

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Acts 10:34, 37-43; Psalm 118 (117); Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-9

On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb

John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 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. 13 They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 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!” (which means Teacher). 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.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Easter appearance narratives vary greatly and are richly theological, usually dealing with issues current at the time of writing. There is a common core, but the writers dispense with “historical” accuracy to privilege theological truth.

Today’s excerpt stops at v. 9. It is virtually impossible to understand the passage without reading on until v. 18 (included here). I recommend reading the full text, not otherwise heard this year.

KIND OF WRITING

Technically, this is a theophany, more precisely a “Christophany” with the usual features of question, encounter, fear and relief.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a

Thought for the day

Traditionally, we have found it easy to think of the cross as the measure of God’s love for us. Because of the focus on the cross, we find it more difficult to think of the resurrection as also the love of God, perhaps “all the more so”! The originality of the Fourth Gospel says it all: the disciple Jesus *loved*, the head cloth recalling Lazarus (*see how much he loved him*) and, not least, the great figure of Mary Magdalene (*Mary!*). In summary, Jesus died *and rose again* for love of us.

Prayer

Loving God, you love us more than we can imagine or take in. Help us to allow ourselves to be so loved by you, that your love may penetrate our hearts, our lives and our loves. We ask this through Jesus, who died and rose for love of us and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Genesis 1:1-4)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

It is odd that Mary seems to be absent during vv. 3-10 and that the disciples, whom she alerted, ignore her apparently. It is odd that we are not told she came back with them although we discover she did. It is odd that the beloved disciple and Peter simply “went back to their homes”—to do what exactly? These unusual features become tolerable once we realise we are dealing a core tradition symbolically expanded, by the genius who wrote the Fourth Gospel, for didactic and theological purposes.

The Mary Magdalene story would be perfectly coherent on its own, taking vv. 1, 11-18. It would then resemble the Synoptic stories, with a Johannine flavour. So, why has this writer inserted a narrative of Peter’s journey to the tomb, with the addition of the Beloved Disciple? In part, I think to contrast the limits of the institutional (*Petrine*; see Luke 24:12, 34,) with the dynamism of the

charismatic (*Johannine*). In part, to place at the centre of this Easter proclamation an important recollection of the Lazarus story – (a) to contrast the outcomes and (b) to affirm love as the key to God’s gift. “Bending down” and the head cloth link the scenes.

A component of the Gospel writer’s objective here is to recount how we come to resurrection faith. This Gospel brings something very special for our consideration. Earlier, in Jn 11, we read that the gift of resurrected life flows from the love of God or the Son of God’s distress at the human condition (“Jesus wept”). Correspondingly, the double story here tells us that the move to Easter faith is also a movement of love. The eyes of faith are opened by the heart. Such an analysis explains both the structure of the passage and the oddity of it.

A vv. 1-3: Mary on a quest like the early stories in this Gospel

B vv. 4-10: Partial resurrection faith: love + scripture

A1 vv.11-18: One-to-one encounter completes the quest.

ST PAUL

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 First day (cf. 2 Cor 5:17) echoing creation. Darkness is symbolic. Notice the lack of motive and that Mary alone (but “we” later) because this Gospel prefers one-to-one encounters; stone.

Verse 2 Contrary to Mark’s account of the silence of the women. The Beloved Disciples only in this Gospel. It may be the original inspiration of the tradition; in the text Beloved Disciple is a model disciple. Notice the logical hypothesis: tombs can be empty for different reasons.

Verses 3-4 First – to suggest eagerness and also to make plain the deference the Peter.

Verse 5 Initial description of details to be taken up later.

Verses 6-7 The details are highly significant; thus the outcome from this burial is contrasted with that of Lazarus (11:44 *The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them,*

“Unbind him, and let him go.”).

Verse 8 NB the choreography, giving priority to Peter. Both saw the same “empirical residue”, yet only the one who loved made the leap of faith. “Seeing” is a verb for faith in this Gospel.

Verse 9 The gloss may seem strange; but full resurrection faith comes by means of an encounter with the risen Jesus (cf. next scene) and by confirmation in Scripture; “not yet understanding” is a theme right from the start of the Fourth Gospel.

Verse 10 To do what? The writer brusquely clears the “stage” for the one-to-one encounter to come.

Verse 11 Seemingly no contact with Beloved Disciple and Peter. Significantly, Mary replicates their actions.

Verse 12 Angels indicate transcendence. White is the colour of the resurrection. Head recalls the veil in John 11; feet recall anointing in John 12.

