

JOHN 20

John 20:1–9. The Empty Tomb

John does not state why Mary Magdalene approached Jesus’s tomb early on Sunday morning, though Mark and Luke explain that several women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’s body, and Matthew states that they went to look at the tomb.¹ Interestingly, neither Mary nor the “other disciple” (probably John) entered the tomb when they saw the stone removed. Perhaps they recognized that the tomb was a sacred space and did not want to risk intruding, feared the ritual defilement of contact with a corpse, or waited in deference to Peter, the senior Apostle.

The position of the burial clothing in verse 7 is important. If a grave robber had stolen Jesus’s body, all the clothing, we imagine, would be stripped and pushed to the side together; however, this arrangement suggests that Jesus removed the “napkin” on His own and set it to the side before removing the rest of the burial clothing. This would have been the natural position of the items if they had been removed by the wearer. Perhaps this sight is what sparked the other disciple’s belief.

John 20:10–18. Mary Meets the Resurrected Jesus

Despite their initial belief, Peter and John returned home—perhaps unsure of what to do next since they still did not fully understand what it meant for Jesus to rise from the dead (verse 9). We will later find them indoors with the doors locked, hiding from the Jewish leaders. We should understand this turn of events to mean that the beginnings of faith do not preclude the possibility of later doubts. Discipleship is a lifelong journey, and though we too may believe, we may, from time to time, find ourselves retreating into the comfortable security of old habits and ways. It is only as we come to understand the power of Jesus Christ that we can place our full trust in Him.

After the Apostles' departure, Mary examined the tomb for the first time. The angels' position in the tomb recalls the placement of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant, between which Jehovah would minister to the Israelites (Exodus 25:17–22). This demonstrates that the tomb had become a sacred space, like the temple's Holy of Holies, and that Jesus had returned to again minister unto Israel.

Much ink has been spilled trying to explain why Mary did not recognize Jesus at first and what prompted her sudden recognition in verse 16. We can compare Luke 24:13–35, in which two disciples conversed with the risen Jesus for hours but did not recognize Him until the very end of His visit with them. Perhaps this ability to withhold recognition is a quality of resurrected beings; however, we should understand that the emphasis is on the fact that Mary *did* eventually recognize Jesus. St. Augustine, noting the repetition in the fact that Mary is twice said to have “turned herself” (verses 14 and 16; Greek *trepḥō*), supposes that in the second instance Mary had “turned in heart” and was then spiritually prepared to recognize the risen Jesus.²

The Joseph Smith Translation of verse 17 (“hold me not”) comes closer to the Greek than the King James Translation (“touch me not”) does—the present imperative *mē mou haptou* indicates a sustained action. (Touching Jesus was not a problem—He will soon invite Thomas to inspect His wounds.) Presumably, in her joy at seeing the Risen Lord, Mary was detaining Him from His mission, perhaps in a misguided desire not to lose Him again. With that, Mary was sent to proclaim the Resurrection to the Twelve, and for this reason, in some early Christian circles she was known by the Latin title *apostola apostolorum*—the apostle to the Apostles.

John 20:19–23. Jesus Appears to the Apostles

Even though Peter and John had seen the empty tomb and Mary Magdalene had reported that “she had seen the Lord” (John 20:18), the disciples were still afraid. Certainly, they were in a precarious position with the loss of their leader and risked being counted with a recently executed outlaw. But what is astounding is that none of these outside circumstances would change, yet this group of timid disciples would become the greatest missionary force that the world had ever seen. What *would* change was their confidence in their risen Lord and their reception of the Holy Ghost.

Jesus showed Himself to His disciples in a manner that would satisfy all doubt. Though He appeared in the middle of a locked room, He allowed His disciples to examine the marks of crucifixion, proving the reality of His embodied resurrection (compare with Luke 24:36–43). Perhaps even more importantly, Jesus recommissioned the Apostles. Now they were to be not the heralds of a coming redemption but the proclaimers of a redemption already wrought. For this new assignment, they needed an endowment of spiritual power, and the promise of the Holy Ghost, which had surely been given at their ordination, was finally realized. This power would carry them throughout the difficult days ahead.

John 20:24–31. Thomas Sees Jesus

It is unfortunate that we remember Thomas only for his momentary period of doubt. Earlier in John's Gospel, Thomas had expressed a willingness to follow Jesus to the end, even if that meant certain death (John 11:16), and the traditions surrounding his later activities confirm that he stood firm in this faithful resolve. Moreover, we should not fault Thomas for expecting the apostolic witness that the others had received before carrying the message of the Resurrection abroad.

Thomas's story is important for understanding the dynamic of the very early Christian community. At the beginning, the early Church was comprised of individuals who had known and interacted with Jesus, including and especially those who had the privilege of seeing the resurrected Lord. But as time passed and the Apostles spread the Gospel abroad, a larger and larger contingent of the fledgling Christian movement had never met Jesus during His life. Eventually, this group became the majority, and it became increasingly important that these new disciples understood that their experience with Jesus was also authentic. Thus, Jesus's words in verse 29 are not directed toward Thomas so much as to those of us whose faith in Jesus Christ did not begin by seeing Him.

Verse 31 contains the Gospel's purpose statement—it explains why John the Evangelist chose to write this story about Jesus. Though scholars have noted that the four Gospels resemble Greco-Roman biographies of famous figures, this is a significant difference between the Gospels and secular literature. John (and Matthew, Mark, and Luke, for that matter) did not write his story to merely provide factual information about Jesus, though this is important. He wrote his account of Jesus's life to help his reader come to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Many have wondered why this statement comes at 20:31 rather than at the end of the Gospel. It's possible that chapter 21 was added later; however, it's also likely that the Evangelist chose to add his thesis here because it was a natural transition from the encounter between Jesus and Thomas and the themes of seeing and believing.

Notes

1 See Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1; Matthew 28:1.

2 St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 121.2, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 28 vols. in 2 series (1886–1889; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 1/7:7:50.

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