

EASTER THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY MAGDALENE
JOHN 20:1-18

INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of World War I Ukraine was made a part of the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Nikolai Bukharin was one of the leaders of the new Russian Communist government. He was one of the first editors of the Communist newspaper *Pravda*, which means "truth," but over the years became a source of propaganda and lies.

A century ago the Communists sent Bukharin to Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, to convince the Ukrainians to buy into Communism and to reject the vestiges of religion. The Communists wanted this traditional center of Russian nationalism to be fully on board with the new Communist movement. There are different variations of this story. But supposedly there was a large public meeting in Kyiv in which Nikolai Bukharin put forth the case for Communism and the need to reject religion and belief in God. The Communist harangue went on for an hour. Finally, an old Orthodox priest was called upon to end the meeting. He simply went up on the stage and cried out the traditional Easter greeting, "He is risen!" The crowd rose to its feet and instantly responded loud and clear, "He is risen indeed!"

The Russian Communists were never fully able to subdue the Ukrainians. A few weeks ago the Russian government decided once again that the time had come to reclaim Kyiv as the center of Russian nationalism. So Vladimir Putin made up a story that Ukraine and its leaders needed to be de-Nazified, a charge which is especially ironic because its democratically elected leader is Jewish.

So the Russian military sent in its vast army with its tanks and its planes and its artillery to attack Ukraine, to quickly take out the Ukrainian leadership, and to occupy Kyiv. And the Lord God of Heaven said, "This shall not stand!"

Over 2000 years ago the Roman government decided that it was time for the Empire to take control of this one piece of territory in the Far East that was governed by these difficult people, the Jews. So General Pompey was sent to Jerusalem, and he and his forces captured this Biblical city. In 40 BC the Romans appointed a puppet king to rule over this client kingdom. The Romans declared that Herod was "King of the Jews."

Meanwhile, the Lord God of Heaven declared, "This shall not stand! It is time to send the real King of the Jews." So it was that that the Lord God of Heaven sent His Son to be born into this earthly world. As is His way, He acted in an unexpected manner. This true King of Israel was born not in a palace, but in a manger. He grew up as a carpenter's son, in a remote part of Judea. He became a rabbi of sorts. He showed His Jewish people, including the religious leaders that He was the promised Messiah of the

Old Testament. But he was rejected by those leaders, who eventually had Him killed on a Roman cross. Yet this was all a part of a perfect divine plan. For in the end it was necessary for this God-man to die as a substitute, as a payment for the penalty of the sins of all mankind. None of even His closest followers got this at first. They were slow to believe and understand. But in one of the most remarkable events in all of human history, Jesus Christ rose from the dead to show that His claims are true and to provide the greatest deliverance that each one of us still need today.

I. THE ROLE OF MARY MAGDALENE

This act of resurrection from the dead itself was unprecedented. Never in human history had such a deed been done. The manner in which it was revealed was also unprecedented. It showed again that God's ways are often mysterious and not according to human expectations. For the first witness to the resurrection of Christ was a woman, a woman with a difficult background. Her name was Mary Magdalene. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE ROLE OF MARY MAGDALENE)

Mary Magdalene has received a lot of bad press down through the centuries. In the sixth century Pope Gregory declared that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute who turned in faith to Christ. Eventually the Catholic Church created a number of Magdalene Houses, used to minister to wayward women, especially former prostitutes.

Almost thirty years ago Dan Brown wrote a novel which became a movie, "The DaVinci Code." According to his story Mary became the bride of Jesus and mother of a child which they had together. This became a great Catholic Church conspiracy and coverup.

Archaeologists and historians have also managed to get involved in the story. Eighty years ago a group of leather bound papyrus manuscripts were discovered in Egypt which became known as the Gnostic Gospels. In one of them, the Gospel of Philip, Jesus is said to have loved Mary more than any of his other disciples. Supposedly Jesus used to kiss her regularly. Conspiracy theorists have been inclined to believe that the early church suppressed these stories that might reflect the real truth. The reality is that hardly anyone in the church believed them, and there was no interest in spending the time and energy and money to copy them, as they did with Biblical texts.

