

John 20:1-19

- When we first meet Mary Magdalene in this passage, her world had been turned upside down. Her dearest friend Jesus, to whom she owed a huge debt of gratitude (Jesus had delivered Mary from the torment of demonic possession Mark 16:9), and to whom she had committed time, loyalty and resources in support of his ministry for 3 years, had been killed by the authorities 3 days earlier. She had watched him die on the cross and, in her profound loss and grief, wanted to carry out one last act of love and devotion in tending to his body with spices, according to the custom. Early on the first day of the week we find her in shock and distress at finding the large stone in front of Jesus' tomb removed and Jesus' body apparently taken.

As we think briefly about this event, we can reflect on 2 things:

1. What had Mary forgotten?

Let's not be too harsh on Mary – she is overwhelmed by grief and shock. No doubt traumatized by what she's experienced, running to tell Peter and John about her awful discovery and now back, weeping at the empty tomb – she must be exhausted and drained of all capacity to think straight.

She can't make sense of the neatly folded burial cloths (the head cloth folded separately). Even the sight of the angels sitting where Jesus' body has been and her brief conversation with them don't appear to shake her from her desperation to find Jesus' body!

We read in Luke 24:6-8 that the angels remind Mary of what she seems to have forgotten - that Jesus had said he was going to die but also that he was going to rise from the dead. Like the disciples, she couldn't take it in at the time and certainly not now! Finding Jesus' body is all that fills her heart and mind. And we can sympathize deeply.

But...

2. What does Mary discover?

To her amazement and wonder, Mary discovers there's no need to search for Jesus' body. He is right there behind her as she peers into his tomb! He's alive!

But Mary's joy isn't instant because at first she doesn't realize who he is! Perhaps blinded by tears and the confusion of her thoughts and emotions, he thinks he's the gardener. What a tender moment of irony when Mary asks Jesus himself where he is!

Only as she hears the familiar way that Jesus' says her name does Mary turn to him in the full delight of recognition. What a poignant moment that was, as Mary reaches out to cling to Jesus (though he will gently rebuke and explain to her why she doesn't need to) – how we can relate to this instinctive gesture in these times!

How we can take great comfort from this precious scene...

Like Mary, we may feel our world, with all its familiar patterns and routines and hopes and plans, has been turned upside down. Someone commented to me that things don't feel "real" at the moment. How Mary must have felt the same.

Maybe we feel unsettled, full of worry, anxiety or fear. Maybe we are feeling the consequences of the lockdown hard to bear, making other burdens harder to cope with - the repercussions are affecting us all in a variety of ways. For some it's the loss of purpose/role, lethargy or boredom as the days stretch out ahead they find tough. Some of us find being confined to home harder to bear than others – for some, however, there is relief from a slower pace of life! Certainly, being isolated from relatives and dear friends is hard for most of us.

Like Mary, we may find that we are so overwhelmed and distracted by what is consuming our hearts and minds at any one time that we forget and don't "see" that Jesus is right there with us, concerned for our particular need (he asked Mary kindly "Why are you weeping?"). But he IS there with us just as he was with Mary, no longer the earthly Jesus, but the risen Lord and Saviour that

we will remember on Easter Sunday, and who has now ascended into Heaven and rules at the right hand of the Father.

The one who is with us is the all-powerful yet loving Saviour who gives us his all-sufficient grace for EVERY need and every hurdle. Risen from the grave, conquering sin and death, he now sustains us and keeps our feet from slipping. We may not see him as Mary saw him, but he lives now in our hearts by faith, and blesses us and comforts us with his presence when 2 or 3 gather together in his name, even if it's through Zoom or a live-streamed service!

This special relationship we enjoy as believers is the one Jesus was preparing Mary for when he gently urges her not to hold on to him – he would shortly be “returning to my Father” v17 and she, like us, would need to live by faith and not by sight

Let's pray for the eye of faith to see Jesus beside us giving us grace exactly as we need it. May we be able to share in Mary's joy that we “have seen the Lord!” v18 in our time of need and share that encouragement with others – either with other believers or even with those who don't yet know him, as the Lord gives opportunity. And we can look forward to that day when we WILL see him face to face!

And like Mary, we need to remember what the Lord has told us in the past and draw on the promises in his Word to help and strengthen us.

Someone has once said “Remember in the darkness what you learned in the light”. Let's cling to the promises of God that we've heard in the past and find fresh hope in them today.

Who can you reach out to with those promises today?

To think about ...

1. How have you recently had to “remember in the darkness what you learned in the light” or known the Lord near? What brought help and comfort – were there any particular Bible verses that sustained you?
2. How has the Lord used others to reach out to comfort or strengthen you recently– in practical or other ways?
3. Have you had opportunities to speak about the Lord with friends and neighbours or share His love with them?