

"Woman, Why Weepest Thou?"

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene" - John 19:25

We meet each first day of the week to remember the death and resurrection of our Lord, and twice each year we read together 4 accounts of the events of this period, in the four gospels.

Let us consider these events, endeavoring to arrange them in order in our minds, and to picture the experiences and circumstances of each individual involved. Let us begin our consideration at the foot of the cross.

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The thing that first strikes us very forcibly is the prominence of women and the apparent absence of all but one of the men connected with Christ. At the betrayal in the garden, nine disciples flee and we hear no more about them until after the Resurrection.

The other two, John and Peter, after first fleeing with the rest, turned and followed the crowd to the High Priest's house. John was known at the High Priest's house, and therefore must have been known to be a disciple of Jesus. The High Priest's maidservant remembered seeing Peter with Jesus; she surely would have remembered seeing John with him, as she knew John. This is a point in John's favor. He went right in along with Jesus, knowing he would be recognized. We find John outstanding all through these events.

After Peter's denial, he too, like the rest of the apostles, drops out of the picture until after the resurrection. There is no mention of Peter or of any of the rest at the cross - only John and the women. All the women closest to Jesus are mentioned by name by Matthew, Mark and John, as being there.

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John stood at the foot of the cross, with Jesus' mother, and received the commission to take care of her. There also was Salome, the wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John. Comparing Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40 with John 19:25 almost certainly establishes Salome as the sister of Mary. This would make James and John the cousins of Jesus.

The only other alternatives are - Mary's sister is mentioned once, (John 19:25) but not named, or ever referred to elsewhere. Mary's sister was also named Mary, and was the wife of Cleophas. In either case, Salome would be omitted from one record where she appears in the other two. In the first case, someone else is mentioned in her place who is never mentioned again. In the 2nd case, there were two sisters, both named Mary. All this seems very unlikely, so we conclude that Salome was "his (Jesus') mother's sister" of John 19:25.

It was Salome who approached Jesus with the request that her two sons, James and John, sit on Jesus' right and left hands in the Kingdom. We will have a better and kinder view of Salome if we remember in connection with this incident that she was one of the faithful band of women who followed Jesus wherever he went, ministering unto him in loving devotion of their own substance.

Matthew says (27:55) regarding the crucifixion scene that: "Many women were there ... which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him." We can hardly interpret 'many' as much less than fifteen or twenty, and it would seem to imply more. Let us try to get the picture. Besides these women, as Jesus traveled about, there were the twelve disciples, and a certain number of others. We know there were at least more than two others, and probably many more, for in Acts 1, Peter says - "Of these men which have companied with us all the time the Lord

Jesus went in and out among us ... must one be ordained a witness." And of this group they appointed two to be chosen between by lot to fill Judas' place.

We are trying to formulate some mental picture of the group that accompanied Jesus. It could hardly have been less than forty or fifty. It could have been much more. We know on at least one occasion Jesus sent out seventy to preach.

What a strange sight it must have been. What an object of ridicule to the learned and sophisticated! They were of the simplest and commonest of the people. We know how limited their understanding was, right to the end. And while they were utterly devoted to Jesus, yet to the end they were small-minded and the best of them disputed who should be first.

What a background for the manifestation of God's Son! What a naturally-speaking humiliating and unimpressing presentation he made! The intellectual of the nation said in scorn, looking disdainfully at this motley, itinerant company: "Have any of the rulers believed in him?"

They would seem like gypsies, wandering about the countryside, with no apparent means of support, and no fixed abode - nothing normal or respectable about them.

And furthermore he did not hesitate to company with publicans and sinners. He recognized no social distinction - no normal standards of propriety. He violated all their artificial etiquette - he did not even wash his hands to eat. He did not work. He did not support himself. He allowed these (as it would seem) infatuated women to minister to him of their substance.

We remember his first temptation - "Make these stones bread." He had all the power at his command. He did not need to humiliate himself, and give such an appearance to the world by depending upon the ministrations and possessions of the simple women who followed him.

Only two classes could possibly be attracted to him - the very simple, and those with deep spiritual discernment who could see through all the externals to the reality within.

