

What the Angels Saw

Alleluia, Christ is risen! This Easter morning marks the end of our long Lenten wait. We've been able to walk with Jesus through his crucifixion, death, and burial as the disciples could not. The disciple whom Jesus loves – probably John – briefly comes to the foot of the Cross to accept Jesus's mother as his own, but the other disciples abandon Jesus altogether. It's the women who supported his ministry that bear witness to his suffering and death. They help Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus hastily prepare his body for entombment. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the women go to his tomb to find the stone rolled away and Jesus gone. But John tells us that Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb alone. She's the first to see the heavy stone rolled away. She hurries to fetch Peter and John, who enter the tomb and find only discarded linens. They return to their homes, leaving Mary by herself to weep at the empty tomb.

This story makes me wonder what the male disciples think of Mary at this point. John doesn't refer to her as a disciple, even though she joined Jesus's entourage near the beginning of his ministry and stayed with him to the end. The gnostic gospels, which aren't in our canon but can sometimes be edifying, suggest that Peter may have been resentful of Mary, maybe even a little jealous. If so, what happens next might turn Peter green with envy. Mary looks into the tomb and sees what Peter and John did not – two angels in white, sitting at the head and foot of the slab where Jesus's body had lain. She isn't afraid of these heavenly beings. When they ask why she's crying, she answers calmly, if tearfully: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Then, she turns around and sees Jesus.

Mary doesn't recognize him at first. Bible scholars have various theories as to why, ranging from "Jesus must have looked different after being resurrected" to "maybe Jesus first appeared in the distance," or "perhaps the rising sun was in her eyes." I tend to think Mary's eyes

were so flooded with tears that she couldn't see anyone. (That might also explain her indifference to being addressed by angels. Perhaps she couldn't see them clearly, either.) She doesn't immediately recognize Jesus's voice, so perhaps she was simply too distraught to fully register anything that was happening around her. But whatever the reason, Mary thinks Jesus must be the gardener *until he calls her name*. In that moment, she realizes that her dear teacher has returned from death, and her sorrow evaporates with her tears.

John doesn't tell us at exactly what point the angels depart the scene. Perhaps they disappear when Jesus arrives. I can't help wondering, though, if they linger to watch the joyful reunion between the resurrected Jesus and his faithful student before taking flight. It's significant that angels were present at Jesus's birth and resurrection and comforted him in the wilderness and Gethsemane, but weren't visible to the human eye at his trial and execution. All of Heaven must have been watching with bated breath as Jesus struggled on the Cross. The angels may well have wept in sympathy with the Father, and we know the darker powers were avidly invested in Jesus's betrayal, suffering and death. Ultimately, though, the Crucifixion has humanity's fingerprints all over it, so it only makes sense to imagine the tragic events at Golgotha from a strictly human perspective. If angels are messengers of God's grace, they can't have had a lot to proclaim when Jesus was crucified. However, they might well have been very eager to help spread the good news of his triumphant return to life.

That may explain why the angels come to the empty tomb, but it doesn't explain why Mary Magdalene sees them, but Peter and John do not. Perhaps it's for the same reason that Jesus chooses to appear first to Mary, rather than to John or Peter. 19th century Baptist minister Charles Haddon Spurgeon, known in his day as the "Prince of Preachers," theorized that Jesus came to Mary first because she loved him most. It's not that John and Peter don't love Jesus;

they both come running when Mary tells them that Jesus's tomb has been opened. But neither disciple loved Jesus enough to accompany Mary on her solitary journey to the tomb, and neither stays to comfort her when they find the tomb empty and Jesus's body gone. Peter may still be eaten up with shame; perhaps he's reluctant to face the Lord he denied. John loved and was loved by Jesus, but he hesitates before entering the tomb. He "believes" when he finally goes in and sees the discarded shroud, but we aren't told exactly what his belief might be or why he chooses to leave. Reverend Spurgeon may be right that Mary loved Jesus more than Peter, John, or any of the other disciples did. The Prince of Preachers theorized that Mary loved Jesus the most, and sought him most diligently, because he did the most for her, freeing her from the burden of possession by no fewer than seven demons and making her one of his closest companions. Her extra love and gratitude may motivate Mary to linger at Jesus's tomb after Peter and John give up and go home. The angels may appear only to her, and not to all three, because they stand in awe of the depth and breadth of her love.

When we talk about Mary loving Jesus, we needn't embrace novelist Dan Brown's theory that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were romantically involved. *The DaVinci Code* was an entertaining read and a pretty good movie, but Scripture doesn't support its thesis. Mary calls Jesus "Teacher," not "husband" or "sweetheart," when she finally recognizes him, so that's probably exactly what Jesus was to her. We don't have to imagine them as a couple for Mary to have been devoted to her rabbi and devastated by his death. From our standpoint, in fact, it's probably better if Mary's love for Jesus was platonic, because it makes it simpler for us to model our own love for Jesus on hers.

As Reverend Spurgeon observed, "If you want to see Jesus, and to have sweet revelations of his glory, you must love him. I must add to that remark, that you must weep for him much,

you must seek him diligently, seek him in the darkness and the twilight, seek him when the sun has risen, seek him at the sepulchre before the stone is rolled away; you must seek him when you behold that the stone is gone; you must seek him in the hollow tomb; you must seek him in the garden; you must seek him in life; you must seek him in death; and then, the more diligent you are in seeking, the greater is the probability that Christ will manifest himself to you, and that you shall rejoice in finding him.” Victorian flourishes aside, it’s excellent advice. Jesus never had much use for lukewarm admirers. He was committed enough to redeeming humankind that he willingly gave up his life for us. I suspect he appreciates it when his followers are equally committed to loving and following him in return.

Mary Magdalene didn’t expect to see Jesus when she went to his tomb that first Easter morning. She just loved him too much to stay away. Jesus rewarded her devotion by appearing to her first, a priceless gift which had the added benefit of giving her a very special status. It’s not clear what would have happened to Mary if Jesus hadn’t chosen her to announce his return. Because he did, she will always be honored as one of his most important followers. Peter might not like it, but no one could deny her significance to Jesus and, by extension, to us.

When the angels watched Jesus and Mary Magdalene from the empty tomb that morning, they saw the joyful reunion of two extravagant loves. Jesus proved that God’s love is stronger even than death; Mary Magdalene proved that human love can reciprocate everything that God’s love offers. Jesus loves each of us with that same extravagance and invites us to love him back just as extravagantly. Mary Magdalene shows us how. Loving Jesus as she did requires commitment, diligence and practice but, by God’s grace, we can get there. And, when we do, the angels might just drop in to watch us and rejoice. Happy Easter, friends. Amen.