

BaptistWay Bible Series for February 18: God still is a God who sends

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• John 20:1-21

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Although the narrative of the fourth Gospel makes clear women were numbered among Jesus' faithful followers, and several women played important roles in the unfolding drama of Jesus' life and ministry, the spotlight has shined clearly on Jesus and his male disciples.

Now, in the dark despair that has followed Jesus' brutal execution, the scene opens in chapter 20 with a solitary figure who makes her way before dawn to the borrowed tomb where Jesus' lifeless body had been lain.

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“While it was still dark” (v. 1) is more than a description of the pre-dawn conditions. It echoes the theme of darkness and light woven throughout the Gospel. It also describes the heartbrokenness and grief Jesus’ followers had experienced on Golgotha—a darkness beyond any night they had known or imagined. Jesus had come as light and life into the world in the glowing promise that the darkness could not overcome the light (1:5), but that light and life had been snuffed out.

Witnesses to the wonder

Exhausted and numbed by grief, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb. She had been among the small collection of followers who had gathered near the cross, watching helplessly as Jesus died (19:25). Now, according to John’s account, she is the first witness to the empty tomb. After seeing the stone had been rolled away from the entrance, she assumes grave robbers have come (not an unusual crime in that day). She runs to share that news with Peter and “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” (v. 2), assumed by many scholars to be John, the author of the fourth Gospel.

The unnamed disciple outruns Peter, peers into the tomb and sees only the linen burial cloths lying there, but does not enter. Peter steps inside and also sees the cloths, including one that had been placed on Jesus’ head, now rolled up and sitting to the side (vv. 5-6).

Significantly, as the unnamed disciple joined Peter inside the tomb, “he saw and believed,” despite the fact that the disciples “as yet ... did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (v. 10). The statement not only underscores the nature of belief in Jesus, a theme of the Gospel, but anticipates Jesus’ response later in the day to Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v. 29).

Eyes of faith

Framing the experience of the two disciples, who then return to their homes (v. 10), is Mary Magdalene, and the next paragraph is a gentle and moving account of the first follower to see the resurrected Christ. Unlike the two disciples who saw only the grave cloths, Mary peers through her tears into the tomb and sees a pair of angels (v. 11). Surprisingly, there is no evidence of fear on her part. They ask why she is weeping, and as she responds, she turns to see Jesus.

Jesus repeats the angels’ question, but adds, “Whom are you looking for?” (v. 15), which, as we have seen, is one of the underlying questions of the Gospel narrative. The eyes of faith, however, are not yet focused, not yet free from the blindness of grief and despair. Mary sees, but does not “see,” and assumes the man is the caretaker or gardener. Only when she hears Jesus call her name does she recognize him. Just as he had promised, the sheep know the voice of the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep (10:11-18).

Jesus’ response to what must have been an immediate impulse to embrace him, asking Mary not to cling or hold on to him, may be the writer’s way of emphasizing that this brief portion of Jesus’ ministry is a kind of transition from his historical existence to his heavenly glorification and reunion with the Father. His mission now fulfilled, the close bond between teacher and

disciple cannot simply be resumed on the old terms. Everything has changed.

Sent into the world

Later that evening, the disciples had gathered, perhaps in the same upper room where they had eaten the Last Supper. We only can imagine the range of emotions as they pondered what Peter and John had seen that morning and talked of Mary Magdalene's report of her encounter with the Master outside the tomb. Suddenly, Jesus appeared among them.

"Peace be with you," he said. Perhaps at that moment, several of them remembered his farewell speech when Jesus had assured them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (14:27)." After showing the disciples his hands and side, Jesus repeated the words, "Peace be with you," and then added John's form of the Great Commission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v. 21).

The God of the Bible is a God who sends. So it comes as no surprise as we near the end of the Gospel that the risen Christ, who in the mystery of the Incarnation had been born into human history to live, minister and give his life as God's Son, now speaks words of peace and commissioning to his stunned but overjoyed disciples as he prepares to send them into the world as witnesses to God's love.

The disciples, and all who choose to follow Jesus, are more than followers. Christians are called to live in the world as God's sent people. We are sent to share his mission, to live as he lived, to love as he loved.

Discussion questions

- What is the significance of the resurrection for you? What difference does it make in the way you live?
- What might happen if we were to take seriously our calling, our commissioning, as followers of Jesus who are sent into the world to live lives that are holy and wholly different from the rest of the world?

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