

HAPPY RESURRECTION DAY! This morning at 7:00 AM, the Greater Flint Council of Churches held a Sun Rise Worship Service at a Cemetery to celebrate the fact that Jesus got up from the grave! (I was not there!) In our scripture John brings us to the conclusion of his Gospel with a proclamation of Jesus' victory over death in chapter 20, followed by an epilogue in chapter 21. Each Gospel writer stressed certain aspects of the resurrection events. John began with a testimony of how he came to personal faith in the Resurrection by considering the evidence found in the open tomb.

It is difficult for us today to appreciate why Mary was at the tomb that time of morning. According to the Word in Life Study Bible, nearly every ancient religion gave explicit and sometimes elaborate instructions for preparing and burying the dead. For Hebrews at the time of Jesus, women and men participated in the mourning ritual, but women likely prepared the corpse for interment. First they washed the body, and then scented it with fragrant oil, an act of devotion that could be repeated at the tomb. Because Jesus died on Friday, and Saturday was a high Sabbath day, as well as being the Passover weekend, Sunday was the first day the women could come to the tomb.

So on Friday they had washed and scented Jesus' body. They could not dress him in his own clothes as his clothes had been taken by the Roman soldiers; so they wrapped him in specially prepared sheets. Jesus' body had then been carried upon a bier to the tomb. Relatives, friends, and professional mourners formed a procession, and anyone meeting it was obligated to show honor to the deceased and the relatives by joining. A eulogy was often delivered at the grave site. This probably did not happen for Jesus as he was crucified at a criminal.

The body was placed on a shelf in the tomb, which was then sealed by a heavy, tight-fitting slab. Jews were expected to visit the tomb often, partly as a precaution against burying someone who only seemed dead.

So, it was on the first day of the week, Sunday, Mary of Magdalene and other women came to the tomb. In scripture "Mary of Magdala" or Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb is also found in Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1, 9; and Luke 24:10. Her devotion to Jesus, living and dead, was based on her gratitude for His delivering her from bondage to Satan. She had been an observer at the cross and now was the first person at the grave. We know from Mark's Gospel that the tomb had been closed with a large rock door and had been sealed by the authority of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

The women were amazed to see an open and apparently empty tomb. They ran and told Peter and the beloved disciple that a terrible thing had occurred. The

women are the first to understand that something has happened, and they run to tell the news. We usually assume as we read the story that the women understood what had happened...that Jesus had been raised from the dead. However, according to John, the women assumed that grave robbers had desecrated the tomb.

Peter and John started a footrace to the tomb. John beat Peter to the garden and looked in the tomb. It was not quite empty because John saw the grave clothes. Maybe John's first thought was that the women had made a mistake, so he went to the tomb to see for himself! When John arrived he bent over and looked in but he did not enter the tomb. Some scholars think John was afraid of defilement. Remember that any Jew that touched a dead body was ceremonially unclean and would not go to the temple or worship for a time. However, when Peter . . . arrived he rushed in and saw (this word translated saw means "beheld attentively") the grave clothes and the separate burial cloth. According to John, Paul remained inside puzzled at what he saw. But John says after Paul has gone in John himself went in and saw. This time the word for saw means "perceived"—John begins to understand the significance of the grave clothes and believed. John implies that Peter was wondering, "Why would a grave robber have left the clothes in this order? Why take the body of Jesus?" But John says he perceived that the missing body and the position of the grave clothes were not due to a robbery. He realized that Jesus had risen from the dead and had gone through the grave clothes. The

tomb was open not to let Jesus' body out but to let the disciples and the world see that He rose.

This section of John's Gospel is a powerful eyewitness testimony which strikes scholars as being psychologically and historically true. John admits that even after more than three years of Jesus' teaching the disciples still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

The part of the story that excites me the most about Jesus' first resurrection appearance was that it was to Mary of Magdala, out of whom He had cast seven demons. The disciples returned to their homes while Mary remained outside the tomb crying. Although John claims he understood what had happened he must not have told her that Jesus was risen. Some scholars take up for him by saying he was probably too stunned and puzzled to say anything significant to her or Peter. Mary looked into the tomb and saw two individuals who were angels. We must remember in the Bible when angels appeared to people, the angels looked like men; they did not have halos or wings, as the Renaissance painter showed them. Isaiah saw them as winged beings appeared but the norm for angels was that they were in humanlike forms.

Because of her grief Mary may not have noticed anything unusual. But the angel's question and her answer set the stage for the greatest "recognition scene" in all of history. Jesus' appearance to Mary was so unexpected that she did not realize

that it was Jesus. The fact that Jesus appeared to Mary rather than to a government official like Pilate; or to Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest; or to one of His disciples is important. That a woman would be the first to see Him is an evidence of Jesus' electing love as well as a mark of the narrative's historicity. No Jewish author in the ancient world would have invented a story with a woman as the first witness to this most important event. Some scholars think Jesus may have introduced Himself to Mary first because she had so earnestly sought Him. She was at the cross while He was dying, and she went to His tomb early on Sunday morning.

It is amazing to us that Mary talked with Jesus but still did not realize who He was. Some suggest that Jesus' appearance was changed; others say she had a temporary "blindness" as did the Emmaus Road disciples who "were kept from recognizing Him" until Jesus blessed and broke the bread. Others say that possibly the tears in her eyes kept her from recognizing Him.

Jesus said to her, Mary. As the Good Shepherd, He calls His sheep by name and "they know His voice." Immediately she recognized Him! She responded with the cry Rabboni! (which means my Teacher).

Mary seemed to have embraced Him physically, for the Jesus responded, Do not hold on to Me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to My brothers and tell them. . . . These words spoke of a new relationship, new relatives, and a new responsibility. Mary may have wanted to "hold onto" Jesus. Mary had

lost Jesus once before at His crucifixion; and it was natural to fear the loss of His presence again.

Jesus said, in effect, “This physical contact is not My real presence for the church. A *new relationship* will begin with My Ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church.” Jesus then explained the fact of the *new relatives*. He called His disciples His brothers. Earlier He had said they were friends: “I no longer call you servants . . . instead, I have called you friends.” Believers in Jesus become a part of Jesus’ family with God as their Father. Mary’s *new responsibility* was to testify to His risen presence. She was the recipient of four special graces: to see angels; to see Jesus risen; to be the first to see Him alive; and to be the first proclaimer of the good news, that made her the first evangelist. Mary was the first bringer of the Good News!

We, Christians today are also the recipients of special grace; we too are given this new responsibility to witness to the world. What a privilege to be an evangelist, a bearer of the Good News that God so love the world that God gave God’s unique son, so everyone that believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life! We witness to the fact that Jesus is the Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the Living Word; the Good Shepherd.

Jesus’ words, I am returning to My Father reminds us of His unique son ship. Mary and the other women told the news to the disciples, but according to Luke,

they did not believe her or the other women “because their words seemed to them like nonsense.” Even today, with so many celebrating Easter, the fact that Jesus rose from the grave and lives with God, praying for us and cheering us on to success, there are people that think our witness is nonsense. However, like Mary, we must continue to share the Good News!

Thanks be unto God for raising Jesus and giving us salvation and new life through accepting Him as Lord and Savior of our lives.¹

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:341