In 2012 a Harvard professor announced that she had discovered a fragment of a second century gospel in which Jesus refers to Mary Magdalene as "my wife." Eventually Professor Karen King acknowledged that this early text was probably a forgery.

II. THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND OF MARY MAGDALENE

So let's consider THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND OF MARY MAGDALENE (II. THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND OF M. M.) What does the Bible actually say about this witness to the resurrection of Jesus?

Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all four of the New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus. The most information that we have about her background, which is not a lot,

comes from Luke #8 vv. 1-3. (p. 864) (LUKE 8:1) Beginning in v. 1 we are told, **“Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, (LUKE 8:2) and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, (LUKE 8:3) and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.”**

This description refers to the earlier part of Jesus' public ministry when He was going around the countryside from town to town to present His message about the coming Kingdom of God. There are at least three bits of information which we can glean from these verses. **First**, Mary was part of a group of women who followed Jesus around. These women apparently had financial resources of their own, not only to support themselves, but also to help pay the costs for the travel of Jesus and this larger group. So Jesus had not just the twelve apostles who followed Him around in His itinerant ministry, but also a group of women, plus larger crowds at times.

Second, Mary is called “Magdalene,” which name suggests that she came from Magdala. (MAGDALA MAP) Magdala was a town on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. In the first century it was known as a center for processing fish which were caught from the Sea of Galilee. The fish were salted there, so that they could be preserved and delivered to towns and cities further inland. Perhaps Mary had financial resources which came from that industry. Magdala was part of Galilee. So she had a geographical connection to most of the twelve apostles, who were also from Galilee, in the north of Judea.. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Third, we are told that seven demons had been expelled from her. There is a distinction made in the text between those who were demon possessed and those who were sick. The author of this Gospel account is Luke who was a Gentile and a physician by training. He was an observer who recognized that there was a distinction to be made between physical illness and demonic possession.

It may be helpful to keep in mind an overall view of demonic activity in the Bible. On a superficial level some may conclude that there were always demonic and miraculous activities that were going on in the Bible. The truth is that there were really only a few major outbreaks of demonic activity recorded in the Bible. There is an outbreak in the time of Moses with the escape of the Hebrews from slavery. At the time of Jesus there appears to have been much demonic activity. Then the New Testament also described a major outbreak of demonic activity, as well as miraculous divine activity, at the time when Jesus returns to earth. This is not to say that there were no other demonic or divine activities in miraculous display in the Bible. But they were scattered and contemporary people were always shocked by them when they happened.

Apparently Mary had some kind of occult connection or involvement with the spirit world such that she became possessed by evil spirits. This was a cause of great disruption

and difficulty in her life. Jesus was responsible for freeing her from these evil spirits. Thus she recognized a great indebtedness to Him.

Beyond that we do not know if Mary was single or married, whether she had children or not, whether she was young or old. Perhaps she was well off enough to contribute financially to the cause. There is no indication that she had any particular status or family connection that was worthy of note.

III.

We come then to THE PRESENCE OF MARY AT THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE PRESENCE OF MARY AT...) Matthew's account of the life of Jesus mentions Mary Magdalene as being present at the crucifixion site of Jesus just outside of the city walls of Jerusalem. According to Matthew #27 vv. 55-56 (MATTHEW 27:55-56), **"There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee."**

So our Mary witnessed the death of Jesus. She presumably saw Him call out His last words. She saw the Roman soldier stab Jesus in the side to make sure that He was truly dead. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The gospels tell us that a member of the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism which had certain civil authority as well as religious authority, by the name of Joseph of Arimathea, asked the Roman governor Pilate for the body so that he could bury it in his family tomb. Permission was granted, and Nicodemus, another Sanhedrin member, who had the famous "how can I be born again" conversation with Jesus, helped Joseph to prepare the body and lay it in a tomb.

In Mark #15 v. 47 (MARK 15:47) we have this additional note: **"Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid."** So Mary knows where Jesus is buried. This sets the stage for her next significant action. Jesus is buried just before sunset on Friday. According to Mark 16:1 Mary shows up early in the morning on Sunday with two friends, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Their purpose is to complete the appropriate burial preparations. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the next chapter, #16 of Mark (p. 853 in black Bibles), we have this gospel writer's description of what happened on Easter morning. Beginning in v. 2 we read, **"And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 And they were saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?' 4 And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large."** In first century Israel tomb entrances of wealthy Jews were typically blocked by large stones to prevent animals and grave robbers from getting into them. These ladies may not have been aware that the Roman governor had also appointed soldiers to guard this tomb.