Verse 13 “Woman” is found in Cana (mother), Jacob’s well (journey of faith); Cross (mother), Resurrection (journey of faith). Mary repeats her “earthly” grasp.

Verse 14 Standard technique for an epiphany. It is also usual in resurrection appearance stories that Jesus is not immediately recognised.

Verse 15 Jesus repeats the words of the angels. There is intense irony (gardener; sir, if, take him away); Mary is still “outside” the mystery. There is no reason to weep. Jesus’ second question takes us back to the first words he speaks in this Gospel: “What are you looking for” (1:38), except “what” has become “whom.” A highly important evolution.

Verse 16 Note the interpersonal address (cf. Jn 11-12) because the good shepherd knows his sheep by name (10:3). Mary turns *again* – physically or interiorly?

Verse 17 Lit. do not keep touching to me (implied: as you knew me). It is peculiar that the resurrection is somehow incomplete because of the “lifting up” theme in this Gospel. Cf. “I go to prepare a place”. The distinctions are only apparent – it is the one God, the gift is through Jesus going to “his” God; lit. “gone up” – cf. 1:51 (with angels); 3:13; 6:62 (NB).

Verse 18 She is still the first to proclaim; cf. 20:25 (>< 1 Cor 9:1). Mary

bears witness unlike Peter (“ask those who heard me; they know what I said”).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The disciples are in a state of shock after their traumatic loss. Jesus, the one in whom they had placed so much hope, has been murdered and buried. Then, before they have time to recover they get another shock. The body of Jesus is missing. Have you had experiences in which one tragedy or crisis follows quickly after another? What was that like for you? How did you cope? Who, or what, sustained you?

2. Mary and Peter, and the other disciple, came and discovered that the tomb was empty. In this text no explanation is given. They are left in a state of bewilderment ‘for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead’. Have you been in situations, faced with events you cannot explain, possibly events that have dashed your hopes in another person, or in God? What has that been like for you?

3. Yet in spite of the lack of explanation, the beloved disciple ‘saw and believed’. Have there been times when others have done something that you could not understand, and which they could not explain at the time, and yet you believed that all was not as it seemed; times when you decided to trust in spite of the evidence? Have there been times when others have shown this kind of faith in you, when you were not able to offer satisfactory explanations, and all you could say was ‘trust me’?

4. Have there been times in your relationship with God when you have felt that you were faced with an empty tomb, and still you believed? What have you learned about life, about love, from such experiences?

PRAYER

God of undying life, by your mighty hand you raised up Jesus from the grave and appointed him judge of the living and the dead. Bestow upon those baptised into his death the power flowing from his resurrection, that we may proclaim near and far the pardon and peace you give us.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, first-born from the dead, who lives with you, now and always, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear

Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 *but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.* 36 *You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.* 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Acts of the Apostles is offered as history. However, it is not quite history as we would imagine it today. The writer does indeed use sources and tells a story in sequence. However, the overall purpose is persuasion, that is, to bring people to a new understanding of the Gospel. In particular, there are three dimensions which influence the telling: the role of the Holy Spirit, the ideals of the community and the career of Paul. Within that, the writer offers speeches at significant moments. How much of these go back to the events is a moot point. They seem to reflect a mature biblical appropriation of the Jesus tradition and reflect more or less entirely the language and outlook of the writer. Such “history”, with words put on the lips of characters, was completely normal at the time. The long story of Cornelius and his household occupies a pivotal position in the overall narrative and project of Luke-Acts.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a highly dramatic telling, unfolding in the context in a number of scenes and interlude:

(9.43): Peter a guest at home of Simon
Scene 1 (10:1-8): Cornelius (revelation)
Scene 2 (10:9-16): Peter (revelation)
Scene 3 (10:17-23a): Peter meets the envoys of Cornelius
Interlude (10:23b-27) Journey of Peter and entourage; meeting of Peter and Cornelius
Scene 4 (10:28-48) Peter and Cornelius in the latter’s home in Caesarea
Scene 5 (11:1-18) Peter explains his actions to the community at Jerusalem.

By means of this layout, Luke narrates the story of Cornelius no fewer than three times, without boring the hearers / readers.

Our selection—vv. 34-43—make up a distinct unit as follows:

Scene 4b (10:34-43)

A. vv. 34b-35 Universalism

B. vv. 26-38: Jesus—what he did

C. vv. 39a: Witnesses

B* vv. 39b-40: Jesus—what has done to him

C* vv. 41-42: Witnesses

A* v. 43 Universalism

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Acts 9:32-11:18: a unit of teaching. There are three stories about Peter: (1) 9:32-35; (2) 9:36-43; (3) 10:1-11:18 = (a) 10:1-19 the events and (b) 11:1-18 the justification of the events.

