

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

March 29-April 4, 2020

Sermon Series: This Changes Everything

Week Five: "From Mary to the First Evangelist"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

O God our Father, renew our spirits and draw our hearts to You, that our work may not be to us a burden, but a delight; and give us such love for You as to make our obedience a joy. Help us, so that we might serve You with the cheerfulness and gladness of children, delighting in You and rejoicing in all that is to the honor of Your name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Throughout the Gospels we find that when people encountered Jesus they were changed, and for the better. That same transformation is available to you, a change for the better, when you encounter Christ in your life.

This Week's Sermon Theme:

Jesus chose to show His resurrected self to Mary Magdalene before any other follower. He then commanded Mary to go and tell the Good News of the Resurrection to the others. Are you open to Jesus using you to tell others?

Sunday Scripture Reading: John 20:11-18 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What is Mary doing outside Jesus' tomb? (20:11)

What does Mary see inside the tomb? (20:12)

What do they ask Mary, and how does she reply? (20:13)

Who does Mary see when she turns around from these two angels, and does she recognize Him? (20:14)

What does Jesus ask Mary, and what does He add to the question from the angels? (20:15)

Who does Mary think Jesus is, and what does she think He has done? (20:15)

How does Jesus respond to Mary's question? How does Mary respond to Jesus' response? (20:16)

What does Jesus tell Mary to do, and what message is she to carry with her? (20:17)

What does Mary do next, and what message does she announce first? (20:18)

What else does she say? (20:18)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are "I wonder" questions that the group might want to pursue together.

We might wonder, why did Mary Magdalene stay at the tomb after the disciples had left?

What might Mary have thought when she saw two angels in the tomb? Do you think she KNEW they were angels, or does John just tell us that they were?

We also might wonder, what happens to the angels after Mary turns around and sees Jesus, without realizing it is Him?

And, why couldn't she recognize Him? Is it just because she would never have EXPECTED to see Jesus? Or did He somehow look different from usual?

We also might wonder why Mary would presume that a gardener would have carried the body away somewhere else!

It seems like it is significant that Mary finally recognizes Jesus only after He calls her by name. Why might that fact be emphasized in the story?

Why do you think Jesus might have told Mary "do not hold on to me"? What reasons can you think of?

What response do you think Mary would have anticipated when she went to tell the disciples? Do you think she would have expected them to trust and believe her?

Why do you think the story doesn't actually give us the disciples' reaction at that point, but moves on to the story of Jesus actually appearing to them, too?

Why do you think Mary was so willing to go and do what Jesus asked her to do?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: John 20:1-10; Mark 16:5; Matthew 28:2-3; Luke 24:4; Luke 24:13-35; John 21:4-7; Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:1-11; John 20:28; Mark 16:11; Luke 24:11; John 20:24-25

In the verses leading up to today's Scripture (John 20:1-10), Mary Magdalene has already been to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away. It is Peter and "the other disciple" who have entered the tomb to find Jesus' body missing and departed again. Now, Mary Magdalene stands outside, crying – not in mourning, per se, but because of the disappearance of the body. This would be a horribly upsetting occurrence for anyone, in any time, but in first century Jewish culture, this kind of abuse of the dead would have been extraordinarily shocking and offensive. Now, Mary, for perhaps the first time, looks inside to see for herself. Whereas the male disciples had seen only grave cloths, Mary Magdalene sees something astonishing – two angels, where Jesus' head and foot should have been.

The language surrounding these angels varies in each of the four Gospel accounts. In Mark 16:5, a single "young man" dressed in white appears to the women who visit the tomb. In Matthew 28:2-3, it is "an angel" with the appearance of lightning, with a garment "white as snow." In Luke 24:4, we have "two men" in brilliant, gleaming white clothing. Even in the cases where the language is of "men," it is clear the writers have angelic beings in mind, because in first century symbolism, bright white garments are always representative of the heavenly world. More importantly, the fact that angels are present is meant to suggest that Jesus is not the victim of a grave-robbery. Rather, heavenly powers are at work here – it is God who has taken Jesus. But at this point in the story, it is not clear why.