Beginning in v. 5 we read, **“And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. 6 And he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’ 8 And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”** Mary Magdalene and her friends are shaken by what they witness. This experience does not fit into any category that makes sense to them. Their primary reaction is fear and astonishment. They just don’t know what to make of this.

The Gospel of John tells us what Mary Magdalene did next. Beginning in v. 2 of John #20 (p. 906) we read, **“So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple [apparently John, the writer of this gospel], 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.’ 3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes.**

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 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.’ 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ 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.’ 16 Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for 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.”’ 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’—and that he had said these things to her.”

Mary Magdalene had some awareness of the trial and legal proceedings which preceded the crucifixion of Jesus. Like the other disciples of Jesus she probably had a hope that Jesus was going to introduce the Messianic kingdom that the Old Testament described. After all, Jesus had been proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. The hope of these followers of Jesus was that He was now going to show Himself to be

the Messiah, expel the Romans from Judea, and set up an earthly kingdom. But that was not yet the plan.

The death of Jesus had seemingly dashed these hopes. His followers were in shock. Most of them went into hiding. It was these women who showed the greatest bravery and devotion. At the very least they could make sure that His body was properly treated.

So Mary and two other women showed up early on Sunday morning to finish the proper Jewish burial treatment. They realized that there might be a problem with the large blocking stone preventing their entrance to the tomb. But then they discovered that the stone had been removed.

Mary's immediate conclusion was that someone had taken away the body of Jesus. Maybe it was the Romans. Maybe it was those corrupt religious leaders. In Mary's mind the situation was even more confusing. At least these others could have allowed Jesus to have a proper burial. Now even that dignity was taken away from Him and from them. The situation had gone from horrible to more horrible.

But then these women found the blocking stone gone and the body of Jesus gone. Furthermore there was this man in white who told them that Jesus had risen and was to meet His disciples in Galilee. Now they were to go and tell the other disciples. Mary and her friends are blown away by this. They are shaken. They don't know what to make of it. So they return to the other disciples and tell them what happened.

In the account in the Gospel of John Mary Magdalene leads Peter and John back to the tomb. These two enter the tomb and discover the linen wrappings which had been put around the body of Jesus, but there is no sign of His body. Peter and John head back into the city, trying to make sense of what they have witnessed.

Mary stays at the tomb and cries. At some point she looks back into the tomb and sees two men there. My suspicion is that she did not figure out until later that they were angels. In many of the appearances of angels in the Bible these creatures appear at least initially to be men. These angels ask Mary why she is crying. She explains.

Then she turns around and sees Jesus. She does not initially recognize Him. It may be partly because of all of her tears. It may be because His appearance is different. Probably He looked differently than when she had seen Him dying on the cross and having been badly beaten up.

But when He speaks to her and says her name, she immediately recognizes that it is He who is the object of her devotion. It is Jesus. She holds on to Him, until He tells her to go back to the disciples and tell them that He is alive and that He is yet to ascend into heaven. Instantly her entire perspective on life is changed. Grief and despair are turned into joy and gladness. She returns to the disciples to announce the good news that Jesus is risen.

IV. A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE APPLICATIONS) There are three applications which I find coming out of this story. The first is that GOOD THINGS CAN COME OUT OF BAD THINGS. (IV. THE APPLICATIONS A. GOOD THINGS CAN COME...) The crucifixion of Jesus was a horrible evil. Jesus Christ was the Son of God, the Second Person of the Triune Godhead. He was the only sinless human being who ever lived. Yet the creatures whom He created rejected Him and killed Him. What a horrible abomination! Yet because of His death the penalty for human sin was paid. This substitutionary atonement satisfied the righteous demands of a holy God. Eternal salvation was provided for mankind.

As we glance through history, we can think of other horrible blots upon the story of us humans. The holocaust of WW II was a horrible evil. Six million Jews were killed by the Nazis. Yet out of that tragedy Israel was reborn as a nation. We have seen in the creation of the modern state of Israel some of the promises of God to His Chosen People being fulfilled.