How beautiful it was that he who had all the power at his command must not use it for his own simplest needs, but must embarrassingly depend upon devoted women who had left their households and who followed and ministered to him with loving care! How beautiful that he should be permitted to need them and depend upon them! - He - the Son of God, the potential Lord of Heaven and Earth! How strange and beautiful are the ways of God! How utterly and refreshingly different from the ways of men!

And so "many" loving and devoted women were there at the cross, but - as far as we have any record - only one man, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." The men were later to carry the burden: and the women, as their position is, were to drop entirely out of sight, but this was their day, their glory, their courage and devotion and service - eternal testimony of love and faithfulness.

When Paul later lists the appearances of the risen Lord, he does not even mention the appearances to the women, though the first two appearances were to them. Does he slight them? By no means! Rather he honors them. These appearances were not public witnesses. They were the far more glorious inner, personal, intimate communions of fellowship and love. The woman's great privilege is the gentle, inner, silent, secret touch.

Beside Jesus' mother, and Salome her sister, there was also Mary the wife of Cleophas and mother of the apostle James the Less, another who traveled with Jesus, and ministered to him.

Three elderly women, standing by the cross, witnessed that almost unendurable scene of agony and shame, with hopeless bewilderment and disappointed faith. Faith and Hope had fled, but Love remained.

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And then there was Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is clearly the leading and most active spirit among the faithful group of women. For three days - the most momentous three days of history - Mary Magdalene is the most prominent actor in the whole divine plan.

How strange and beautiful that this fearless devoted woman should suddenly come briefly into brilliant prominence and, then as quickly fade forever from the record! She filled one essential, central role in the great sweep of history, and then retired to womanly obscurity. Mary Magdalene - the last at the cross, and the first at the tomb. And her devotion was rewarded - she was the first to see the Lord.

When we come right down to the very heart of the events of these three days - around which all history revolves - we come to two people - Mary Magdalene and John the beloved disciple.

True, John at first fled. "They ALL forsook him and fled." It had to be that way. The flesh must learn the deep wisdom of its weakness - its utter, powerless dependence upon God. But John recovered himself immediately.

Peter "followed afar off," drawn by an irresistible love, but held back by the dragging feet of a terrible, trembling fear. But John, we are told, "went in with Jesus into the palace of the High Priest;" then later went out and brought in Peter. It was John who said, "Perfect love casteth out fear." John was the last to whom Jesus spoke in the hour of death: "Behold thy mother."

Mary was the first to whom he spoke in the hour of Resurrection and Life - the first name he uttered beyond the grave.

How little we know of Mary! Her name occurs twelve times - eleven times in connection with the events of the crucifixion and only once anywhere else. That one place is Luke 8:2, where we are told she was among those who went about with Jesus on his journeys, and ministered to him. We are told there too that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary - that is, he had cured her of some terrible and overwhelming infirmity.

At the close of the crucifixion day, two other men come into the picture - men whom we would never have dreamed would fill the role they filled. Of one of them, Joseph of Arimathea, we have never heard before, and never hear of him again. We are told he was rich, he was a counselor, that is, one of the ruling body of the nation - like a member of Congress or of Parliament, that he was a good and righteous man who looked for the Kingdom of God, that he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews. Up to this point he had never publicly revealed his allegiance. He had lived a double life - an inner, private life and an outer, public one. There is a great lesson and a great comfort in the example of Joseph. He was rich and influential - he had much to lose in following Jesus, and up to this point he had not been able to face the open choice.

But when Jesus was dead, when all hope seemed ended, he gathered together a Faith and a Courage that stands out with almost unique brilliance, and went boldly to Pilate, requesting the body of Jesus! Something now so moved and took hold of this fearful man that he stood up boldly and alone before both the Romans and his whole nation and publicly allied himself with the cause of Christ, just when that cause had come into direct collision with both Jews and Romans and seemed to have ended in utter disaster.

We wonder whether, and at what point, Joseph realized that he was fulfilling that strange, unlikely prophecy of Isa 53 - "He shall make his grave with the rich." Truly a prophecy which - up until the moment Joseph stepped forth - seemed impossible of fulfillment under the circumstances. How marvellous are the ways of God! Let Joseph be a perpetual inspiration to all who have ever hesitated under any circumstances to speak out for Christ because of fear. Joseph laid the body in his own new tomb - a tomb wherein never man had lain. In the fittingness of things, it could be no other way. This event was not only unique in all history - it was the very center of all history.

