

# *Mary's Conversion*

John 20:1-2, 11-18

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*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."*

*<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look<sup>1</sup> into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew,<sup>2</sup> "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (NRSV)*

Three years ago I talked to a Mennonite man who was in the process of being converted for the second time. At the time of our conversation he was about twenty-five years old and had already been a follower of Jesus for something like nine years. His original conversion nine years before was fairly typical for young people in our churches: he decided to follow Jesus, went through a baptism exploration class, and was baptized in worship on Sunday morning. He finished high school and went off to a Mennonite college.

At this Mennonite college he formed wonderful relationships with ten to twelve other people in his dorm. So close did he become with them that he and they became a Christian community. They were in and out of each other's rooms, prayed and studied the Bible together, played games together, often took the same courses together, and sat with each other in the cafeteria. It was, he told me, a wonderful experience because God was so real. At every minute of the day, he was aware of God's presence. It was almost as if he could reach out his hand and actually touch God. His faith was oriented to what was tangible and concrete.

After his sophomore year, he transferred to a different Mennonite college and promptly entered into a spiritual crisis. He lost most of the concrete, tangible things he had come to depend on spiritually at the first college. He found new friends, of course, but his friendships with them

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<sup>1</sup> Gk lacks *to look*

<sup>2</sup> That is, *Aramaic*

were not as close as with the old friends. Gone too were the daily Bible studies, the emotionally intense prayers, and the sense of God's tangible presence. God, it seemed, had pulled away from him and withdrawn to some distant solar system. This young man essentially entered a dark night: he wanted God but God was far off; he wanted to feel happy and fulfilled but instead felt empty and forlorn.

As time went on, he reluctantly began to realize that the kind of faith he had at the first Mennonite college was in fact shallow and ultimately unsustainable. It was built too much around the tangible and the concrete. It relied too much on transitory emotions. Coming to this realization was for him a painful process that spawned deep grief. And yet in spite of the grief, or maybe partly because of it, he slowly perceived that God was nudging him to a deeper, more mature faith.

When I talked him these events were all in the past. With the vantage of hindsight, he could now look back on what had happened at the second Mennonite college and understand that God was actually doing him a favor. He now realized that God asked him to turn away from a certain kind of spirituality that worked well for a while but was inadequate and unsustainable in the long run. God was prodding him to a new spirituality of trust that involved a different understanding of God and a different kind of friendship with God. The experience, he remarked, was like another conversion.<sup>1</sup>

Some of what happened to this man also happens to Mary Magdalene in John 20. We know from 19:25 that Mary is already a follower of Jesus, because she is one of three women who stands by the cross as Jesus dies. Now here at the beginning of chapter 20, in the darkness just before dawn, Mary walks to the tomb of Jesus; and the darkness of the landscape suggests that her inner spiritual landscape is also dark, that she's grieving the death of Jesus and of all that her relationship with him had meant. He had been a friend, a Lord, a reason for joy and hope. But now he was dead.

Events take an unexpected turn when she arrives at the tomb and discovers the door wide open. Immediately she suspects grave-robbers: a group of thieves must have stolen the body. She therefore does what any reasonable person might do; she spins on her feet and runs to find some other people, hoping that with robbers on the loose, they might be able to recover the body (v. 2).

In verse 11 Mary returns to the tomb, and from here through verse 18 she is the focus of the story. Since this is a resurrection story, you might suppose that Jesus is the main focus, but that's not really the case. In the gospel of John the main focus of the resurrection stories is actually on the disciples. John is not very interested in showing us the glory of the risen Jesus because for John, Jesus had already been glorified in the crucifixion. By the time John gets to chapter 20, the glory and majesty of Jesus is largely a done deal. So instead John focuses on how the resurrection affects the disciples. He wants to show us how the resurrection changes them. His concern is how the resurrection of Jesus shapes the community of faith.

In the story before us, Mary represents the community of faith. I'll demonstrate in a few minutes that she is a unique person in her own right, yet she also symbolizes all of us who belong to the wider church. One leading scholar of John has insightfully divided this story about Mary into three parts, each of which contains an important word that clues us in to what is happening to Mary. I like this way of looking at verses 11-18 because it shows us how Mary goes through a second conversion which ushers her into a deeper, more mature spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the story is verses 11-15. In this first part, Mary is weeping (Greek *klaiousa*), which means that her eyes are full of tears. One of the things I've tried to emphasize since June when I began this series of sermons on John is that seeing is extremely important in this gospel. The writer of this gospel is a subtle literary craftsman who explores different kinds of seeing and how those modes of seeing do or do not lead us to believing. Therefore when we read that Mary has tears in her eyes, we ought to pay attention. What happens when your eyes are full of tears? You can't see very well, right? Things look blurry. Your vision is not very good.

