

**Passage:** John 20:1-18

A well known rabbinic quote at the time of Jesus stated: "A man should not talk with a woman on the street, not even with his own wife, and certainly not with someone else's wife, because of gossip...it is forbidden to give a woman any greeting."

Imagine that – men were taught to not greet women and not talk to them. Women were considered second rate citizens. However, Jesus defied the culture of the time. He spoke to women, freely, in the streets on many occasions.

To name a few:

from John's gospel in chapter 4, Jesus has a theological debate with a Samaritan woman who had had multiple husbands, and was from a tribe that the Jews despised.

Jesus was friends with Mary and Martha, Lazarus's sisters, and Luke's gospel, he visits them at their home and he teaches Mary who sits at his feet. When Jesus finds Martha in distress at her brother's death in John chapter 11 he had an intellectual discussion with her explaining "I am the resurrection and the life." When Jesus saw Mary weeping, he was deeply moved and troubled in his spirit. He was relating to her pain.

The account that gives me goose bumps, as it shows Jesus' amazing grace is in John chapter 8. Jesus calmly deals with a situation where a woman is caught in adultery. The Jewish leaders wanted to stone her, as she had broken the Law. Jesus doesn't condone what she has done, but he forgives her as he asked her:

[Act this out]

*Jesus deep gentle voice: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

*Woman nervous voice <sup>11</sup>"No one, sir."*

*Jesus deep, gentle voice: "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."*

If you haven't read it, you should read it in. But just not right now.

In John's gospel Jesus treats women as unique and valuable individuals. None of the women in John (except Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mary the wife of Clopas) are described in relation to men. They are recognised in their own right. Jesus freely associates with women, he actively teaches women, he discusses topical issues of the day with them, and he has compassion for women. Jesus was prophetically restoring

the place and identity of woman in that society. Jesus was subverting the order of the day.

In fact in all the gospels, once Jesus has risen from the dead, the first person he chooses to appear to is a woman! In John chapter 20 verse 15, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene before he appears to any of his disciples in verse 19.

Since today is Woman's Day, I thought it would be appropriate for us to reconsider the way Jesus viewed woman, specifically Mary Magdalene. Once we have examined the manner in which he related to woman, we can apply this to how we relate to women and each other in the church. We are going to look at the following:

- Who was this Mary Magdalene that had a deep love for and devotion to Jesus
- What the events were on that first Easter Sunday morning
- How Jesus calls Mary by name and she is obedient
- How Jesus entrusts a woman with the Good News and commissions Mary.

Women's Day celebrates every woman in South Africa. Today commemorates the 9 August 1956 when women participated in a national march petitioning against pass laws. This legislation was part of the apartheid system that required Black people to carry a pass document to 'prove' that they were allowed to enter a 'white area'. The women who participated in the march were standing up for justice, and they were fighting oppression because they saw a future without pass laws where people weren't treated as second class citizens.

We know that Jesus stood up against the oppression of the Pharisees in first century Palestine. Jesus said: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Jesus bought justice, and he treated the marginalised equitably. Jesus was victorious on the cross, and through the cross he is putting the world to rights!

John chapters 20 and 21 tells us of Jesus' interaction with his disciples after he had risen. This morning we are going to focus on John chapter 20 verses 10 to 18, which describe Jesus' interaction with Mary Magdalene.

**First, let's look at who Mary Magdalene was.** She had a special relationship with Jesus. Mary had a deep love for and devotion to Jesus. Some scholars think that she was the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Jesus with an alabaster jar of perfume, and wiped his feet with her hair, in Luke chapter 7. We are told about Mary Magdalene in all four gospels. She appears at the crucifixion scene and at the resurrection.

Mark 15 verses 40 to 41, confirm that she was watching Jesus' crucifixion with other women. The passage says:

*“<sup>40</sup>Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. <sup>41</sup>In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.”*

Luke chapter 8 verses 2 to 3 tell us more about her:

*<sup>1</sup>After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, <sup>2</sup>and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; <sup>3</sup>Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.*

Mary Magdalene had been demon-possessed. Not one demon – seven demons! She was a broken woman. She must have been involved in something or exposed to something horrific to have been overtaken by seven demons. In first century Palestine, she would have been shunned by the religious leaders. She was demon possessed and would have been considered unclean. In the world's eyes, this was a second rate citizen, despised and certainly not worthy of a rabbi's special attention.

