

**Series: “The Unfinished Business of Easter”**  
**#2: “Confused by an Empty Tomb”**  
**John 10 (excerpts); John 20:1-18 (NLT)**  
**By John Gill**

She must have loved him... I mean, she must have REALLY loved him! Tradition tells us that before Jesus came into her life, Mary of Magdala was a mess. Some have even suggested that she had been a “women of ill repute” (which is just a nicer way to call her a “whore”) – that she was the disreputable woman who scandalized the guests when she crashed a dinner-party and, weeping, bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears. Maybe so - however, there is no evidence in the text of the Scriptures that the fallen woman at the dinner party was Mary Magdalene, nor that Mary had ever been a prostitute.

In any case, it is true that her life before Jesus was a mess. Luke’s Gospel tells us that Jesus had exorcised seven demons out of Mary. Jesus brought order and healing to the chaos of Mary’s life – a healing of body and soul. He gave her life a new beginning and restored her dignity. No wonder Mary became such a devoted follower of the Rabbi! She owed him her life, and she gave him her love. If the woman weeping on Jesus’ feet that day wasn’t Mary, it could have been – because Jesus meant everything to her.

Before Jesus came into Mary’s life, she was despised and pitied by everyone, an outcast. People treated her like garbage, and assumed she was a sinner. But Jesus was different. When Jesus had look at Mary, he didn’t see her condition, he saw her potential. He treated her with respect and compassion. That’s all she really needed – to know that God loved her, in spite of what she had made of herself. When you get right down to it, that’s all any of us ever really need. Yes, she must have loved Jesus more than anyone in the world!

We shouldn’t be surprised, then, to read in John’s Gospel that it was Mary Magdalene who was the first to come to the tomb that Easter morning. And she would have come sooner, if it weren’t for all those religious laws against doing such things on the Sabbath – that Saturday between the darkness of Good Friday and the dawning-light of Easter Sunday.

But, as soon as the religious laws would allow, Mary went to Jesus. Long before daylight, she made her way through the quiet streets of Jerusalem to beyond the city wall where the body of Jesus lay. The other Gospels mention that a group of the women brought spices to anoint the body. Not so in John. John only mentions one woman – Mary Magdalene – and she comes empty-handed. It seems the only reason Mary is drawn to the tomb that morning is to weep for her beloved Jesus.

It was probably still early morning when she arrived – barely dawn. Just as we sang at the beginning of our service, “I come to the garden alone, While the dew is still on the roses.”

She approached the tomb – but something didn’t look quite right. As she drew closer, she must have been horrified to see that the tomb had been disturbed. She was confused! The possibilities rushed through her mind... Had grave-robbers broken in looking for trinkets to steal and sell? Had the keeper of the cemetery transferred Jesus’ body out of the “borrowed tomb” and placed him in a more permanent grave? Or – had Jesus’ enemies desecrated the grave in or order to heap even more scorn on Jesus: “How could they do it? Wasn’t it enough that they had whipped Jesus, made fun of him, and crucified him like a common criminal?”

All she was sure of was that someone had taken away the only thing in life she had left to hold on to – the body of her sweet Jesus!

Distraught, Mary did the only thing she could think to do. She ran to tell the Disciples. She found Peter and “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” (the cryptic way the author, John, refers to himself). Both raced through the streets, but John, who was likely the younger of the two, got there first. Once Peter caught up, they peered into the tomb, and were baffled by what they found.

Mary was right - the body of Jesus was indeed gone! And what’s more, the grave clothes which had wrapped the body were still lying there – NOT cast-off into a pile on the floor, but “still in their folds” (as the original Greek text literal puts it). In other words, the grave clothes which had wrapped Jesus body were still intact, marking the place where Jesus had lain, still wound up just as they had been when the body was enclosed within them, only now deflated. It was as if Jesus’ body had just evaporated into thin air without disturbing the cocoon that had encased him.

Peter was the first to go into the tomb to witness the scene. But, in spite of the evidence right before his eyes, he wasn’t quick to catch the significance of all this. (As we have seen before in the Gospels, Peter wasn’t the brightest bulb in the chandelier!) John tells us that he followed Peter into the tomb – and “he (that is, John) believed.” What exactly “he believed,” we aren’t told. It seems that John is more clever than Peter - but I’m sure even John still didn’t fully comprehend the full-scope of all that the Resurrection of Jesus would mean. But at least, John sees the grave clothes, and puts two-and-two together. Jesus is indeed risen, just as Jesus had promised!

Even with this partial faith, it is clear that the two Disciples still are confused about what this all means – because, instead of running back to find the other disciples and proclaim Jesus’ resurrection, the text simply says Peter and John went home. You’d think there would be joy and excitement – but no mention of a celebration. It seems they were still confused by this turn of events. I guess it’s fair to say they were in shock. I would have been, too.

Then the story-line shifts back to Mary. After she had fled from the tomb to tell the disciples that the grave had been disturbed, the men had set-off at full-speed running through the streets to see for themselves. But poor Mary couldn’t run as fast as the men. By the time Mary returned to the scene, the men had already come-and-gone. We, the reader, know that John already had some inkling of the Resurrection, but Mary didn’t know that. She was still grief-stricken and just as confused as ever. Through her tears, she stooped at the entrance to see for herself.

And Mary saw – what the men could not see... She was greeted by two angels, sitting at either end of the slab on which Jesus’ body had rested. I’ve always wondered why the angels chose not to appear to the men, but instead, revealed themselves to Mary. Perhaps God wanted the first person to announce to the world the resurrection of Jesus – to be a woman. Did you ever stop to think about the fact that the very first one to proclaim the good news... the first preacher in the Christian Church – was a woman?

Anyway, Mary is greeted by angels, but, even now, she doesn’t recognize them as angels... She is still confused. And they speak to her.