At long last, in the fulness of times, the grave was to be conquered. A path never before opened up was to be trod -- a path of hope right through the hitherto hopeless valley of the shadow of death, and out the other side. No man had passed this way before.

True, there had been typical raisings from the dead before in manifestation and shadow of what was to come, but never a Resurrection that shattered the power of the grave and cast off its shackles forever. Never man had passed this way before - no man had ever lain in this tomb - this glorious gateway from death to life.

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The other man was Nicodemus - likewise a counselor - two of the highest men in the nation.

And, like Joseph, he had apparently up to this point been held back by fear from open discipleship. Unlike Joseph, he appears twice before in the record. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Nicodemus comes to him by night, confessing his recognition that Jesus was a teacher sent from God.

Though Jesus chides him for lack of understanding basic spiritual truth, though holding a position as the teacher of Israel, still Jesus speaks to him many things of depth and beauty like we find revealed no where else. He knew what was in man, and he could doubtless see in Nicodemus the nucleus of a faith that would overcome all fear.

Consider the well-known passages of eternal promise and beauty that Jesus spoke alone to this Jewish leader who sought him in the night. The event is recorded in John 3 - "Except a man be born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit." "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven." "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light."

For all this we are indebted to Jesus' private conversation with this man Nicodemus in the quiet of the night. And Jesus ended the interview with this gentle rebuke, doubtless long-remembered with much heart-searching and self-examination, and which bore glorious fruit so long after -

"He that doeth Truth cometh to the Light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God."

Nicodemus was at last to come in the open daylight - in full public gaze - to manifest his allegiance to Light and Truth. There is one other mention of him, apparently about 6 months before the Crucifixion. It is very revealing, both as to how far he went, and how far he did not go. The officers were sent to seize Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles. They came back to the chief priests empty-handed and overawed, exclaiming - "Never man spake like this man!" (John 7:46)

The Pharisees contemptuously answer - "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?"

Nicodemus was there. He was one of them. What were his thoughts in the face of this contemptuous challenge? This was just a few months before the Crucifixion. He had had 3 years to ponder on the words of Jesus, whom he had confessed to be a teacher sent from God. He does speak up. Truly very mildly and timidly and uncommittingly from the point of view of a robust faith, but he does speak out against them - "Doth our law judge any man before it hear him?" And they all turn on him in scathing ridicule - "Art thou also of Galilee?" But finally, at the last moment possible, Nicodemus' secret faith burst forth in loving, fearless, public service to the dead body of a condemned and executed prisoner.

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Two women are watching as these two men, these two wellknown rulers of the Jews, but doubtless strangers personally to them, carefully take down the body, prepare it for burial and carry it a little way into a tomb nearby. They were Mary Magdalene and the "other Mary," that is, the wife of Cleophas.

Finally, after seeing the stone rolled against the entrance, they returned home and prepared spices and ointments, and rested the Sabbath day. All this, from the death of Jesus on the cross - the begging of the body from Pilate, the removal from the cross, the burial and the preparation of spices, had to happen between 3 o'clock and 6 o'clock on Friday afternoon, before the Sabbath began.

There has always been controversy concerning what day of the week Jesus was crucified. Many, on the basis of a full 3-day interpretation, and by a double-Sabbath theory (Passover Sabbath and weekly Sabbath), move the crucifixion back to Thursday and some even Wednesday. But Bro. Thomas' beautiful exposition of the Son of Man fulfilling the work given him to do by the Friday night, "resting according to the commandment" during the Sabbath, and arising the first day of a new week to a new life and a new work, strongly inclines us to the simple view that the crucifixion was on Friday.

The women appear to have bought more spices on Saturday evening, after the Sabbath was ended.

Then, very early Sunday morning, they came to the tomb to perform more fully and carefully the service hurriedly rendered by Joseph and Nicodemus on Friday afternoon. The 4 women named as coming are those same faithful ones who remained close to Jesus right up to the moment of death - Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the less, Salome, mother of James and John, and Joanna, wife of Chuza, who was steward to Herod. (The word "steward" implies the position of general manager of the household like Eleazar of Damacus in Abraham's household). We are told that "other women" also were with them.

