

John 20: 14-18

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RS 213: Women in the Bible

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14 When she had said this, she turned around and
saw Jesus standing there, but she did
not know that it was Jesus

15 Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?
Whom are you looking for?’ Supposing him to be the
gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him
away, tell me where you have laid him,
and I will take him away.’

16 Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’

17 Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I
have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers
and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father,
to my God and your God.”’

18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples,
‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that
he had said these things to her.’

John 20:14-18

Of the four core books which make up the narrative of Jesus' life and ministry, the Gospel of John acts as an outlier due to a myriad of reasons. While the last to be written, John distinctively lacks the same sources which make Matthew, Mark, and Luke synoptic. As a result, there are notable differences in how those authors present their stories. Where the synoptics focus on Jesus' humanity over his Godhood, John emphasizes Christ's Godhood in spite of his humanity. The divergence can be seen clearly through Jesus' miracle usage which while abundant in the synoptic trio are almost entirely absent from the last book. When a miracle does occur, it only functions as additional proof to Christ's divine origin.¹ In the same way John replaces the familiar parables with intense monologues of religious thought.² This often causes Jesus' listeners to misunderstand his words. John also includes verses of resistance towards the Grecco-Roman patriarchy of the time through the insistence of equal gender roles.³ These changes purposefully align with the beliefs of the gospel's main audience, the Johannine community, as a medium to preserve and strengthen the people's faith, resolve, and traditions in the face of persecution.⁴ The chosen pericope of John 20:14-18 not only exemplifies these points through Mary Magdalene's interaction with the Risen Christ, but also highlights the promotion of women to equal status with men in the mind of Christ.

Chapter 20 begins with the discovery of the empty tomb by multiple female followers of Jesus. Mary Magdalene goes to the disciples and relays the message, which prompts Peter and

¹ Brown, Raymond, An Introduction to the Gospel of John, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), p. 80.

² Ibid.

³ Martin, Francis and William M. Wright IV, The Gospel of John, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2015), p. 20; Durken, Collegeville, p. 199; Poole, Proclaim, pp. 45-6.

⁴ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 20; Brown, Introduction, p. 151.

the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved to examine the claim. After both males also see the tomb empty, they leave Mary to hide again out of fear of the authorities. Out of despair, Mary begins to weep, and upon the appearance of two angels, she relays her belief that a stranger stole the body of Christ. In the pericope below I examine the next scene.

“When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.” In this verse, Jesus demonstrates that he has the ability to withhold recognition of himself from an individual.⁵ This power can also be seen in Resurrection appearances like John 21:7, Luke 24:16, and Luke 23.⁶ The comparison of Peter’s reaction to the empty tomb a few verses back to Mary’s current inability to recognize Jesus brings into play the relationship between faith and perception.⁷ Where Peter is able to put his faith in the sight of a corpse-less tomb, David Peterson writes that Mary’s grief does not allow her to “comprehend Jesus being alive” which forces her to assume that the “only option is he is somewhere else.”⁸ I think theologian Francis Martin’s suggestion that Jesus can withhold recognition from his followers makes the most sense as to why Mary cannot identify him, especially in light of the other instances where the same exact situation occurs.

⁵ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 336.

⁶ Poole, Olivia, Women Who Proclaim in the Gospel of John: John 4 and John 20 as Paradigms of Women’s Proclamation and Leadership for the Contemporary Church, (Proquest Publishing, 2019), p. 37.

⁷ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 336.

⁸ Peterson, David L. and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, New Interpreter’s Bible One-Volume Commentary, (Abingdon, VA: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 528; Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 336.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’” The use of the word ‘woman’ by Jesus in the verse does not signify contempt or malice according to theologian Francis Martin. Instead, he explains Jesus’ usage of the word indicates the redefinition of a relationship with the woman he addresses.⁹ In the first question, Jesus simply repeats what the angels say to Mary, but the concept of relationship redefinition returns in his second question.¹⁰ Martin states that Jesus repeats the same question he asks the disciples when they first meet, an action that redefines Mary’s existence to a higher status, equalizes her to the male disciples, and establishes her title of discipleship.¹¹ However, in her own query of Jesus’ identity and continuation in the search for a stolen corpse Mary reveals she now does not recognize neither the body nor the voice of Jesus. While I accept Martin’s assessment, I still find the use of ‘women’ uncomfortable. On the other hand, I adore the thought that Jesus purposefully restates the words he said to the disciples all those years before in order to signify equality. While he could only do so much within human form to advance women in the world, Jesus makes equality one of the first actions he performs with his divine glory.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’”

Theologians John Barton, John Muddiman, Francis Martin, and Daniel Durken all agree that Mary’s recognition of Jesus upon his call of her name is a parallel of Christ’s parable of the

⁹ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 336

¹⁰ Poole, Proclaim, p. 47.

¹¹ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 336.

Good Shepard in John 10:3-5.¹² Gail O'Day states that the scene symbolically harkens back to the resurrection of Lazarus. Both individuals receive the call of their name by Christ and enter into new life through physical or metaphorical means.¹³ Mary's response of 'Rabbouni' brings up the relationship redefinition concept of earlier, except this time in reverse. Mary's reply translates to mean teacher, master, or Lord. Francis Moloney and Olivia Poole explain that the verse acts as a faith confession with the call and response. Francis Martin points out how Mary misunderstands Jesus' reason for his return and that the exchange betrays her desire to return to the earthly connection between her and Jesus.¹⁴ If I follow the logic from Martin a few verses back, Mary's reaction to her name and the connection with the Good Shepard parable makes sense. If Jesus can shroud recognition of himself, it stands to reason that he can trigger the recognition however he wants. Even so, I believe that the strongest interpretation of this verse lies with Mary's comprehension of Jesus' post-resurrection direction.

"Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father to my God and your God."'" There are multiple interpretations exist for the first line of the above verse, but for the sake of time here are some of the most prevalent ideas. In regard to Jesus' admonishment to touch, Daniel Durken believes that Jesus' response was literal due to his still

¹² Barton, John and John Muddiman. "Commentary on John," Oxford Bible Commentary, Oxford Biblical Studies, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/commref/OBC/Jn/13>; Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 337; Durken, Collegeville, p. 231.

¹³ O'Day, Gail. "Gospel of John," Women's Bible Commentary, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 528.

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Poole, Proclaim, p. 48; O'Brien, Kelli S. "Written That You May Believe: John 20 and Narrative Rhetoric" The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2005): 293.

incomplete mission.¹⁵ In addition, Peterson mentions that the issue may not be touch but that Mary holds onto Jesus' feet to worship, which causes Jesus to explain his new position.¹⁶ Both Chrysostom and Theodoret think that Jesus felt protective over his resurrected body, while others consider the possibility that the wounds hurt him.¹⁷ John Barton proposes a metaphoric interpretation in regards to Mary's declaration of Jesus' old title, 'Rabbouni'. Explicitly, the quote "do not hold onto me" means that Mary must redefine how she sees him as Jesus will soon gain a new role when he sits at God's right hand.¹⁸ Jesus attempts to impart that, as Poole states, the "days of being associated with the historical Jesus are over."¹⁹ The interpretation that I agree with, however is Susan Schneiders. She believes that Jesus, with the knowledge of his ascension, seeks to redirect Mary's affection, reliance, and energy towards him into that of the early church.²⁰ I find that Schnieders' thought process captures the care Jesus has for the disciples. Furthermore, the concept even connects to the scene where Christ gives his mother to the Beloved Disciple as a substitute son while her true son was on the cross. The second part of the quote sees Jesus give Mary a mission of great theological importance, to proclaim that his death allows humanity to share in the relationship he has with God.²¹ Poole sees the quote 'go tell my

¹⁵ Durken, Daniel, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 231.

¹⁶ Peterson and Gaventa, Interpreter's, p. 1179.

¹⁷ Levine, Amy-Jill, The Feminist Companion to John: Volume II, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2003), p. 43.

¹⁸ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, pp. 337-8.

¹⁹ Poole, Proclaim, pp. 48-9.

²⁰ Levine, John, p. 150.

²¹ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, pp. 337-8; Durken, Collegeville, p. 231.

brothers' as "the crux of Mary's apostolic ministry" with the explicit order of a female to preach to males.²² However, O'Day and Hylan simply dismiss 'brothers' as a misinterpretation that actually encompasses the whole faith community.²³ I personally like the concept that Jesus gives women the authority to preach to men, especially since there has been a considerable amount of discourse in conservative communities about this very subject. Where many modern theologians point to Timothy as evidence of God's desire for a woman's silence in church, Jesus specifically instructs a woman to preach to men. This fully equalizes the genders within the Christian community and rights an injustice in God's eyes. The interpretation from O'Day and Hylan ruins the thought that women must rule under the dominion of a man, which makes me not want to agree with logically but not emotionally.

"Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her." Through her proclamation in this verse, John creates multiple paths of thought. First, that Mary's obedience completes the maturation of her faith as well as establishes her responsibility as the apostle of apostles.²⁴ Poole considers Mary to be a role model for all women to follow.²⁵ Barton expands on the thought and adds that Jesus wants all believers, regardless of gender, to follow the same transformation and mission of Mary.²⁶ Some theologians use this pericope as a vessel in which to speak negatively of Mary for her lack of faith. However, Schneiders asserts that the events which concern Mary's faith simply

²² Poole, Proclaim, pp. 48-9.

²³ Ibid, p. 57.

²⁴ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 338.

²⁵ Poole, Proclaim, p. 56.

²⁶ Martin and Wright, The Gospel of John, p. 338.

strengthens the position of her as an acceptable role model. Despite her lack of faith in her confrontation with an empty tomb, Mary persists. She continues to question anyone she meets to find Christ's body and put it to rest. Schneiders explains that "her misunderstanding...coupled with persistence" are actually the "key to faith".²⁷ Jesus demonstrates that he applauds such a search and rewards her for determination.²⁸ I agree with Schneiders that Mary deserves the title of role model, her devotion to Christ becomes evident in her persistence to find Christ's body. While she did have a lapse in faith, I believe her natural conclusion of an empty tomb to a stolen body to be logical and not hard to understand.

In summation, this pericope acknowledges several important theological points in spite of John's direct intent to relay the resurrection of Jesus. It details a transformation of Jesus' earthly body and earthly relationships to that of a spiritual nature. It represents the joy of reunification, but also the terror which accompanies a shift in life. Humanity gains a Heavenly Father in God as well as a sibling in Jesus—we also receive the gift of good news for all believers to share. That of a God that not only vanquishes death, but destroys any injustices among his children regarding him.

²⁷ O'Brien, "Written," p. 294.

²⁸ Ibid.

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