Now, most of the time in scripture, when angels appear to mortals, the very first thing they say is “Fear Not!” Not so here. Mary is not fearful. She is sorrowful. And so, the angels comfort her in her grief. They ask, “Dear woman, why are you crying?” Still overcome with grief, Mary answers, “Because they

have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." Clearly, she is confused by this angelic appearance – she seems to assume they are just ordinary men.

Maybe that is why the angels don't announce the news of the resurrection to Mary, as they do in the other Gospels. They leave the proclamation of the Resurrection to Jesus himself – the only One who can truly comfort her in her grief.

Suddenly a voice speaks from outside the tomb. Mary turns, but through her tears she doesn't recognize his face. He speaks, and asks her the very same question the angels had just asked, "Dear woman, why are you crying?" But then adds, "Who are you looking for?"

"Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him." Apparently, she now suspects the figure standing before her to be the caretaker of the cemetery who had moved the body of Jesus out of the "borrowed tomb" of Joseph of Arimathea to a different, more permanent grave. All Mary wants is to cling to Jesus one last time.

And then, in the climax of the story, Jesus utters the most beautiful word Mary could possibly hear – he said her name, just the way he used to say it... "Mary." And instantly she knew it was him.

When she heard the voice of her beloved Jesus, the fog of her confusion immediately vanished, her sorrow was turned into joy, and she could see clearly his lovely face. Just like the character Job in the Old Testament, whose life had also taken a tragic turn, and had struggled to make sense of loss and confusion, Mary could now also sing, "I know that my Redeemer Liveth!"

This beautiful scene is also an echo of a passage in John's Gospel ten chapters earlier where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd: It's almost as if Jesus is foreshadowing this Easter encounter with Mary when he said, "(I) call my own sheep by name and lead them out... I am the Good Shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me... my sheep listen to my voice... I give them eternal life, and they will never perish..."

Yes, Mary heard the voice of her Good Shepherd calling her name. And so, in that instant, she was sure that Jesus is alive! The One who loved her like no other – still loved her! He called her by name!

You know, when you get right down to it, isn't that what Easter is all about? It's sometimes easy for us to think of Easter and what it means as an abstract thing... something that happened a long time ago, which has no real claim on us today – a doctrine of the church which can be as cold and lifeless as a corpse sealed in a tomb.

But the good news of this Easter Story is that there is NOTHING abstract or distant about the Resurrection of Jesus! It's not some hypothetical theory. It's a personal relationship! The truth John is wanting to convey to us in the way he tells his Easter Story is this: The resurrection of Jesus will always remain abstract and confusing to us until we, like Mary, hear Jesus call OUR names – and we respond with our love.

You know, it may be that some of you listening to this message this morning don't know what I'm talking about. To you, Easter was just another holiday which we can pack away with the Easter bunny decorations and our Easter baskets. You don't understand what all the fuss was about. You don't have a clue about why Christians get so excited about the resurrection of Jesus. To you, Easter is confusing.

If so, maybe you are like Peter. You observe the evidence laid out before you in the Empty Tomb but you just don't get it. You see, but you don't have a response. Maybe today, your faith lacks clarity, so you draw no conclusions. So, like Peter, when Easter is over, you just "go back home" as if nothing has changed. Because, for you, nothing HAS changed.

Or, perhaps you are like John. You see the same things Peter saw – but because of what you have been taught in Sunday School and through countless sermons, you "get" what it's all about. You can intellectually consider the evidence of the Resurrection and can agree that it is convincing. So, you can proclaim that you "believe" that Jesus is alive. You can repeat the words Apostles' Creed, and call yourself a "Christian" and a good "member of the Church." But, as yet, Easter isn't personal for you. Like John, you believe, but you are still confused by all that Christ's resurrection means. So, you leave the Easter Tomb and, like Peter, you simply go back to life as usual.

Or,-- maybe, you can identify with Mary Magdalene. Oh, I hope you are like Mary.

Mary was also confused at the Tomb, but not because she didn't believe. Her judgment was clouded by the depth of her love for Jesus. She couldn't see the evidence of the graveclothes, or understand the words of angels, or even the stranger in the Garden. Her eyes were blinded by tears of Love.

But, like a lamb in the flock of the Good Shepherd, Mary knew her Master's voice. Or, as we sang in our hymn: "And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, The Son of God discloses."

When Mary heard Jesus speak her name, all confusion left her. Her faith was not based on evidence. It was based on Love – Love for Jesus, that was grounded in a relationship of Love. As Jesus had said, "I know my own sheep, and they know me... my sheep listen to my voice... I give them eternal life, and they will never perish..."

Friends, the message of John's Easter story is that you will NEVER understand the Resurrection, and you will never experience the transformative power of Easter UNTIL YOU HAVE A RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE - WITH JESUS! Then, when he speaks YOUR name, you will recognize his voice, and you, too, will rejoice!

What about you? Are YOU confused by the Empty Tomb? Do you look, but not see? Do you hear, but not listen? Is the Easter story only some abstract theory or fable, lost in the dusty annals of history? Or is it REAL – for you? Have you heard Jesus call YOU by name, or are you still lost and confused, grief-stricken and hopeless, blinded to the Reality that is standing right in front of you?

Friend, Jesus is nearer to you than you realize. He's right in front of you! He is speaking your name.

This morning, we are each standing by the Empty Tomb. Listen. Listen. I mean REALLY listen!

What do you hear? Could it be that this morning, Jesus is calling-out your name? And if you hear his voice, I urge you to respond just as Mary did, by giving him all your love and devotion.

If you do, then you also can sing, "He speaks, and the sound of His voice, Is so sweet the birds hush their singing, And the melody that He gave to me, Within my heart is ringing."