

Mary Magdalene

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[0:01] Let's turn into the chapter we have read, John chapter 20. Rather than deal with a particular verse this morning, I want to deal with a section from verse 11 to verse 18.

We've already read it and there's no point in reading it again. Now, there are not many references in the Gospels to Mary Magdalene, to her life and all that.

And with the exception of Luke, I think it's chapter 8 and round about the second verse, where we are told that Jesus cast seven demons out of her.

But most, if not all, of the other references are in connection with Christ's arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. And yet, although there is not a lot said, there is a lot in the little that is said.

Here was a woman who obviously must have been steeped in sin. And yet, when she was brought to her saving knowledge of Christ, we see her equally hazarded in her pursuit after spiritual blessings.

[1:17] We see how much she devoted her life and time and energy to serving the Master. And maybe in the passing, we should just pause and remind ourselves of the importance of devoting our times and gifts and energy to his service whilst we can.

The day might come when we might not be able to do much for him. And whilst we have our health and our strength and all these opportunities, let us make the very most of them.

Well, we find that Mary Magdalene was never far from the Master. Yes, she observed what took place when he was crucified. She observed where he was buried.

And here we find her now on the third day coming to the sepulcher. That is the setting. And this morning, I want to look at four points briefly. First of all, I would like to look at her misplaced sorrow. Secondly, I want to look at her darkness dispelled. Thirdly, I want to look at her commission. And lastly, her obedience. First of all, then, let us look at her misplaced sorrow.

[2:32] You know, friends, we all have our share of misplaced sorrow. All we have to do is look at Scripture itself and we can find there quite a number of examples.

Let me just pick one in the passing. We have Jacob mourning for Joseph. And the tears he shed, they were needless tears.

And there you have an example of misplaced sorrow. Yes, Joseph was alive whilst his father was mourning. Joseph was a famous man in Egypt, though his father at home went on mourning.

And the mourning was so acute that Jacob firmly believed that he would go down into the grave mourning for his son. Why was that?

Well, on the one hand, of course, Joseph was lost. Secondly, the coat of many colors dipped in blood. It was very difficult to refute these things, very difficult to believe otherwise. And yet there was something very vital that Jacob overlooked.

[3:37] What was that? Well, do you remember the dreams that Joseph had? And when Joseph told his father and his brothers these dreams, we are, of course, reminded that Jacob observed these things.

In other words, he believed that what he had dreamed about would eventually come to pass. He forgot all that. And there is a lesson there for you and for me.

And here we have another example. Mary Magdalene. Here she was at the sepulcher weeping because the sepulcher was empty.

There would have been real cause for weeping if she had found the body of the Lord in that sepulcher. There would have been real cause not only for her, but for the whole of mankind to

weep.

Misplaced sorrow, needless tears. Why? What was the cause of all this?

[4:43] Confused understanding. Didn't Jesus tell them that within three days he would rise again? She was confused about the doctrines of salvation.

And that is true concerning you and me as well. We have our own share of unbelief, haven't we?

We have our own share of doubts and fears, haven't we?

Why? Is it not because our understanding is confused? There are many justified people in our congregations and they're not too sure whether they've ever been justified or not.

And if you ask them why, they'll reply, well, I find so much sin in my heart. In other words, they are confusing justification with sanctification.

They think that a justified person should be a holy person. And there is a form of holiness in connection with justification. Because the word holy has a lot of connotations, hasn't it?

[5:53] It was applied even to inanimate things. Never mind to God's people. But when we speak of holiness or sanctification, we're thinking in terms of subjective sanctification.

And it's wrong, friends, to think along these lines when we're looking at justification. And the reason why people confuse this is because they look at justification in a moral sense, like the Roman Catholics do.

It must be viewed in a legal sense or a judicial or forensic sense. In other words, they put it as simple as we possibly can. When a person is justified, he is no longer treated as a guilty person.

Yes, there will be sin in your heart. But you must take your eye off the sin that's in the heart and look to the ground of your justification, which is Christ's righteousness.

And what is Christ's righteousness? His perfect obedience. Obedience into death. That is Christ's righteousness.

[7:05] And by that obedience and death, he merited salvation for his people. And that righteousness is put to your credit and to my credit as if we had rendered it ourselves.

So we become confused sometimes about these matters. Yes, sanctification, of course, is the work of God's free grace.

And the Spirit is a great sanctifier. And any justified person has a longing after holiness. And if he or she has not that longing, then, of course, that person could never have been justified.

