

April 4

*I Come to the Garden Alone*

John 20:1-18

Intro: Jesus of Nazareth, according to reports by his closest associates, “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed of the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). He was a preacher and a healer, and at first he does not seem to be a candidate for execution as a criminal.

But that was before the envy and anger of the religious leaders was aroused by his popularity and unconventional teaching. When it became evident that Jesus could not be assimilated into the existing religious institutions those who guarded the institutions rightly judged him to be a threat to them personally and to the religion which they embraced. These men, including the high priest, orchestrated the arrest of Jesus and supplied the witnesses that led to his conviction on charges of insurrection.

I have stood upon an ancient stone pavement some 10 or 12 feet below the existing streets of old Jerusalem. Some guess this pavement to be the very place where Jesus was tried, convicted, and whipped. This picture of “Christ at the Column” is one that I cannot get out of my mind since my visit to Jerusalem. Some of you saw Mel Gibson’s graphic movie “The Passion of the Christ.” The whipping post is an unimaginable horror that sometimes robbed the cross of its victim.

Roman justice was graphic and brutal. The Romans developed crucifixion to a fine art, accompanied by beating, mocking, and public humiliation. The criminal was suspended from a cross in a public place, somewhere along the most traveled routes.

Roman crucifixion was common enough that the main stake of the crosses was a permanent fixture outside the city gates. The condemned carried their own crossbeam to the gruesome site, assuming they were not too far gone to do so.

The Romans were proud of their justice. They would suspend a sign on the cross or around the neck of the criminal describing the crime of the one executed. In Jesus’ case the sign said, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The Romans were saying, “This is what happens to people who claim to be a king.” By this form of torture the Romans discouraged uprisings against their rule and terrorized the conquered peoples. So from a political point of view, the death of Jesus was utilitarian—useful to communicate to the masses that they should never think about resisting Rome.

Jesus does not live very long once he is hung up to die. John tells us that the soldiers were going to break his legs to hasten his death. They did this with the two other victims. But when they came to Jesus he had already died—without a single broken bone, just like the Passover lambs being slaughtered that day.

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea removed the body of Jesus from the cross, a concession by the Roman ruler to Jewish sensibilities on their biggest feast days. With the help of some women they hastily prepared the body for burial and placed it in Joseph’s new tomb. I think they planned all along to come back on Sunday morning, after the Sabbath, and complete these last rites for the dead.

NOW READ JOHN 20:1-18

Mary Magdalene appears at the end of the gospels to take a very prominent place. This is surprising because she is barely mentioned prior to the execution of Jesus.

She has risen in prominence in our own day through the fanciful thriller written by Dan Brown and turned into a blockbuster movie, The Da Vinci Code. The book depicts Mary as the wife of Jesus of Nazareth. This is a modern myth based on some comments in the fictional Gospel of Philip which was written 200-300 years after Jesus.

Mary Magdalene is first mentioned by John when he names her among the women at the cross of Jesus (19:25). Only at the cross and here in the garden does she appear in his narrative. The same is true for Matthew and Mark’s accounting of Mary Magdalene. She came from Galilee with the women to care for the needs of Jesus, Matthew records (Matthew 27:56).

Luke is the only one who mentions Mary Magdalene prior to the crucifixion. He includes her in a list of women who accompanied Jesus in some of his travels and helped to support him and his ministry. Luke records that these were “women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out...” (Luke 8:2). Mark uses this same language to describe her (Mark 16:9). I think that this description is about healing from sickness rather than forgiveness for scandalous sin, as church tradition suggests. A prostitute certainly could be full of demons. But of the demon-possessed people whom we know that Jesus healed none were scandalous sinners.

### I. ALONE THE THREE-FOLD WITNESS

Mary Magdalene is the only individual who is said to be a witness to the crucifixion, burial, and the empty tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel writers place her alone at all three places.

Mary stood at the foot of the cross where Jesus died. She did not run away as the disciples did. She, along with Jesus’ mother, stayed right there to give him comfort, hear his last words, and see his last breath.

Mary went with Joseph and Nicodemus to the tomb as they carried the body of Jesus away from Golgotha. She helped with the spices and the linen wrapping. She did for him what she could. It reminds me of another Mary, the sister of Martha, who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume—"for the day of my burial"—Jesus told his disciples (John 12:7).