But after Jesus had cured her of the evil spirits, she became an active participant in his ministry. She was devoted and this was a reflection of her profound gratitude. In Luke chapter 8 verse 2, she is the **first named of the woman** who travelled with Jesus, supporting him out of her own means and caring for all his needs.

Jesus took her seriously; he healed her and interacted with her. Jesus' restoration of Mary is a proxy for Jesus' restoration of all people. Remember who this woman was. Yet Jesus loved her. This is an encouragement for all of us sitting here today. It doesn't matter who we are and what we have done, Jesus is interested in each one of us. He wants to heal and restore us. Jesus wants to heal and restore each person you meet on the street.

And look at Mary's response. It is one of love and devotion, which flows out of meeting the true God. Let this be our response today, one of love and devotion to our Lord. The passage we are looking at this morning focuses on what Jesus has done – his resurrection is proof of his victory on the cross.

### **The events of Easter Sunday morning**

I think it is helpful if I put the events on that Easter Sunday morning into context. Picture Mary standing at the empty tomb: this is the third day; the last time that Mary had seen Jesus was when he was on the cross, dying. She had waited faithfully at the cross, enduring the agony of watching her Lord suffer and die.

In Mary's mind she has lost her Lord and teacher. Try to imagine how Mary is feeling at this point. Two days earlier the man who had rescued her, and to whom she had devoted her life, had been crucified. Mary wanted to tend to Jesus' body, but she had to wait as it was near sunset, when the Sabbath would start and no work could be done. Jesus had been wrapped in spices and strips of linen and placed in an empty tomb. At the first possible moment after the Sabbath, the next morning while it was still dark, she and some other women went to the tomb to embalm Jesus' body for burial.

And what do they find?

The stone had been rolled away from the entrance of the tomb and the tomb was empty. Jesus' body is no longer there but there was no evidence of a burglary. The linen clothes had been left – which were the most valuable items – and the burial cloth had been neatly folded. This was a radical moment! Simon Peter and John were also there. The passage says that the other disciple, which was John, went inside the tomb and that he saw and believed! We are not told what he believed, but we can assume that it was that Jesus was resurrected.

However, Mary Magdalene, rather than assuming that Jesus had risen, assumed that the body had been taken away or stolen. Verse 10 says: "<sup>10</sup>*Then the disciples went back to their homes,* <sup>11</sup>*but Mary stood outside the tomb crying.*" When I read this, I wanted to start crying too. We are not talking about a gentle sobbing here – the word used means wailing, a loud expression of grief. It gives a poignant picture of a woman who truly loved Jesus and her great love is poured out in her grief.

Mary looks into the tomb and sees two angels, which is to tell us that the powers of heaven have been at work there. Usually when people in the Bible encounter angels they are awe struck. But she doesn't react as we would expect and her answer to their question shows that she is totally focused on the fact that Jesus' body is missing.

She says: "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him." He is still her *Lord* even though he is dead; her loyalty is still fixed on him. She is not noticing anything else.

I find her complete commitment inspiring. She knows what she is looking for and hoping for. Maybe if she had slowed down and looked at the evidence – the grave clothes and the angels – she would have realised that Jesus had risen as John did. But she didn't. There is no sense of condemnation in the passage that she failed to "see the signs". In fact, Jesus is so gracious to her and he meets her where she is at.

The encouragement for us today is that Jesus will speak to us in a manner that we relate to. Not all of us are people who are going for evidence and facts. Some of us need to hear Jesus' voice. We often miss the obvious fact that Jesus is present in our grief and traumas. He is right there beside us, even if we don't recognise this at the time. In the events where we feel the furthest from God and the most disappointed in life and in people, it is in these events where we encounter Jesus, gently asking us "why are you crying; who is it that you are looking for?"

### **Jesus calls Mary by name**

Whilst this was going on, Jesus stands behind Mary. She turns around and verse 14 tells that that Mary did not recognise Jesus and thought that he was the gardener – perhaps because of her grief or perhaps because she wasn't expecting to see him in a resurrected state or perhaps he intentionally prevented recognition.

There is a tender dialogue between Jesus and Mary. You can sense Mary's desperation:

*Jesus gentle deep voice: "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"*

*Mary desperate voice: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."*

And then the most beautiful thing happens, Jesus calls her by name and then she recognises him.

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher or "my teacher")

Why is it significant that Jesus calls her by name? Our names encapsulate our identity. Jesus affirms Mary's identity by calling her by name. This re-enforces that she is a respected, normalised whole person. Jesus has restored her.