So we become confused and we have misplaced tears, wondering if we've ever been brought to a saving knowledge of the Savior. Wondering if we have ever passed from darkness into light.

And then we have misplaced tears as well about many things in life. We worry about tomorrow and the following week and the following week again, when God gives us grace but for today.

[8:08] If we could only bear today's burdens with dignity. If only we could bear today's burdens to the glory of God. But we don't. We fall so far short of his glory in these matters.

Why do we burden ourselves with tomorrow's cares when we haven't been given grace to bear these burdens? It'll be given tomorrow, but not today. Needless tears as well.

So here then, we find Mary mourning, weeping bitterly at the empty tomb when she should have been rejoicing.

Maybe you are here today and you're downcast and you're mourning and you're miserable when you should be rejoicing. You are Christ's property. You have been bought with a price.

Rejoice, rejoice, said Paul, and again I say rejoice. You have cause for rejoicing. You will never again enter into condemnation.

[9:11] Isn't that wonderful? At this very moment, you're a justified person. At this very moment, you are God's property. You are his child. And he loves you with an everlasting love.

Well, let us leave then our first point there and move on to the second point. And our second point is, of course, her darkness dispelled.

She came to the sepulcher. She didn't find the body of Jesus there. But the sepulcher wasn't empty. There were two angels there. Why were they there?

What was their function? Well, people have speculated and we won't succumb to that speculation. Maybe they were just marking out that sacred spot where the body of our Lord had lain. We don't know. But we do find angels featuring very prominently in the life of Christ. That is, during his state of humiliation.

[10:14] Did they not herald his birth? They did. They did. They did not minister to his needs after the temptations. They did. And what a joyous occasion that must have been to the Savior.

The Bible doesn't tell us everything. But it is always a moment of joy and triumph when we have resisted the tempter. There is no sin in being tempted.

It is when we yield to the temptation that is when we sin. And each time we are tempted and we resisted the temptation, we are strengthened in the faith.

The joy, friends, is most exhilarating when we have resisted a temptation. If you had been in the heart of Abraham on his way back from that very sore trial, I am sure that his heart that day was aglow with the love of the Lord.

He would have been full of the joy of the Lord. And so are we when we resist the tempter. And isn't it equally true when we yield to a temptation?

[11:30] We are miserable. And we can regret it at leisure. And the scriptures remind us that if we resist the tempter, he will flee from us.

So we find that the angels featured there after the temptations. We see an angel also being sent by God to the Garden of Gethsemane to strengthen the Savior.

Isn't that amazing? His sorrow was great. He was shedding, as it were, great drops of blood. Why? Was it because he was imagining the sore trial that was before him? No. You and I, of course, can torment ourselves about many things.

Let's say a loved one went missing and we can imagine awful things. Maybe that the person is dead and so forth. After a few days, maybe that loved one will turn up and we realize, well, there was no need to have sorrow as we did.

[12:39] But with the Lord Jesus Christ, it wasn't so. It was necessary that he should have a clear vision of the sorrow that was before him.

Why? Without that clear vision, he would have been going into it blindfolded. That wouldn't have done.

So he had to have a clear vision. And in going into it, it had to be an act of his will. To do thy will, I take.

Delighted thou my God at heart. And little wonder then, that he sweated as it were great drops of blood. And an angel was sent to strengthen him.

What kind of strengthening did the angel give him? We do not know. And here, now, at the resurrection, there are two angels present within the sepulchre.

[13:37] And the question they put to Mary wasn't at all, friends, to extract some information from her, but to express sympathy and to arrest attention.

And unawares, Jesus, the risen Lord, was very close to Mary at that moment.

She didn't realize it. We often speak of the Lord being near and the Lord being far away, having the presence of the Lord.

And so, what do we mean? What do we mean? God is an omnipresent God. God isn't by case one spot to be in another spot.

He is everywhere in his fullness, all at once. So in that sense, we always have God's presence. But we also have his presence in a very special way where his people are.

[14:39] Because by his spirit, he dwells in them. Doesn't he? And he never takes his spirit from them. So in that sense, God is always present where his people are.

So what do we mean, then, by having God's presence and not having God's presence? When he never withdraws his spirit from his people. Well, there are occasions when we all might lose consciousness of God's gracious presence.