In each of the Gospel stories of the empty tomb, the angels inquire after what the women are seeking. Here, this inquiry takes the form of the question, "why are you crying?" Mary answers, but immediately senses another presence behind her. Consistent with other resurrection appearances, Mary does not recognize Jesus at first (see the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35 and of the disciples on the sea of Tiberius in John 21:4-7). There is an important theological truth at work here – it is possible for Jesus to be present, but for us not to recognize Him until revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. It is only when Jesus speaks Mary's name to her, only when Jesus reveals Himself to Mary that she is able to understand what has happened. Jesus need not be lost to Mary – the personal relationship they had could continue in a deeper, and even more personal level than had been possible when Jesus was alive!

The request Jesus makes to Mary, "Don't hold on to me" might be perplexing. Notice that in Matthew 28:9, the women at the tomb grab hold of Jesus' feet and worship Him. This language means that they prostrated themselves before Jesus – an action very typical of Eastern customs, including clasping the feet of the person being honored. Almost certainly, the same scene is assumed in John's telling of the story. Mary Magdalene has prostrated herself before Jesus in a posture of submission, clasping His feet, to pay Him honor and adoration. It is a very normal expression of affection in Mary's culture. Perhaps, in telling Mary not to hold on to Him, Jesus is relating a new truth. Whereas, in our way of life, physical contact is a primary way of encountering reality, contact with the risen Christ takes place on a different level – through the spiritual means of faith.

One interesting note on Jesus' reply about His ascension – it might be easy for us to think Jesus is implying "I haven't ascended yet, but I will soon." We usually think of Jesus' ascension as a singular

event that took place 40 days after His Resurrection, especially given the way Luke describes the scene in Luke 24:50-51 and Acts 1:1-11. John does not portray the ascension in the same way, but the language translated “I am returning to my Father” (NIV) or “I’m going up to my Father” (CEB) in our Scripture reading strongly implies that Jesus’ ascension is something that is actively happening NOW, in the present tense of the narrative! Jesus’ initial words “I have not yet returned” (NIV) imply that the action has BEGUN, but has not yet been COMPLETED. For John, the Resurrection appearances all happen DURING Jesus’ ascension to the Father! In John, Mary is not told to go and tell the others “Jesus is risen” (as in the other Gospels), but that “Jesus is ascending”! In John’s theology, the redeeming work of Christ, the true fulfillment of Jesus’ mission, can be fully known only through Christ’s life, death, resurrection, AND ascension. The ascension brings the cyclical mission of the Son of God, descended to earth in human form, and now returning to the Father, to completion. The fact that Jesus is returning to the Father verifies His divine origin, and that He is worthy of ongoing worship and adoration. Jesus is truly God, as Thomas will exclaim in John 20:28!

The culmination of the story, though, is that Mary Magdalene is obedient to her Lord. Jesus told her to go and tell the other disciples that He is returning to His father and their Father, and she goes. Mary thus becomes the first evangelist to share the news that Jesus is risen. John gives no indication of how the other disciples received her news. According to Mark 16:11, they could not believe her, and in Luke 24:11, the disciples think the witness of the women is nonsense, and again, refuse to believe them. While John may not have the story of the reaction of the disciples to Mary’s testimony, his is the only Gospel to relate the story of Thomas’ unbelief after the witness of the rest of the disciples (John 20:24-25). Thus, even John includes the fact that the initial response to testimony of the resurrection is disbelief.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Mary did not recognize Jesus until He called her by name. How has Jesus revealed Himself personally to you?

Do you agree with the statement that Jesus might be present, but that we are unable to recognize Him?

What does it take for us to see Jesus in the world?

What does Mary’s initial reaction to seeing Jesus say about how we should respond to seeing Jesus at work in our world? What is the role of worship in our faith? What is the role of Jesus’ divinity in our worship?

Why do you think the natural response any of the disciples had to seeing Jesus was to go and tell others they had seen Him? Is there more to it than the shock of seeing a dead man alive again?

How have you personally responded to the witness of Mary Magdalene, as transmitted to us through the generations?

Are you open to Jesus using you to tell others about Him?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, open our eyes to the presence of Christ in our world; give us ears to hear when Jesus calls us by name; and transform us into people who are so astounded and overjoyed by the Good News of Jesus' Resurrection that we cannot help but tell others, so that they too might experience this joy. We pray in Jesus' holy name, Amen.