

Exegetical Notes, John 20:1-18
“Early on the First Day”

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John 20:1-18

Verses 1-2

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

- The first day of the week on the Hebrew calendar was Sunday.
- “Early,” “before dawn”...these events happened around dawn as the sun was rising.
- Mary Magdalene who was a follower of Jesus came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. Although only Mary is mentioned here, she came with a group of women to anoint Jesus’ body for burial. See Matthew 28:1-8, Mark 16:1-8, and Luke 24:1-10. This is confirmed by the use of the plural pronoun “we.” **“WE** don’t know where they have put him.”
- Mary saw that the stone which sealed Jesus’ tomb had been rolled back from the entrance to the tomb. The tomb was not sealed but standing wide open.
- Mary saw that Jesus’ body was missing. So she ran to find Peter, who was still the leader of the twelve, and “the one Jesus loved.” Scholars believe that “the one Jesus loved” was John. She told them that Jesus’ body had been removed from the tomb and that she and those with her at the tomb had no idea where “they” had put Jesus’ body. She clearly had no idea that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Verses 3-8a

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked

in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there,⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside.

- When Peter and John heard Mary's report, they raced to Jesus' tomb to confirm the fact that Jesus' body was missing. John reached the tomb first but did not go inside. From outside the tomb, John could see the grave clothes still in the tomb.
- When Peter arrived, he went into the tomb immediately. The grave clothes were still in the tomb lying just as if the body of Jesus was still in them, but the body was gone. The face covering, the burial cloth, had been removed from the strips of linen and was rolled up or folded and carefully placed.
- The description of the grave clothes is extremely important. If Jesus' body had been removed from the grave by human hand, most likely, they would not have removed the grave clothes from the body. Had they done so they would have been taking a naked corpse from the tomb. It would have been utterly impossible for any human being to remove the strips of linen wrapped around the body and then lay them out so that it looked as if the body had been sucked out of them. The way the graves clothes were left testifies to the resurrection.

Verses 8b-9

He saw and believed.⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

- What Peter and John believed was the report which Mary had brought to them that Jesus' body had been taken from the tomb. They still did not understand that Jesus had risen from the dead. Like Mary, this was incredulous! Why would someone, they did not know who, remove Jesus' body from the tomb? They did not yet know what had happened!

Verse 10

Then the disciples went back to their homes,

- The disciples did not understand that Jesus would rise from the dead, so the news that his body was missing left them confused.
- Because there were no answers to be found at the tomb they simply returned to the places where they were staying.

Verses 11-12

but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

- When the others had gone, Mary Magdalene remained at the tomb. She was crying (the Greek word means wailing, crying uncontrollably from deep grief) because she did not know that Jesus was alive but assumed his body had been taken out of the tomb by someone. She was distraught.
- She bent down and looked into the tomb of Jesus. Inside, she saw two angels guarding the place where Jesus' body had been

Verse 13

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

- At their request, Mary explains to the angels the reason for her sorrow. Someone has taken Jesus' body somewhere and she does not know where they have put it.

Verse 14

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

- Mary stood up and turned around. Jesus was standing near her but, as she thought him to be dead, she did not recognize him.

Verse 15

"Woman," he said. "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

- Like the angels, Jesus asked Mary why she was crying. He also asked her whom she sought.
- Assuming that Jesus was the gardener and that he had removed Jesus' body from the tomb, Mary asked him to tell her where he had put the body. She promised to take it away.

Verse 16

Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

- At the sound of his voice speaking her name, Mary recognized Jesus. She greeted him as her teacher with deep surprise and respect.

Verse 17

Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

- Jesus told Mary not to cling to him because “he had not yet returned to the Father.” The phrase may mean that Mary should not touch him before his ascension to God. However, in verse 27, Jesus encourages Thomas to touch him and this would still have been before the ascension. More likely, Jesus is dealing with Mary’s emotional desire to hold him on earth rather than release him to God’s greater plan. Her lingering in the garden after the others had gone would indicate that she was having a great deal of trouble letting go of the earthly Jesus. For her own sake, she needed to let go so that the plan of God could be realized in her.
- Jesus gave her an assignment. She was to carry his message to his disciples. She was to be included in his ministry even after his ascension.

Verse 18

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

- Mary did as she was instructed.

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