Maybe when we are disobedient. And God, as it were, hides his face from us. And then we are troubled. And that's something of the trouble that David had after he had sinned. Cast me not from thy sight, nor take thy Holy Spirit away.

There's no fear of God taking his spirit from David. But David had behaved in such an obnoxious way, he felt that he was like a reprobator, that God would cast him forever from his presence. And surely that reminds us of the importance of walking obediently before God. To have his gracious presence. To be aware of his gracious presence and of his nearness.

[15:51] And yet God can be near at times. In retrospect, we can say, yes, it was the Lord. But at the time, we can be confused. He was near to Mary at this time.

And she didn't realize. She thought it was the gardener. He walked the two on the way to Emmaus. And they didn't recognize him until their eyes were opened. But in retrospect, they were able to say, ah, but our hearts burn within us.

Our hearts burn within us. Whilst this traveler accompanied us in the way. And then, of course, the disciples, when he walked towards them on the sea, they thought it was a ghost.

They never thought it was the Lord. And how often has that been true concerning you and concerning me? We feel that the Lord has forgotten us. And he's near. Sickness comes.

And we're trying to say, ah, the Lord doesn't care for me. See what he has brought upon me.

Bereavement comes. And the home is cast into gloom and sorrow. The Lord doesn't love me.

[16:54] He doesn't care. And yet, in retrospect, the sick person can say, ah, but look at the fortitude with which I was blessed in my sickness.

And the bereaved person can look back and say, look at the strength I had to bear that heavy burden. I wasn't crushed and overwhelmed by it. Why?

Because the Lord was present. The Lord was near. The Lord undertook for me. The Lord helped me. The Lord is indeed our helper. And here he was, especially near to Mary.

And she didn't realize it was the risen Lord. Remember how Job on one occasion said, behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive him.

On the left hand where he worketh, but I cannot behold him. He hides himself on the right hand, and I cannot see him. But he knoweth the way that I take, and when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

[17:58] In his going forward, backward, looking to the left and to the right, God was present in all that. He didn't realize it. David, on another occasion, said that he went forward, faint, but pursuing.

He just felt like giving up. But even in that, the Lord was present. And as you and I go forward, you know, pilgrimage, the Lord is present.

We feel at times very discouraged. And you know, we are living in darkness. There's a lot to discourage your hearts. A lot. We must also maintain a balance. There's a lot to be thankful for.

There's a lot to discourage us as well. I mean, when I look at your own congregation here, I suppose it must be one of the largest congregations in the Free Church in Maine and Scotland.

And yet, friends, this building was built to accommodate the people. It was built, I suppose, to demand. There was a day when every pew here was packed. And why are we as a denomination forced to adopt a policy of retrenchment, linking up lots of little congregations?

[19:08] It's not because there's depopulation in these areas. That's not the reason why. And it's not because there are not people in Inverness that this place is half empty. It's the day we're living in, friends.

It's a sad day, a dark day. So whilst we're thankful, it also fills us with sadness. May the Lord yet do a mighty work and turn people to himself.

But have we any warrant to believe that he will visit again our nation and turn us to himself? No, I don't think we have. When we dip into history, there are names there that are sacred to us.

Because they are almost synonymous with the blessing of the Spirit. And you look at these very areas now, they're just spiritual wildernesses. Might not the same happen to Scotland sometime.

We don't know. But we rejoice in the Lord that he is still working in many areas of the world. Many areas. And just a wee word in the passing.

[20:07] When we were over in Romania, standing there preaching to 3,000 people was most exhilarating. And listening to the singing of these people, it was just out of this world.

And I think it would do every minister and every office in our church, it would be atonic to them to see that for themselves. And hear that for themselves.

So just because we are experiencing, to a great extent, a spiritual blight in Britain, God is blessing his word in other areas of the world.

And you know, people here complain if a service is five or ten minutes longer than usual. This morning service there in Aradia begins at half past eight in the morning.

And it ends at midday. And you won't find a seat in that church at quarter past eight. I saw it with my own eyes. And it's an effort getting to the pulpit. And if a fire were to break out, it would be a disaster.

[21:10] Every square foot is occupied. I'm of the belief even that there was a standing room even in the toilets. And I'm not exaggerating. Everything. They're out on the street with microphones. It is like something you were rid of, rid about from the past.

It's happening now. And so, friends, the master, the risen Lord, eventually identified himself. Mary. She recognized his voice. Wouldn't you recognize the voice of a loved one if he called to you out of the darkness? You would. And he knows each of his people by name.