All three stories take place in Judea (incl. the administrative capital, Caesarea Maritima).

RELATED PASSAGES

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. (Luke 24:36-43)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 34b-35 The theme of universalism is a key: cf. *Testament of Job* 4:8; Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6; Col 3:25; Eph 6:9; 1 Pet 1:17; James 2:1, 9; 1 Clement 1:3; Barnabas 4:12; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 6:1.

Verses 36-38 Jesus’ activity as prophet, closely following Luke’s Gospel.

Verse 39a The witnesses to the ministry of Jesus. Being witnesses is central to the mission in Acts.

Verse 39b-40 Jesus is rejected (using the language of Galatians, interesting); the resurrection (i.e. vindication) is the deed of God.

Verse 41-42 These are the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Cf. Lk 24:36-43 (above); Acts 1:4.

Verse 43 Universalism once more, as already implied in the Pentecost speech. Cf. *Peter said to them, “Repent, and each one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call to himself.”* (Acts 2:38-39) Cf. Lk 2:29-32; 3:6; 4:25-27; 24:47; Acts 1:8.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Witnesses: who has been to me an authentic witness and bearer of the Good News? To whom have been been a witness?
2. Showing partiality is a very human trait and it takes conscious choice to act differently. How have I learned to accept people without prejudice?
3. The need for forgiveness is also a regular human phenomenon, sometimes from myself or from others; from time to time we need forgiveness also from God.

PRAYER

God, creator of everything and everyone, lover of all humanity without partiality or distinction, help us to live according to the good news of Jesus.

Help us to break down barriers just as he did. Show us how to reach out to the excluded, in imitation of Christ who was himself excluded in death, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God

Col 3:1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Whatever else we may have expected to be told on Easter Sunday, it is unlikely that we anticipated being informed that we have died! The old joke about the premature announcement of our death may come to mind.

KIND OF WRITING

Colossians is a letter, but shading over into the “epistolary sermon” typical of early Christianity. It is in three large segments, easily identifiable:

1:1-14 Introduction
1:15-4:6 Body of the Letter
4:7-18 Conclusion

Within the body of the letter, a new section starts at 3:1:

3:1-4 Summary
3:5-17 Contrasting old and new
3:18-4:1 The Christian household
4:2-6 Advice and prayer

Vv. 1-4 are a kind of heading, the contents of which will be amplified in the following verses.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

On account of the absence of typically Pauline vocabulary and the presence of non-typical words, many scholars assess Colossians to be a document of second generation Paulinism written in the name of the great apostle. Such an assessment is supported by a different theology with a cosmic view of Christ and a strong sense of realised eschatology.

Part of the presenting issue can be described thus. It seems that there are problems of “spirituality” in the church at Colossae, with an emphasis on visions, angels, rituals, dietary restrictions and ascetic practices (it may sound familiar to many today).

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in

matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. (Colossians 2:16–19)

Such deviations have led to a denigration of the person and role of Jesus (perhaps also familiar today). The author insists, on the contrary, on the centrality and sufficiency of Christ, *for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.* (Colossians 2:9–10) In effect, the writer is saying: you have all you need in Christ and there is no need for esoteric private revelations (also needed today).

RELATED PASSAGES

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:2–3)

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Colossians 2:6–7)

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him (Colossians 2:13)

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? (Colossians 2:20)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The little word “so” makes the link between the orthodoxy of chapter 2 and orthopraxis of chapter 3. Thus, the practical exhortations start here. The degree of the Christian’s incorporation into Christ is reflected in the citations from chapter 2 above. Christ at God’s right hand is one way of speaking of the resurrection, based on Psalm 110:1 (fre-

quent in the NT).

Verse 2 The writer expands a little on setting your minds on the things that are above. The contrast is with the human concoction of “devotions” evolved in the Colossian community, judged to be earthly. The risk of an other worldly dualism is obviated by the focus on Jesus now and in the future.

Verse 3 The corollary of “being raised” is that you (must!) have died. Cf. Col 2:20 above. Again, the purpose is the relativisation of attachment to esoteric asceticism. Hidden here means more than it can’t be seen; it means also it lies in the hand of God and in the future of God. Thus history has an unseen purpose in God. Hidden may also be a response to attraction of elite mysteries. The realised eschatology of Colossians is wisely tempered by the “not yet” of the Gospel. Cf. ...*because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.* (Colossians 1:5)

Verse 4 Notice the tension between the tenses: Christ *is* our life and yet we *will* be revealed with him in glory. Here the writer stands very close to genuine Pauline teaching and writings. However, in the view of Colossians, the *parousia* will bring nothing new—it will simply make plain what is already real for Christian believers.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The attraction to visions, angels and asceticism has not gone away and may very well detract from the central place of Christ in the Christian life.
2. The Christian tradition has in the past settled for an other worldly dualism, with an unhealthy detachment from living the Gospel *now*. How have I coped with such traditions and tensions?

