

John 20:1-17

If someone wanted to totally disprove and destroy Christianity, what one thing lies at the heart of Christianity which would be their main target? The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the very foundation of our faith.

Why is that? If Christ was not raised, then all we have is another martyr dying for another cause. This would mean that Jesus is no different than any of the other great religious leaders who all remain in their graves. *“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith....And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17).* This chapter is a proclamation of Jesus’ victory over death.

All four of the Gospels honor Mary Magdalene by mentioning her as the first person to come to the tomb (v. 1). What does that say about her? She had great courage, devotion, and love for Jesus. She came prepared to anoint the dead body of Jesus. She did not come with the intention of becoming a witness to His resurrection, but that is precisely what happened.

That a woman would be the first to see the risen Jesus is evidence of Jesus’ electing love as well as a mark of the narrative’s historical believability. No Jewish author in the ancient world would have invented a story with a woman as the first witness to this most important event.¹

What do we know about Mary Magdalene? Mary Magdalene is the woman from whom Jesus had earlier cast out seven demons (Luke 8:1-3).

Where did we last see Mary Magdalene? She was at the foot of the cross (John 19:25).

What did Mary see when she arrived at the tomb early Sunday morning, the first day of the week (v. 1)? The stone had been removed and the tomb was empty. Note that the removal of the stone had taken place *after* Christ’s resurrection (Matthew 28).²

What did she do next (v. 2)? Mary immediately ran to Peter and John with the breathless announcement that someone had removed the Lord’s body out of the tomb. Mary assumed that some people had stolen Jesus’ body.

How did Peter and the other disciple react (vv. 3-4)? They started running to the tomb.

What did they discover (vv. 5-7)? The tomb was empty and the strips of linen cloth were there and the burial cloth was folded up neatly.

What is the significance of the description of the burial cloth (v. 7)? The way the cloth was left indicates that Jesus’ departure from the tomb was orderly/unhurried. His body could not have been taken by grave robbers. They would never have left the burial cloth wrapped neatly. They would have either taken the body wrapped with all of the linens/cloth or else torn them off and scattered them.

What does it mean that John “saw and believed” (v. 8)? It means more than physical sight. It means that he understood. Before him were the evidences of Christ’s resurrection. They showed him what had happened, and he ... believed.³ The tomb was open not to let Jesus’ body out but to let the disciples and the world see that He rose.

While Mary Magdalene was lingering at the empty tomb and weeping, who did she encounter (v. 12)? She peered into the tomb for the second time and saw two individuals who were angels. Mary was still grieving over Jesus’ death and weeping over the missing body of Jesus. She had not yet realized what John had realized.

Who did Jesus pick to be the first person to see Him after His resurrection (v. 14)? Mary Magdalene, an obscure Jewish woman. Not Mary His mother. Not a prominent person. **Why? What’s the message(s) there?**

How would you describe Mary Magdalene’s confusion (vv. 13-15)? Mary did not answer either of Jesus’ questions. Her grief had apparently made her somewhat irrational and emotional (cf. 11:21, 32). She was focused on the missing body and how to retrieve it. Resurrection was the furthest thing from her mind.

Instead of answering, Mary asked this apparent “gardener” for Jesus’ body, and she promised to assume care of it. Her request revealed her devotion to Jesus. She thought that the gardener had removed the body for some reason.⁴

How would you characterize Mary Magdalene’s interaction with Jesus (vv. 14-17)? Mary Magdalene did not immediately recognize Jesus nor did she recognize Him the first time He spoke. Possibly God prevented her from recognizing the Lord until the proper time had come.⁵

There seems to have been something about Jesus’ resurrection body that made immediate recognition of Him difficult for many people including Mary Magdalene ([Mark 16:12](#); [Luke 24:16](#); [John 21:4](#)).

Why did she eventually recognize Him (v. 16)? He called her by name, speaking with tenderness and compassion—just like she had known Him. The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name and they know His voice (10:3-4). Here we see what is probably the greatest “recognition scene” in all literature. A close second would be, “I am Joseph.”

How did Mary react when Jesus called her name? Mary ecstatically responded by calling Jesus by the name that she had undoubtedly used to address Him numerous times before: “Rabboni!” This title expressed the joy of a restored relationship that she had probably figured had ended. Mary swung from the emotional depths of despair to the height of joy—in one brief second.⁶

Why did Jesus tell Mary Magdalene not to hold on to Him (v. 17)?

- He might be saying, “You have to let Me go Mary. Don’t cling to Me emotionally. If I don’t go, the Father can’t send the Holy Spirit. When He does, I will be closer and dearer to you than was possible during My life here on this earth.”
- Or it could mean physically holding on. The Greek means “Stop clinging to me.” Mary had lost Jesus once before (at His crucifixion) and it was natural to fear the loss of His presence again.⁷
- Or perhaps He meant.....only in heaven would it be possible for loving believers such as Mary to maintain contact with Jesus forever. This contrasts with Jesus’ invitation to Thomas (v. 27). Thomas needed to touch Jesus to strengthen his faith. Mary needed to release Him because she had no reason to fear losing Him.

What was the message Jesus directed Mary to convey to his “brothers”? To tell them of the new order that had just been ushered in. Jesus described the Father in a new way. He may have been Jesus’ Father, but He was also the disciples’ Father. Jesus did not say “our” Father but “My Father and your Father.” He and His disciples had a different relationship to the Father. God has been the Father of the Lord Jesus from all eternity. However, we are sons of God by adoption. It is a relationship that begins when we are saved and will never end. As sons of God, we are not equal with God and never shall be.⁸ This is the first time in the Gospels that Jesus called his disciples His brothers.

The context clarifies that Jesus was referring to the disciples, and not to His physical half-brothers (v. 18).

If the Gospel of John were an ordinary biography, there would be no chapter 20. All biographies conclude with the death and burial of the subject. I have yet to read one that describes the subject’s resurrection from the dead! The fact that John continued his account and shared the excitement of the Resurrection miracle is proof that Jesus Christ is not like any other man. He is, indeed, the Son of God.”⁹

¹ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 342.

² William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1566.

³ *Ibid.*, 1567.

⁴ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on John, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 522.

⁵ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1567.

⁶ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on John, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 523.

⁷ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 342.

⁸ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1567.

⁹ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on John, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 513.