Does he not number the stars? He counts the stars. He names them one by one. The hairs of our head are all numbered. He calls his own sheep by name and they follow him.

He knows you by name. And all the name encapsulates. Our nature, our character, our weaknesses, our gifts, everything. He knows us exhaustively.

[22:10] Mary. Mary. And her response, a bone eye. She recognized him. It was the voice of her beloved. And listen, friends.

Is it not true that the voice of God is sweeter to us than any voice in this world? You might say, what do you mean by the voice of God? His word.

If sorrow comes to you or sorrow comes to the home or you are faced with something crucial, you can turn to the word. And if the word of God is with you, you need not fear.

It is sweet, friends. We can be so despondent at times. We can there go down into the depth. And a word from himself.

And we rise immediately to the crest. And you know, by this one word, Mary, her darkness was immediately dispelled.

[23:15] Her doubts were immediately dissipated. Her fear was immediately allayed. And her confidence restored. Oh, how quickly the Lord could revive his people.

How quickly he could give life to the dead. That animating power belongs to him. That we would experience, friends, a day of his power.

We need it. And the time is racing by. Third point. Her commission. Now, Mary could have said, listen, Lord, I want us to stay here with yourself.

I want us to be alone here. I want to learn more about you. I want to enjoy this fellowship with you. But no.

He gave her a commission. Go to my brethren. I think that was about the first time he called them brethren. Before then, they were called servants. And in one of the other gospels, we know that Peter was singled out.

[24:20] He was mentioned specially. Go to my brethren. And Peter, because he knew that Peter was downcast and troubled because of his sin. And she was to convey the glad tidings to them that the Lord was indeed risen.

You know, friends, we have to be careful that we don't become unwittingly selfish even in worshiping God. There's the grave danger of confining your Christian life to our own private worship, to coming to God's house, observing the Sabbath day.

And beyond that, of course, we don't engage in anything else. You know, we have a ministry on our doorstep. And very often, it's a strange irony.

We can have more concern and soul for people we have never seen than we might have for our very neighbors who go nowhere. I am sure every one of us, every one of us present here today has an unbelieving neighbor or unbelieving neighbors.

Have we ever spoken to them about the gospel? Have we? Have we ever made an effort to get them to church? Have we? Just imagine if every single person here were to manage to get one person to church.

[25:40] You would double your congregation. And I feel strongly about this, that there's a very important ministry here for our women folk. The women, I think, are gifted in communicating with other women and getting into their confidence and so forth.

And I am certain, friends, that if our women were to try and invite unbelieving neighbors into their home and befriend them and so on, that through time, at least some of them would succeed in getting some of these people to God's house.

There's a ministry on our own doorstep. What are we doing about it? Very often it is left to the minister and left to the elders. No, we're workers together in his vineyard.

We have to share the good news. That we are worshiping not only a crucified, but a risen Lord. And we rejoice that he's at the right hand of God. We call that his session.

And that is to continue until he returns again. And he is mighty to save. Good news. And we find then that this was her commission by the Lord to go and tell his brethren that he was risen.

[27:01] What glad tidings. And that brings us on to our final point. Her obedience. You know yourself, if you're the bearer of glad tidings, you do so with alacrity, don't you?

You're longing to meet the first person to share the glad news with them. You have a person who has to pass a driving test. He's longing, or she is longing, to meet someone and say, I've passed. If someone has passed his or her final exams, they're longing to tell people. If a woman is engaged, she's longing to tell people she's engaged. If she's getting married, she's longing to tell people she's getting married.

The same can apply to the man as well. Love to share good news. Don't we? And yet, you know, there's something subtle about us.

We're just as loathe to tell people about their failures. Aren't we? If a person fails a driving test, I hope nobody asks me. If a person fails his final exams, he or she is hopeful nobody asks.

[28:08] But we want to share good news. And there's no news of the gospel. We should want to share the good news.

So she went with haste to her disciples. I know the greatest mark of saving grace is obedience to the revealed will of God. If you love me, keep my commandments.

Obedience. May God bless these few thoughts. Let us pray. Most gracious God, keep us forever at thy footstool.

And when we elect your others, may we apply it in the first place to ourselves. And grant each of us grace to practice what thy word requires of us.

Be with us, you in the remaining part of this day. Sanctify to each of us the reading of thy word in its proclamation. Keep us in safety and pardon sin.

[29:13] For the remorse sake. Amen.