In Mary's case, her teary eyes give us a clue that her spiritual insight is not working very well right now. Her blurry physical sight tells us that her spiritual sight is also blurred at the moment. Even though Jesus is standing right in front of her and is even talking with her, her spiritual insight is so blurred that she cannot perceive who this really is. She thinks he's the gardener. The problem is that in this first section of the story (11-15), Mary is still fixated on finding the body of Jesus. Her faith, her spirituality, is based on the tangible and the concrete. Ever since she first began following Jesus, her relationship with him has been tied to the physical. If she wanted, she could touch his hands or his arms. She could look into his confident brownish-black eyes and lose herself in love. She could see the hair of his toes curling up through the sandals on his feet.

Her faith relied on having the historical Jesus present, in person, here and now. The intellectual contours of her faith had assumed a physical Jesus, and now that Rome had crucified him, she wanted to find his biological body, precisely for the reason that her faith had always been based on his biological body. Her faith needed a tangible body, whether alive or dead. But her old spiritual worldview was keeping her from perceiving new spiritual realities that were happening right before her eyes. Resurrection was creating a new spiritual landscape only a few feet away, and yet she couldn't see it because her sight was so blurred by old assumptions.

The second part of this story is found in verse 16. In this second part, Mary is turning (Greek *strapheisa*). When verse 16 says that Mary "turned," it cannot mean a physical or geographical turning, because according to verse 14, Mary is already facing Jesus. She is already face-to-face with him. Therefore what verse 16 must mean is that Mary is turning spiritually.<sup>3</sup> In other words, she is now beginning the process of a new spiritual transformation. This new spiritual transformation begins when the man standing in front of her finally speaks her name: "Mary!" You may remember that back in 10:3-5, where Jesus compared himself to a shepherd and his followers to sheep, he said he would call his followers by name, and they would know his voice. This is exactly what Jesus does for Mary: he calls her by name, and she immediately realizes he's not the gardener. Her blurred spiritual sight clears up. She sees Jesus in all his glory and immediately greets him as "Teacher!". This greeting suggests that her conversion is well underway, because in the gospel of John authentic followers of Jesus look to him as their true teacher, instead of to Moses. The Johannine community of faith primarily orients itself around Jesus the Teacher rather than Moses the teacher.

The third and last part of this story is found in verses 17-18. In this third part, Mary announces (Greek *angelousa*). Now that she understands who she's really talking to, Jesus orients her to a new, deeper faith. "Do not hold on to me," he says in the NRSV, or in some English versions, "Do not cling to me." What he means by this is that Mary can no longer cling to the tangible and the concrete. Her relationship to a physical, historical Jesus is over. A relationship of touch and physicality with him is no longer possible. If clinging is part of the old spiritual reality, then the new spiritual reality will be about openness. If her hands were previously clenched, now they are to be wide open. Moreover, since Jesus is ascending to God, his time on earth is virtually over. From now on, her spirituality will have to be about perceiving beyond the surface details of events. She will have to look for the intangible, for what lies just

beyond the contours of the everyday. She will have to rely more on spiritual insight and less on physical sight.

But that is not all. Jesus gives Mary Magdalene a mission. Her mission is to go back to the community of faith, to Peter and Nathaniel, to the Beloved Disciple and all the other members of the church, both women and men, and tell them what she has seen and heard. Throughout the New Testament, people who have “seen and heard” the risen Jesus are granted the official status of apostles, essentially one notch above an ordinary disciple. Here in John, Mary Magdalene is the only solo person to whom the risen Jesus appears. She is the only follower to get a personal Easter appearance and to get a personal commission from Jesus. She is the only person to whom Jesus gives the Easter message (v. 17); and later that night, when he visits the male disciples in verses 19-23, he does not repeat that Easter message. Instead Jesus relies on the fact that Mary Magdalene has already told them. In other words, in this gospel Mary is the original apostle. The Easter message from Jesus to the community of faith travels through her. She herself becomes a teacher, an interpreter, a carrier, a witness, an apostle of high status. What makes all this possible is her second conversion to a new kind of faith, a new kind of believing.

The goal of this gospel, according to 20:31, is to help people believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through believing we might have life. It’s appropriate, therefore, to conclude this series on the gospel of John with the story of Mary Magdalene, a woman who believed, who allowed herself to be led to deeper belief, and who ended up with a mission to the community of faith. Mary is us.

#### Notes

1. To honor this man’s privacy, I’ve altered certain details of his story.
2. I’m indebted to Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999, 2003), 211-223, for a number of ideas in this sermon, including the tripartite division and themes of 11-15, 16, and 17-18.
3. The Greek word John uses here for turning is the same Greek word that Jewish translators used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *šub*, a word that often refers to spiritual transformation in books such as Ruth and Jeremiah.