

# A Storytelling Commentary on John 20:1-18

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

This is the quintessential resurrection story. The combination of urgency and grief with the intimacy of relationship with the risen Jesus makes for a wonderful story.

The story itself has two parts. The first part is the discovery of the empty tomb, first by Mary Magdalene and then by Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. The second part is Jesus' appearance to Mary and her going to tell the disciples. There are five episodes with two sentences each in the first part of the story. The second part of the story also has five episodes, the climax being Mary's announcement to the disciples "that he had said these things to her!"

---

## The Verbal Threads

- "We don't know where they have laid him" which links the two parts of the story together
- "The linen wrappings lying there"
- "Woman, why are you weeping?"
- "I have not yet ascended to the Father" and "I am ascending to my Father and your Father"

In the first part of the story, an important dynamic to communicate is the sense of terror that Mary feels at the discovery of the empty tomb and her subsequent assumption that someone has stolen Jesus' body.

Another dynamic is the sense of being part of the story through inside views. The first instance of this occurs with the disciples running out to the tomb. An inside view is given, first from the perspective of the "one whom Jesus loved," and then from Peter's perspective. Try to communicate their looking around, seeing the inside of the tomb through their eyes.

The enigmatic conclusion of this inside view occurs in the final narrative comment of this first section: "For as yet they did not understand the scripture...". We are left wondering what this statement means. Perhaps they only believed what Mary Magdalene had said about the tomb being empty, or perhaps they believed that Jesus had been raised. But, if it means that he had been raised, why then does the narrator comment, "They did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead"? It may be that they didn't understand the scripture but that they believed he had been raised from the dead or it may

mean that they weren't sure what had happened. What they believed about what had actually happened is ambiguous, and what actually happened is also ambiguous.

The comment about them going to their homes adds to the puzzlement because if they believed he had been raised from the dead, they would do as Mary did after the appearance and run to tell the others. So, the ending of the first part of the story is ambiguous. It is just fine to leave this ambiguity in the story because that is true to the story itself. You might even scratch your head as a sign of your own puzzlement.

The second part of the story describes the transformation of Mary Magdalene's grief into joy. The whole story is essentially told from her point of view. There is an implicit invitation to the audience identify deeply with Mary Magdalene in this episode through her weeping, and then through what she sees and hears from the angels.

A delightful quality in this story is the storyteller's direct communication with the audience that Jesus is standing there but Mary Magdalene doesn't know it. Part of the story's delight is watching Mary's experience of Jesus revealing himself to her. Communicating this inside information to the audience with a twinkle in your eye is an essential dimension of the telling of this story.

A central element of the story is the voice of Jesus, first of all in his warmth and affection to Mary: "Woman, why are you weeping?" It is important to distinguish between the angels' more objective question "Woman, why are you weeping?" and Jesus' more compassionate, intimate "Woman, why are you weeping?" Also, his saying "Mary" is an invitation to her to recognize him. It too is affectionate and warm in tone.

Jesus' word to Mary not to hold onto him implies that she is holding onto him and that she needs to let him go. Jesus' word about his ascension should have some human energy to it, not like a disembodied theological statement by Jesus.

The final episode is an expression of Mary Magdalene's amazement and joy in going and telling the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" "That he said these things to her!" is my distinctive translation. It is a more literal rendering of the Greek than is present in other translations. Because it is a storytelling ending, many translations miss the mark in communicating her delight. The importance of this is in how you tell it, and in the expression of this indirect discourse about Mary's delight and wonder that Jesus had revealed himself to her and had said these very important things to her, a woman. In the context of the ancient world, this truly was amazing because things like this are always said to men, not to women.