3. To be told you have died may seem alarming, especially on Easter Sunday morning! To adapt Hebrews, we do really enjoy now something of indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16) of Jesus, raised from the dead.

PRAYER

On this glorious day of resurrection, faithful God, we praise you for all you have done for us in Jesus. He is our life. In him we have died and we are raised. In him we place all our hope.

Help us to live these gifts in the present moment so that others may drawn to the life of faith and know the joy and happiness you offer us today and every day.

THE LITURGY

Acts 10:34, 37-43; Psalm 118 (117); Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-9

READINGS 2 AND 3

The Gospel proclaims the resurrection and the second reading explores how to live it.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 118 is perfect for it joyful, exultant thanksgiving for the reversal of the cross.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Acts 10:34, 37-43

Belief in the resurrection is not at all static or neutral, as we listen to Peter drawing out the *consequences* of Easter faith.

Second reading

Colossians 3:1-4

The attentive hearer will notice an alarming claim: we *have* all died! What can that mean and how do we live our new reality?

Gospel

John 20:1-9 (10-18)

How can we today believe in the Risen Lord? It is a matter of faith and hope, of course, but even more importantly a matter of love.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Easter Monday

Acts 2:14, 22-33

The cross was a shock to the first Christians and so was the resurrection. In this speech of Peter, we “overhear” the first disciples using the Old Testament—especially the psalms—to understand what had taken place. The primary proclamation is focused on Jesus of Nazareth.

Matthew 28:8-15

The central proclamation—Jesus’ appearance to the women *at the tomb*—is unique to Matthew. In effect, it places the previous proclamation of the angel on the very lips of Jesus himself. In this way, Matthew—ever the teacher—make the implicit explicit.

Easter Tuesday

Acts 2:36-41

The opening verse is really the climax of yesterday’s reading. The rest responds to the question: if the Easter proclamation is true, what difference should it make and what should we do?

John 20:11-18

The question in today’s gospel is powerful: “Who are you looking for?” With this question the Gospel comes full circle, because the very first words of Jesus in this Gospel are “What are you looking for? The shift from “what” to “who” marks the Christian journey. We are not looking for philosophy but a person.

Easter Wednesday

Acts 3:1-10

The healing at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. Already in Acts 2:43 we read: *Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles.* This story is not just a healing from the past but a metaphor for the present, offered to us today as believers who may feel paralysed.

Luke 24:13-35

The disciples on the road to Emmaus is a powerful account. At the centre stands a recognition/ accusation of “slowness of heart”, that is, resistance to the Easter proclamation. As we listen, we hear the stages or marks of an authentic journey to spiritual insight and faith.

Easter Thursday

Acts 3:11-26

Sometimes Christians today feel that the God of the Old Testament is somehow a different God. In contrast, the early Christians felt a very strong desire to show that the surprising outcome of Jesus life and ministry—his death and resurrection—was actually and in fact a fulfilment of things foreshadowed in the Old Testament. God’s continued fidelity was an important part of their faith.

Luke 24:35-48

Our Gospel today evokes several resurrection themes: failure to recognise the risen Lord, the gift of peace and the

confirmation of the reality of the resurrection. Perhaps, however, the very last lines speak directly to us today: *in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this.*

Easter Friday

Acts 4:1-12

The religious authorities of the time were against the teaching of resurrection at all and very much against saying Jesus was risen. These are the very same people who brought about the crucifixion of Jesus. Here Peter, using the Old Testament, make the case for the resurrection of Jesus.

John 21:1-14

Chapter 21—an early addition to John—reminds us of the three-fold denial of Peter by means of his three-fold restoration. The fishing scene takes us back to the original call of Peter and his brothers. That earlier call is still “valid” and at the same time strengthened in the light of the resurrection.

Easter Saturday

Acts 4:13-21

The early Christians experienced opposition—but this only strengthened their courage. Anyhow, it looks as though those who were against them were “flummoxed” as we say!

Mark 16:9-15

These few verses—a very late addition to the Gospel text and not from Mark—form a kind of late synthesis of disparate material. Nevertheless, the Great Commission is repeated, for them and for us.