The mention of the time of day is quite specific, and unquestionably purposeful. They appear to have left home while it was still dark, and to have arrived at the tomb just after the sun had risen. John speaks of, "While it was yet dark;" Mark says, "At the rising of the sun;" Matthew says, "As it began to dawn." Two parts of the record give the strong impression, doubtless intentionally, that the Resurrection itself occurred very close to the same time, possibly between the time they left home in the dark and the time they arrived at the sepulchre as the dawn was breaking.

Matthew (28:2) mentions the opening of the tomb after describing the women leaving home, and as a present connected event, not a past one; and Matthew again (28:11) also specifically says the watch came into the city with their report just as the women were going to

tell his disciples, as if they had waited for them to leave. Everything seems to happen very closely together, and the natural impression from the record is that the Resurrection had just occurred and the watch were lying in a stunned condition nearby when the women visited the tomb.

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All 4 records mention Mary Magdalene first among those who visited the tomb. John mentions no one else. Combining the records seems to give this sequence of events: As they approach, they are questioning among themselves how they are going to remove the great stone blocking the entrance. It would be a large flat, round stone like a wheel that was rolled in a groove and dropped into a small depression in front of the entrance. It seemed to be a very serious obstacle, but as so often happens, when they reached the spot they found the obstacle had been removed, the worry needless, the problem non-existent.

According to John, Mary Magdalene - before the angels revealed themselves - seems to have run immediately to tell Peter and John that the tomb had been opened. (We cannot help but wonder why these two disciples did not accompany the women in the first place, especially in view of the problem of moving the stone. Why did the women go alone? What were the disciples doing? What was their state of mind?) Perhaps the circumstances are purposely designed to make us think deeply upon the state of mind of Jesus' followers during this terrible period.

They had not only suddenly lost - under violent, tragic circumstances - the one who was the focus of their deepest love and devotion. This would be of itself a terrible shock. But their whole world had been shattered. They had left ALL and followed him. They had put all their faith and hope - all their very life - on and in him - all their dreams for future eternal blessing. Everything of them and in them was bound up in him, whom they had regarded as the very Son of God.

For over 3 years they had enjoyed to the full his wonderful, sustaining miracles and manifestations of power, seen him put the nation's rulers to helpless confusion and humiliated silence time and again, while all the people thronged him and marvelled at him. Then suddenly it all collapsed. Suddenly everything went dark, and began to violently close in on them. In a brief, terrible, unprepared-for 15 hours, he was seized, abused, mocked, humiliated, and destroyed. And the whole weight of the long-infuriated and now triumphantly-revengeful wrath of the rulers would be turned against them - his closest followers.

We remember that when Jesus revealed himself to them they were assembled trembling, behind locked doors, "for fear of the Jews." Surely everything indicated that they had good reason to fear. But the fear would not be the major aspect of their condition. The major aspect would be shock, terrible shock at the loss of their beloved Master, and the end of all they had built upon him. Why was such a trial permitted? Why were their understandings previously veiled so they should not be ready? The simple answer is: it was necessary. They had to be tried, torn, twisted, crushed to the utmost.

All of us, in our own small way, have experienced the transforming power of a great emotional shock. It searches the soul, it opens up the mind to its foundations, it rearranges all the courses of nature and sets things going in an entirely different direction. It is hard but it is wholesome.

It shakes out the dross from the mind, and makes men bigger and better.

From this time forward, these are all different men. It is as if they have passed through a violent metamorphosis, and henceforth are an entirely new type of creature. The old man died, and the new man found his strength. Henceforth, they stand fearlessly before the rulers. Henceforth, they go fearlessly to prison and to death. The double shock of Death and

Resurrection appears to have been the divine means for effecting this transformation - this sudden growth from children to men. Let us learn the lesson well, that we may yield ourselves completely to the Divine Hand and in the fierce crucible of sorrow, find the glories of spirit birth.

The record focuses our attention upon the women, led by Mary Magdalene - overwhelmed by the dreadful shock and sorrow, but still doing, in love, that one last, pitifully hopeless service that it was in their power to do. Mary Magdalene has run away to tell Peter and John of the strange new development. Did it mean a last bitter, mocking disappointment, or dared they permit their crushed hearts to court further pain by opening them up to a ray of hope? Peter and John rushed to the tomb.

