

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – April 1, 2018

[John 20:1-18](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on John 20:1-18:

1. What is the real nature of Jesus’ resurrection? Why can Mary not recognize Jesus by sight (v. 14-15) Why can she not “hold on” to him? (v 17) And what does the ascension status of Jesus have anything to do with Mary embracing him? What conclusions are we to draw from such details about Jesus’ post-resurrection body?
2. Jesus’ commission to Mary to tell the “brothers” what she has seen and heard (v. 17) has earned her the title of “apostle to the apostles.” What is the significance of her being the bearer of the good news of Jesus’ resurrection?
3. Can we even imagine such as Easter scene today? If so, what would it look like?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on John 20:1-18

(From *Homiletics*; "The April Fool" – April 1, 2018)

The resurrection story in John is arresting due to its deviation from the Synoptics. Verse 1 states that "*while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb ..." (emphasis added). In contrast, Mark 16:1-2 mentions "Mary the mother of James, and Salome ..." in addition to Mary Magdalene and states that "*when the sun had risen*, they went to the tomb" (emphasis added; cf. Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1). Besides the preceding variations, John states that Mary "saw two angels in white" (John 20:12; cf. Luke 24:4) while Mark has "as they entered the tomb, they saw a young man" (Mark 16:5; cf. Matthew 28:2-5).

The paragraph above demonstrates that the gospels include disparate statements about the Resurrection. Although attempts to reconcile these incongruities may have some merit, these variations indicate that John highlights -- at least to some degree -- certain details that diverge from the other gospels. In particular, John employs specific literary devices in his telling of the Resurrection in order to connect this climactic event with theological themes found throughout his gospel.

For example, John reports that "Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb" (v. 1). Though subtle, the precision of this language is unmistakable, for the words "came" and "saw" echo Jesus' invitation to his first two disciples to "come and see" (1:39; cf. 1:46).

After coming upon this startling discovery at the tomb, Mary "ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" (v. 2a). Again, another literary feature of John presents itself. This description -- viz., "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" -- is both frequent and unique to this gospel (cf. 13:23; 19:26-27; 21:7, 20-23). (Traditionally, this unnamed disciple has been identified as John, though some scholars propose Lazarus as a better option. See Ben Witherington III, "The Last Man Standing" *BAR* [March/April 2006], 24.)

Once the disciples hear Mary say, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him," they run to the tomb (vv. 2b-4). When "the other disciple" reached the tomb, "he bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in" (v. 5). "Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb" (v. 6). The two disciples -- like Mary before them -- accept Jesus' invitation to "come and see."

Though the two disciples came and saw the same tomb and the same linen cloths, Peter and "the other disciple" respond differently. When "the other disciple ... went in ... he saw and believed" (v. 8). This disciple -- "the one whom Jesus loved" -- holds a special place in the theology of John. He stands in sharp contrast to Thomas, who does not believe until he can see and touch Jesus' hands and side (cf. v. 25). Consequently, this unnamed disciple represents the blessed disciple who did not see Jesus, yet still believed (cf. vv. 29-31).

Peter, however, stands in contrast to both "the other disciple" who saw an empty tomb and believed, and Thomas who could not believe until he saw Jesus' resurrected body. Peter neither believes nor doubts. He represents confused disciples who "did not understand the scripture, that he [Jesus] must rise from the dead" (v. 9). Peter's confusion does not subside until Jesus reclaims him in John 21.

Although "the disciples returned to their homes" (v. 10), Mary remained. "As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet" (vv. 11b-12). Mary is again responding to Jesus' invitation to "come and see." But this time, she sees much more, for she is blessed to see angels. She witnesses one of the "greater things" that Jesus promised to Nathanael (cf. 1:50-51). Despite this epiphany, when the angels asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" she said, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (v. 13). Her reply reveals that she remains -- like Peter -- one who "did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

Having said this, "she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus" (v. 14). Some scholars have proposed that her inability to recognize Jesus was due to her grief,

tear-impaired vision and/or the nature of the morning's light. The narrative itself suggests none of these possibilities. Rather than offering a physical cause for her inability to recognize Jesus, her reaction is consistent with John's theology that no one -- including Mary -- can come to Jesus "unless drawn by the Father" (cf. 6:44, 65). Consequently, when Jesus asked her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" she saw a gardener. At that moment, he was anyone except the Lord; so Mary assumed that someone -- perhaps, this gardener -- had taken Jesus' body away (v. 15).

Her inability to believe that "he must rise from the dead" was about to vanish like morning fog. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher)" (v. 16). When Jesus called her by name, John adroitly linked the Resurrection with "the good shepherd" who calls "his own sheep by name" (cf. 10:1-18, esp. vv. 3-5). Upon hearing her name, Mary was instantly transformed from a brokenhearted disciple of Jesus into a believer.

Undoubtedly Mary was thrilled to see Jesus again; that's why she embraced him. But the puzzling exchange between Jesus and Mary suggests that her understanding of the Resurrection remained imprecise. Indeed, Jesus' reprimand hints -- though only mildly -- that Mary was in some way offended by his resurrection (cf. John 6:61-62). Therefore, he had no other recourse but to tell 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'" (v. 17). Though enigmatic, Jesus' words made it possible for Mary to understand and teach the other disciples that "he must rise from the dead" so that the advantage Jesus had spoken of previously would not be lost (cf. 16:7ff).

Having been called by "the good shepherd," Mary was thus empowered to go and announce to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18). And not only had she seen the Lord and heard his voice, she also knew that he was both the Lord and her Lord.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).