Mary Magdalene, along with all who loved Jesus of Nazareth, endured a long and dark Sabbath on that Passover. The feasting had no appeal for them. Life as they knew it was over with the death of Jesus, and all their hopes were shattered. Luke alone records a little of this sorrowful interlude among the followers of Jesus: *The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment* (Luke 23:55-56).

(Matthew, however, lets us in on the activities of the enemies of Jesus. The chief priests and Pharisees went back to Pilate to alert him to the possibility of a staged resurrection of Jesus. Soldiers were deployed to seal the tomb and guard it for the next few days.)

## II. ALONE IN THE GARDEN

Mary Magdalene comes "to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses." The sun is barely glowing behind the Mount of Olives, and she is ready to finish the work of burial that they had to abandon in haste with the arrival of the Sabbath Day.

I have stood in two or three gardens around the old City of Jerusalem. The one I like the most is next to Gordon's Calvary. It is a peaceful, quiet place where you can imagine the gardener arriving early to water the plants and tend the roses.

Mary arrives first that morning and discovers that the large boulder which sealed the tomb has been rolled aside. She sees that the body is gone, and she runs to report to Peter and the other disciples what she has found. Peter and John respond with a footrace to the garden. John wins the race, but stops at the door of the tomb hewn out of stone. Peter passes him by, dashes into the tomb, and sees the incredible sight—the burial linen laid there like an empty cocoon. The face napkin is folded up and put aside.

John then entered the tomb and "saw and believed" (John 20:8). They still did not understand the Scriptural prediction of the resurrection of Jesus, but John believed that Jesus had done what he said he would do—rise from the grave.

## III. ALONE AGAIN

The disciples sprint back to the Upper Room or wherever they are congregated to make their report. And Mary Magdalene is once again in the garden alone, crying. To bury the one you love is the most emotional event in your life. To find that body gone without explanation compounds the grief and sorrow.

\*\*\*One spring after we moved to this location I tried to calm a young man who found his mother's grave disturbed. He was beside himself with confusion and grief. We went to the grave that morning and talked to the grave tenders and discovered that a family burial had taken place without this young man's knowledge.

Mary checked the grave again, bending over to look inside. She sees two angels all aglow seated at the head and foot of that stone shelf where they had placed the body of Jesus. They ask her, "Woman, why are you crying?" (John 20:12). I don't think this is a rebuke. I think the angels may actually be puzzled.

Mary still assumes there is a simple, ordinary explanation for the absence of the body. "They"—whoever they might be—"have taken my Lord away," she told the two angels, "and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13).

## IV. ALONE WITH JESUS

A. ANGELS: At that moment Mary turned around and saw Jesus, but she thought he was the gardener. He breaks the news to her slowly with two questions, "Why are you crying?" and "Who is it you are looking for?" (John 20:15). Mary responds in a way consistent with her understanding from her first arrival before sunrise: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him" (John 20:15).

B. MARY: Jesus said to her, "Mary." That is all she needed. Her name falling from his lips parted the veil. She now knows that this is Jesus to whom she speaks. She cries out, "Teacher!" and gives him a hug, as I envision it.

C. THE FATHER: Jesus pries her loose and sends her to the disciples to tell them that he is "returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17).

Jesus is letting her know—and the disciples know—that he is going away. He does not want them to think that he will be hanging around permanently for them to see and touch.

But he will be going to be with a familiar person—his Father and theirs. He has taught them all about the Father in his years of ministry. They know that the Father loves them. They know they are destined to live in the Father's house where he is preparing rooms for each of

them. They will one day eat at the Father's table in the big banquet hall. The Father will receive them then just as he is about to receive Jesus, his One and Only Son.

D. I HAVE SEEN THE LORD! This is Mary Magdalene's report to the disciples.

1. Seeing the empty tomb is startling, confusing, and amazing. Seeing angels is fearful and astonishing. But seeing Jesus is the best possible news in this universe. She saw him one-on-one, when she was left alone in the garden.
2. Every person stands before God alone. We are each responsible for our own answer given to God. No one can give that answer for us, not parent or priest.
3. We are alone in our death despite the company of loved ones or medical professionals. Each one of us will die singly just as we came into this world one by one. We view the tombs and know that one day it will be our turn.
4. We come to the garden alone. Each one of us enters the garden with his own questions and beliefs. We stand before the empty tomb alone in mind and heart. Here before the tomb we make our personal decision and live with that personal choice.