

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: St John Chapter 20: Some Notes

It is quite tempting to leave what was clearly originally the last chapter of John's Gospel to speak for itself. It speaks powerfully without any commentary. What follows is literally "thoughts", rather than interpretation.

It is between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. on Sunday morning – the very first opportunity for an observant Jew to go grave visiting; and no time of day for a woman on her own to be visiting a graveyard. It has been well said that nobody loved Jesus as this Mary loved Him. (Other versions of Easter morning are slightly different, but let's just stick with John for the moment.) She gets a terrible shock, as presumably she had been expecting just to sit and cry outside a tomb with the body of Jesus inside. (If she had "thought" at all!) Jealous Jews wanting the body dumped somewhere, not honoured? Grave robbers? Mary didn't look, and naturally enough. If you find a door has been removed, you assume the contents have been removed.

Note that the Peter who has most (in one stark way) betrayed Jesus is still the leader. He is, as so often, with the male disciple who had least betrayed Jesus. Peter blunders in, in his inimitable way. John thinks things through, and is the first to begin to grasp the reality of the Resurrection. Note that the grave clothes were where you might expect if they had been emptied of the body. (No word of all that precious embalming material.) If you have that sort of mind, you will be wondering where the Risen Christ got his clothes from. (In Stanley Spencer's "Resurrection" painting, He is naked.)

How come Mary didn't recognise Jesus? She is blinded by tears, and by expectations. She wants to look back at the empty tomb, not at the improbably living Gardener Jesus. (Adam was a gardener.) Mary of Nazareth first to know the Incarnate Christ. Mary of Magdala first to know the Risen Christ. Eve hiding from God in the Garden. Mary open to God in the Garden. Savour that one life-changing word "Mary", which pulled the veil aside and changed tears to rejoicing. The greatest encounter in all history: trumping the Burning Bush. Rabbi and Rabboni are the same.

Then that mysteries "Noli me tangere!" Contrast the meeting with Thomas. Contrast the account of the disciples clutching His feet. Contrast the fish breakfast. There isn't a dead cert answer. One theory is that Jesus didn't actually say "Don't touch me", but "Don't be afraid!" (The words are very much the same.) Perhaps the better explanation lies in "The Message" translation "Don't cling to me!" Thomas just wanted to know that Jesus was real. Mary, understandably enough, wanted to hug Him and continue with the old relationship. That wasn't possible. So Mary becomes the first Apostle: Being a Christian often seems to about being gathered in. It isn't. It is about being sent out – a great deal less comfortable!

Then the male disciples [already believing Mary, or not?] get to meet Jesus for themselves; and Jesus, in this John account, anticipates Pentecost. He commissions this diminished

bunch of men, more worried about the whereabouts of their Jewish (and Roman) enemies, than about the whereabouts of Jesus. They have to continue the Jesus mission.. and, pause for breath there: Jesus was a much more charismatic figure than all of them put together, and where had His mission ended?

Don't judge Thomas harshly. He was the one who had expected to, and been ready to, die with Jesus when they set off for Jerusalem. He may well have been missing on this occasion because he wanted to grieve in private. A number of the commentators make the point that church-goers find it quite hard to join the congregation immediately after bereavement or other personal tragedy (or what experiencing the dark night of the soul) .. just when they most need Christian fellowship. But how good are we at being alongside them in the right way at that time?? (Jesus knew where Thomas was emotionally/ spiritually.)

It seems that, the following Sunday, Thomas doesn't actually do the physical test; and he rounds off the Gospel by a declaration of faith matching the opening chapter of John's Gospel.

The rounding off bit: Being the Church, not just going to church.