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Mary Magdalene Meets the Risen Jesus

John 20:1–18 · Harvest · Adults

Grief has a way of narrowing our vision. On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene can see only one thing: Jesus' body is gone, and she wants it back. She tells Peter and the other disciple, and they run, look and go home. She can't go home. She stays at the tomb, weeping (Jn 20:1–11).

Anyone who has lost someone knows this place: the visit to the grave, the instinct to hold on to whatever is left. Mary had followed Jesus since he freed her from seven demons (Lk 8:2). She had helped fund his ministry from her own means. She stood by the cross when almost everyone else had fled (Jn 19:25). Now she wants, at least, to care for his body.

The angels ask why she is weeping, and she gives the same answer again. Then the risen Jesus himself stands behind her and asks the same question, with one more: whom are you looking for? She doesn't recognize him. Through tears she takes him for the gardener and asks where he has put the body. Even the risen Lord can be hard to see when we are certain we know what we are looking for.

Then he says her name.

That is the whole turning point of the story. Not a proof, not an argument, but a voice that knows her. Jesus once said the good shepherd calls his own sheep by name (Jn 10:3). Many adults come to faith, or come back to it, the same way: not by winning an argument, but by a moment when they knew they had been personally known.

Then comes the harder part. Jesus tells her not to hold on to him. He isn't rejecting her. He is telling her that the relationship can't go back to the way it was in Galilee. He is going to the Father, and she has a mission. The Catechism says that the women were the first messengers of the Resurrection, even to the apostles (CCC 641).

Legend has blurred her: she was not the sinful woman of Luke 7, an idea that grew from a homily Pope St. Gregory the Great preached around 591. In 2016 the Church raised her memorial to a feast and honors her as 'apostle to the apostles'. What Scripture gives us is better: a faithful disciple, freed by Jesus, who stayed when others left and became the first witness of Easter.

For many of us, the call is the same. We would like to hold on to the faith of an earlier time: the parish we grew up in, the way prayer used to feel, the people who have died. Jesus meets us in our grief, says our name, and then sends us forward.

This week, if you are grieving, bring that grief to him honestly, as Mary did. And then tell someone, simply, what you have seen of the Lord.

Church teaching note

Church teaching: the women as the first messengers of the Resurrection (CCC 641); the risen body (CCC 645); the Resurrection as real and historical (CCC 643). 'Apostola apostolorum' is a traditional title. Her feast on 22 July (raised from a memorial by the Congregation for Divine Worship's 2016 decree at the request of Pope Francis) is liturgical fact. Gregory the Great's Homily 33 on the Gospels (usually dated 591) is history. Lk 8:2, Jn 19:25 and Jn 10:3 are cross-references outside the retold passage.

Talk about it

1. What are you holding on to that Jesus may be inviting you to release?
2. When have you known yourself personally known by God?
3. Why do you think the legend about Mary Magdalene took hold, and why does the Gospel picture matter?
4. Catholic connection: read CCC 641 on the women as first messengers of the Resurrection.

Key verse: Jn 20:15–16. Look it up in your Bible.