The current Russian attack on Ukraine is a horrible evil. Thousands of Ukrainians have been brutally murdered. Perhaps the Lord will yet bring some good out of that situation.

The Covid pandemic has been a great evil. Millions of people around the world have been killed by this virus. A number of us in the congregation have just recently been affected by it. The mental health of adults and especially children has been adversely affected. The academic progress of so many precious children has been stymied.

Yet perhaps we can see at least a few glimpses of good things which have come from this. It seems that many parents have become more attuned to what their children are being taught. Some families have been drawn closer together. We churches have learned new ways to get our message out. We have learned how to more effectively use modern technology, which will hopefully benefit people beyond the four walls of the church.

Most all of us have individual challenges and hard things. It is often difficult to see what good things can come out of them. Yet because we have a good and gracious God, He can and does bring good things out of truly bad events. We must trust him for that.

B.

The second takeaway that I find in this story is that WE SHOULD TRUST THE RESURRECTION STORY. (IV. A. B. WE SHOULD TRUST THE RESURRECTION STORY) It has the ring of authenticity to it. In Jewish legal tradition a woman was not allowed to testify in court. If a first century Jew was making up this story, he would not have the first witness to the Resurrection be a woman. He would also not choose a woman who had a history of involvement with the demonic.

The leading disciples of Jesus don't come off looking like heroes. In ancient biographies authors tended to make themselves look pretty good. It still usually happens today in

modern autobiographies. It does not work out that way here. The main characters, with the exception of Jesus, indicate that they were clueless. They did and said dumb things. They ran away from Jesus in His moment of need. They did not get the message of Jesus about the Crucifixion and Resurrection until after it happened. The way that things worked out was not made up. It was a divine plan. The death and resurrection of Jesus really did happen. Jesus is risen from the dead.

C.

The third application then is simply this: WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT WE HAVE BELIEVED IN JESUS. (IV. A. B. C. WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT WE HAVE BELIEVED IN JESUS) If the resurrection story is true, then it means that Jesus Christ was and is who He said He is. He is the Son of God. He was God who became a human being. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sin of mankind. He rose again to show that He is God. He ascended into heaven. We have a responsibility to trust in Him.

I was blessed to grow up knowing a fair amount about marriage. I was blessed to have parents who were married and demonstrated what a good marriage was like. As I grew older, I acquired personal friends who were married. In my twenties I had the opportunity to stand up at a couple of weddings for friends and relatives who got married. I participated in their weddings. In graduate school, as I prepared to be a pastor, I took courses on marriage. I read a number of books on marriage. I learned a little bit about how to do marriage counseling. Eventually I acquired a girl friend. We began to talk about marriage. Yet none of these activities actually made me married.

It was not until forty years ago today, April 17, 1982, that I stood in front of a church and made a commitment to Suzy that I would be her husband until death do us part. It was that commitment that truly made me married.

There may be people within the sound of my voice who have had that kind of earlier commitment to Christianity. Perhaps you grew up in a Christian family. Perhaps you went to church during much of your life. Perhaps you have had Christian friends. Perhaps you have read the Bible. Maybe you have read books about Christianity. Maybe you have Christian kids or a Christian spouse. Yet you have not really made that personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

We religious types over the centuries have too often complicated the main issue. We have added things that are not at the heart of the Biblical gospel. We talk about church membership, about belonging to a certain denomination, about being baptized in a certain way, about giving money, about going forward in a church service, or about performing some other kind of religious ritual.

These religious activities may, or may not, have some value. But the Bible says that our primary responsibility is to believe in Jesus. Here are a couple of the verses in the New Testament which get at the heart of our responsibility. Jesus said, **“For God so loved the world that He gave His unique Son that whosoever believes in Him should not**

perish but have eternal life.” The Apostle Paul told a Philippian jailer, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”** The Apostle John said, **“But as many as received Him [Jesus], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”** The best thing which you could take away from this meeting together is to make sure that you have believed in Jesus. If any of you would like to talk about that, or have questions about what this means, I or others around me would be happy to talk to you.