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In the meantime at the tomb 2 angels had appeared to the other women in dazzling brightness, with the strange greeting - "Why seek ye the living among the dead? Remember how he spoke unto you ... that he should rise again the third day. AND THEY REMEMBERED HIS WORDS."

This was the turning point. From here on the glorious picture rapidly opens up wider and wider. They fled from the tomb. "Trembling, astonishment, fear, and great joy." is how their state of mind is described.

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Peter and John, running, arrive soon after they depart, with Mary following them. John gets there first, stops, and looks in. Peter catches up and goes straight into the tomb. He sees the linen clothes, and the head napkin by itself. There is great significance in this reference in the grave clothes and their position.

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The word for "napkin" - soudarion - means literally "sweat-cloth." We remember the priests could not wear wool, because it caused sweat. Their garments must be all linen. The name of this napkin, and its being specifically distinguished from the "linen clothes." strongly points to its being of wool. Linen is a symbol of spirit, as distinguished from the wool, or animal.

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John followed Peter in, and saw the garments and, it is recorded, he "believed." HERE IS THE FIRST RECORDED BELIEF. Truly, the women ran from the tomb in an excited state of "fear and great joy" at the sight and message of the angels, but here is the first specific record of belief - calm mental conviction - and it was without the help of any supernatural message or appearance. This was the disciple Jesus loved. Not having seen, he believed. Jesus appeared specially and specifically to Peter, and to his own brother James, but there is no record of an appearance to John. Peter needed the comfort, James the conviction; but the beloved disciple was given the privilege of believing without seeing. He was honored by the recognition that his faith need not rest on sight.

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John and Peter left the tomb and went to their homes, leaving Mary Magdalene alone at the tomb, weeping. As she wept, she stooped down to look into the sepulchre, and she saw two angels who said, "Why weepest thou?" She said, "Because they have taken away my Lord." Mary's heart had been set on that last loving service to the body of her beloved. Turning from the tomb, she saw Jesus behind her, but did not know him. He too said, "Woman, why weepest thou?" - his first recorded words beyond the grave. We cannot help but be struck by the typical aspect of the scene, as of Christ and the Bride - "Woman, why weepest thou?"

The long travail is over. The Seed has been born of the Spirit. "And thy desire shall be thy Husband, and he shall rule over thee" - a sentence upon the Woman, a glorious promise to the Bride. She still did not recognize him, but mistook him for a Gardener. Then Jesus said,

"Mary," and suddenly recognition flooded over her, and she exclaimed "Rabboni!." - a term of deep affection, respect and devotion - "My Master, Leader, Guide, Teacher!"

This was Jesus' first appearance after his resurrection. There must have been a reason why Mary Magdalene was chosen for this unique privilege - the first to see the risen Lord. Peter and John had been there but a few moments before. Jesus waited for them to go away before revealing himself alone to Mary.

She naturally, overwhelmed with joy and love, sought to touch him, but he said - "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father." Mary's privilege is further emphasized. She alone saw him in the state between grave and glorification. She was taken, as it were, into the intimate workshop of the Spirit. He sent her to convey the joyful news to the disciples, and having performed this service, we never hear of Mary again.

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The other women are still on their way to tell the disciples of the angel's message. Before they reach their destination, Jesus appears to them, too. This time he permits them to hold him by the feet. The ascending to the Father has now been accomplished. We get a hint in these events of the rapidity of spiritual things, and their freedom from the bonds and bounds that constrain the natural man.

The second appearance, like the first, is to women. We hear so little of these loving, faithful women all through Jesus' ministry. Though they continued with him, and ministered to him, they are so much in the background, that it is only with effort we can piece together the meagre record concerning them. But in the darkness and sorrows of death they come into brief and glorious prominence. How beautifully God hath provided a vessel for every need.

8

Surely it is our wisdom to yield ourselves to the Master's use, fulfilling with loving, wholehearted devotion the task that comes to hand. Whether it be in prominence or obscurity, in public or in private, in honor or humility.

This was woman's greatest hour, when all his disciples forsook him and fled.

G.V.G.- July

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