I wonder if you have experienced this. You are in a room full of people, but if someone across the room using your name in conversation, you immediately hear it. I know that this happens to me. My ear is finely tuned to the sound of my own name, and this shows the power of our names.

The application for us is two fold. Firstly, Jesus continues to call us each by name today. He knows our names and he relates to us as both an almighty God but also as one closer than a brother.

Secondly, Jesus affirmed the value of woman's roles and opinions the world over, when he affirmed Mary. The Church tends to mirror the society that it is in. But it

should be the other way around. We as the Church should be affirming woman as Jesus did, and modelling something for the society around us.

### **Not clinging but obedient**

Jesus calls her by the name he used for her before, and she responds with the title she used before. Mary would naturally assume that their relationship would continue on as before. Jesus' response, however, lets her know there has been a radical change in him and consequently in his relationship with his followers. This change is indicated when Jesus tells her not to hold onto him in verse 17.

Jesus did not forbid her from touching him, but gently assured her that she need not cling on to him. This was either to assure her that he was really there and so she need not cling onto him as if he was about to disappear, or let her know that she must not try to restrict him, for he had not yet ascended to the Father and to teach her to relate to him in a different way and to live by faith not by sight.

Mary had been crying and desperate to find Jesus' dead body. Now she finds Jesus alive. It would be natural for her to want to cling onto him. However, she is obedient to what he asks for her. She trusts him and is willing to stop clinging to him and to do what he asks of her.

For us today, we also need to be willing to do what Jesus asks of us as he knows us and he knows how things are going to work out if we trust him.

### **Jesus entrusts a woman with the Good News and commissions Mary**

After this Jesus tells her "Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Here Jesus is speaking about his future ascension to heaven, which is going to happen about 40 days later and is recorded in Acts chapter 1 verse 9-11.

Jesus entrusts a woman with the Good News and commissions Mary to go and tell his brothers or disciples. As the ancient church put it, she becomes an apostle to the apostles.

The resurrection defines God's victory over evil. It is the essential crux in God's plan for putting the world right. This gets entrusted to a woman first!

Mary Magdalene is the one chosen for the special service of proclaiming the resurrection of the Lord to his disciples. This was more extraordinary given that Jewish Law disallowed the witness of women in court, and yet Jesus is prepared to put it into her hands and let her be his first witness.

This shows us that Jesus did not consider woman second rate citizens. He trusted her with this critical news. Jesus is sending Mary to proclaim the Good News into this hostile environment. The Jewish authorities were determined to prevent any story of the resurrection from getting out. But Mary is the one he chooses first.

Is Debbie Sprowson here this morning? Debbie Sprowson shoots documentaries. What Jesus did here is like Debbie's boss coming to her and saying "There is this massive news event and I want you to cover it. I trust you Debbie to go out there and get the story and rely it. You are strong enough, you are gutsy enough and I trust you to do it."

The message that Jesus has given Mary says a great deal about the new phase that has begun in the relations between the Father, the Son and the disciples. He tells her to: *Go instead to my brothers and tell them*. This is the first time in this Gospel that Jesus refers to his disciples as his brothers. This implies that Jesus has not put off his humanity in his resurrected state and that there is a new level of intimacy between himself and his disciples and therefore with us.

Let me reiterate the order-upsetting nature of what Jesus does by entrusting this message to Mary: He is modelling the humanity, dignity and value that God holds for women, and subverting the First Century Palestinian view of women as untrustworthy non-entities in the religious and civic functions of society.

We could look at this as a useful "history lesson", if it unfortunately what Jesus was doing then is still so relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> Century South Africa today. Jesus is again speaking to women this morning and reminding us that we are not marginal, second class citizens excluded from the churches' and society's leadership and functioning. Mary's encounter with Jesus at the empty tomb it is not simply a history lesson, it is instead as relevant, prophetic and indeed subversively liberating for women today, as it was two millennia ago in dusty Palestine.

Where the church or society has held you as a woman in second class status, let Jesus' attitude, love, healing, dignity and purpose restore you this morning. Where society and life has deemed you weaker, and has defined an infinite number of ways to exploit you, let Jesus' clear voice speak to you, as he did to Mary, asking "why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?"

**Let us pray:**

Jesus we praise you this morning as we remember your victorious resurrection. Thank you Jesus that you are speaking to us this morning as you did to Mary on that first Easter Sunday. Jesus you call us by name and you long know us intimately. Please speak to our hearts this morning and tell us your will for us lives. And

especially for the woman this morning, I pray your love, healing, and purpose over them.

Amen