’ resurrection. We would’ve expected one of the disciples who would become his apostles to witness the empty tomb first. Wouldn’t each Gospel writer make himself the first witness? Even if a woman was his first witness we’d expect it to be his mother, Mary. The scandal of a woman to a patriarchal society points to the reality of the narrative. “It was a conspiracy!” Right. And I have a bridge to sell you!

SHE’S AN IGNORANT WITNESS

Something else shows Mary Magdalene’s importance and truthfulness of the narrative. The Gospel accounts evidence their historicity and honesty because they don’t clean her up first and prep her for testimony. SHE’S AN IGNORANT WITNESS at least to begin with in John’ describes. Let me set this up so it makes most sense.

John says **on the first day of the week** only **Mary Magdalene came to the tomb** (v. 1). Matthew, Mark, and Luke recount that a group of women went to Jesus’ tomb early on that Sunday or **first day of the week** (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1). John says she went to the tomb **early, while it was**

still dark but Mark says it was after sunrise (Mark 16:2).³ Oh, the tv shows eat this so-called contradiction up! But besides the fact that ancient narrative wasn't being written for a bunch of Western skeptics who had a different sense of how chronology and detail play out in a story, these narratives actually supplement each other quite nicely. We can read the story as saying either the whole group left before sunrise but arrived at different times, Mary being first while it was still dark and the others just after sunrise.⁴ The other option I think is preferable is that Mary Magdalene went alone first in the dark (20:1), then goes back to her companions and they find Peter and John to tell them what happened (Luke 24:9–10; John 20:2), finally they all return to the tomb.⁵ After this Mary lingers and encounters Jesus (John 20:11). All this harmonizes, but John's real point in selecting how to craft his narrative is theological. What does Mary going to the tomb while it is still dark communicate? As we've already seen in our sermons through John, the images of darkness and light say Mary's still "in the dark" and not "in the light" about Jesus' resurrection.⁶

When she arrived she **saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb** (v. 1). John doesn't insert the most amazing pre-scripted testimony you've ever heard into her mouth. He records how she initially responded: she thought Jesus' body had been stolen. This is honest authenticity. If you were inventing a religion everyone would be fully convinced! Not so the disciples of

Jesus. Mary thought Jesus' body had been stolen because she saw the seal stone rolled away. Grave robbing was so prominent in those days that the Emperor Claudius would eventually decree it a capital offense for destroying a tomb, removing a body, or displacing the seal stone.⁷

So what does she do? **She ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple...and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him"** (v. 2). Twice she speaks of "not knowing" (vv. 2, 13). Mary wasn't "in the know" yet. Recall how Jesus' chastised Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" when should have known what Jesus was talking about (3:10). Mary's ignorant; she's in need of enlightenment. She gets it directly from Jesus! This leads to our final point.

SHE'S A TRANSFORMED WITNESS

This first, albeit ignorant, witness is important because SHE'S A TRANSFORMED WITNESS. After Peter and John depart Mary **stood** lingering behind, **outside the tomb**. To describe what she was doing John uses an onomatopoeia—a word that sounds like what it is: Μαρία...κλαίουσα. Listen to that word again: κλαίουσα...κλαίουσα...κλαίουσα. She's crying (v. 11).

Why weep Mary?

But she does. While **she wept she stooped** just like John did in verse 5 to **look into the tomb** (v. 11). What did she see? **Two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet** (v. 12). **They** asked **her**, “Why weep Mary?” But she does. **She** replied in ignorance as she thought others “**have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him**” (v. 13). Why weep Mary? Turn around! She does. Standing before her is he whom she sought! **But she did not know that it was Jesus** (v. 14)—just like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:16); just like the disciples in the boat while Jesus is on the shore cooking fish (John 21:4). Jesus says, “**Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?**” (v. 15) Why weep Mary? But **supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away”** (v. 15). Why weep Mary? If the angels or the man you thought was the gardener gave you back the body you thought was stolen you’d have all eternity to weep that Jesus wasn’t who he said he was!

But he is! And with one word, “**Mary,**” everything changed! “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me...The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:10, 3). The shepherd calls and his sheep at that very moment **turn[s] and**

sa[ys]... **“Rabboni!”** “My dearest teacher.” “That heart which was freed from Satan, by that powerful dispossession, was now possessed with a free and gracious bounty to her deliverer.”⁸ And Jesus commissions his first witness—this woman—to **“go”** and be his first witness to his official sent ones with this message: **“I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”** (v. 17). There was a glass ceiling in ancient culture and religion: Jesus broke it without the help of a hashtag! As one writer said, Mary goes

...from panic and weeping to epiphany and revelation, from *not* knowing the place where Jesus is to knowing whither he is ascending, to the most important place in the cosmos.” She “initially had excusable, erroneous ideas about Jesus’ status (theft of his body), eventually has extraordinary knowledge about Jesus’ true position and status (ascension to God). She who reported only bad news and confusion returns to report one of the most important messages given anyone in the gospels.”⁹

My friends, I end where I began: Christianity is the most publicly falsifiable or verifiable religion. It’s not the story of one man like Muhammed or Joseph Smith. It’s not merely a philosophy like Buddhism or Hinduism. It’s a religion that stands or falls with the resurrection. It’s all or nothing. And John put it all on the line by saying the first witness was a woman. Why? Because that’s how it happened! I invite you to give your life to the crucified and resurrected Jesus today. Stop trying to convince yourself and others that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Believe! Brothers and sisters, Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Endnotes

¹ See Michael Patton, “Christianity, the World’s Most Falsifiable Religion.” As found at <http://credohouse.org/blog/christianity-the-worlds-most-falsifiable-religion> (Accessed March 22, 2018).

² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 636; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (1987; third edition, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 78.

³ On the use of πρωὶ last hours of one day or earliest hours of the morning, see 18:28.

⁴ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 830 n7.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 635

⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 635. On John’s point of view, see Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Resurrection Stories* (1988; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), 63–65.

⁷ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 282; Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 636.

⁸ Joseph Hall, *Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments* (1860; repr., Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Tentmaker Publications, 2009), 590 col. 2.

⁹ Neyrey, *The Resurrection Stories*, 66.