

What Persuaded Mary

You might have discussed religion with someone who is sceptical or doubtful, and one of the things that people will say is, “I need proof to believe. I can't just act on blind faith. You need to prove to me that the Bible is true, or that Jesus rose from the dead.” And of course, that's perfectly reasonable. We all want some kind of good reason for thinking that anything is true. But an important question to ask the man demanding proof is this, “What would count as proof? If I could provide it, what would you regard as persuasive, as good and reliable evidence that the Bible is true, or that Jesus rose from the dead.”

Why that is important is because Christians have gone to great lengths to show people many of the facts around the resurrection that point to it happening. They've pointed out that Jesus was certified dead on Friday, placed in a sealed tomb, and on Sunday, the body was missing. Almost no one disputes that. Christians have pointed out that none of the enemies had a reason to steal the body, and that none of the disciples had the courage, desire, or even thought to fake a resurrection. They've pointed out that eyewitnesses claimed to have seen Jesus, that the church soon began, and faced great persecution and loss for holding to this belief.

Now, all of this seems quite persuasive to me, but it doesn't seem to create faith in everyone. It seems to me to be a powerful legal case that is almost irrefutable. And yet, it does not count as persuasive evidence for everyone.

Interestingly, we have an amazing example of that in the very first person who saw the risen Christ: Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene appears most prominently in the last days of Jesus, mentioned by all the Gospels as being at the Cross, witnessing the burial, and being the very first to witness the risen Christ. Before that, we know very little about her. Our only reference to her comes from Luke 8: “and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities—Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons,³ and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance.” (Luke 8:2–3)

All we know is somehow she had been possessed by seven demons. There is no evidence that she was immoral or an adulteress. How she came to be possessed is not known, though most often demon possession results from some kind of dabbling in the occult: divination, astrology, seances, drug-use. She is often confused with Mary the sister of Martha, who anointed Jesus' feet with the perfume.

Her surname is not Magdalene; it is that she came from the town of Magdala, one of the towns on the Sea of Galilee, close to Capernaum. Magdalene is similar to how Jesus was called the Nazarene, because He came from Nazareth.

The focus on Mary provides us with an interesting glimpse into what produces real faith in the heart. Mary sees a number of things on this Sunday morning that many would count as evidence, but they do not persuade her. Instead, faith rises up in Mary's heart because of a very particular event that is still true for all of us. Two things did not produce faith in her; one did. What will cause faith to rise in your heart? In the heart of that person you are praying for? We'll see the example as we follow the story in John 20. We begin with the first thing that did not produce faith in Mary.

I. The Missing Body Produced No Faith in Her

¹ Now on the first *day* of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw *that* the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the

other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

The women set out early Sunday morning with spice to anoint the body. Perhaps because of the lateness of the hour on Friday, Nicodemus and Joseph had not been able to finish, and the women came to complete the anointing, and at the very least, to show their adoration to Jesus. We know from the other Gospels that there were several women who headed to the tomb. Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome, and possibly others.

It's very significant that the Gospel writers all say that the first eyewitnesses of the Resurrection were women. In the time of Christ, there was a prejudice against the reliability and intelligence of women. "It is better that the words of the law be burned," said the rabbis, "than be delivered to a woman." So if you lived in the first century, and you were inventing an account of the Resurrection, and you wanted your contemporary readers to feel it was credible and legitimate, you would not have made women the first eye-witnesses. You would have chosen men, men of a certain quality. The fact that the Gospel writers record women as the first witnesses smacks of unvarnished, unedited, factual reporting. Maybe they might have wished it to be another way, but it was God's will that that it happen this way, and so happen it did, and they wrote it down. As one baseball umpire said, "I calls it as I sees it". Or in the words of the apostles, "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20)

John singles out Mary Magdalene from the women who went to the tomb, not because he means she was the only one, but because she played a very particular role, which John wants to bring out. And in fact, in verse 2, Mary uses a plural pronoun "we do not know where they have laid him" – indicating she was with others.

What is most likely is that the women set out together. Perhaps from a distance, Mary saw the stone rolled away, and then ran ahead of the other women, who were likely somewhat older than she was. She got there, and the text doesn't tell us that she went in; but she likely saw that the tomb was empty. At that point, she turned around and ran back to where Peter and John were, maybe even taking a shortcut.

While Mary is running back into the city is likely when the remaining women see the two angels, who tell them Jesus is risen, and then they make their way back, much more slowly.

In fact, even the slightly divergent accounts of the resurrection speak to its authenticity. When police investigators interview people about a crime, or an accident, they actually expect truthful witnesses to have slightly differing accounts, because of perspective, where they were, what angle they saw the events. When two witnesses have identical stories, investigators usually suspect them of collusion, of working together to construct a false story, because they both tell the same story in exactly the same way. The fact that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John agree on the event, while filling in extra details that the other omits, shows that these were eye-witnesses, not script-writers.

In the meantime, Mary reaches Peter and John, tells them that someone has interfered with the tomb: the body is gone, the stone is rolled away.

Apparently, resurrection has not entered her mind; she is certain this can only be some act done by the enemies of Jesus or something like that. The empty tomb has not persuaded her. The missing body of Jesus is not proof to her of the resurrection. Right now, her only interpretation of that event is some very human act either of mistake or of mischief. She sees no spiritual significance, no truth, no fulfilment of prophecy. All she sees is an empty tomb, a missing body, some kind of desecration

of Jesus' burial.

For many people, the empty tomb is not enough to prove Jesus rose from the dead. That it was empty is plain as day. For had it still been occupied, the Jewish rulers would have made sure it was publicly seen and noticed, and would have squashed any claims of resurrection. In fact, Matthew 27 records that they feared an empty tomb, and asked for a guard to make sure the body remained in there. The tomb was empty, the body was gone, but that did not produce faith in her heart.

II. The Misshapen Grave Clothes Produced No Faith In Her

³ Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. ⁴ So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. ⁵ And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying *there*; yet he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying *there*, ⁷ and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. ⁹ For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went away again to their own homes.

Peter and John head out to the tomb, with Mary, by now probably a bit winded, trailing behind. John was fleet of foot and arrived there first, but what he had in speed, he lacked in impulsiveness, and he waits outside the tomb. When Peter finally catches up, he dashes in to the tomb, and finds the grave-clothes, and the handkerchief, or facecloth there. Now this scene was already remarkable.

Why? First of all, the grave-clothes are still there. They had not been removed, not been taken, but were still present, but with no body within them. They were also somewhat orderly, not torn, shredded, thrown wildly or randomly around the tomb. Verse 5 tells us that what Peter saw was the linen still in place, not thrown aside, not crumpled up.

Second, the face-cloth is not just where it was, but folded up. Someone had taken a few moments to fold it neatly, and place it in a place by itself. In other words, it was placed in another part of the tomb.

When John enters the tomb, he sees this. He then believes. Why?

Because the state and shape of the grave-clothes told him that Jesus' body had not simply been moved. This was not merely a removal of a body from one tomb to another. Mary's idea was clearly mistaken. If you were just moving the body of Jesus to another tomb, you wouldn't take the body out of its wrappings, you would leave them on.

Also, the state and shape of the grave-clothes told John that no one had stolen the body of Jesus. This was not the scene of a grave robbery. As anyone who's been robbed knows, robbers are not neat and orderly. They don't fold things for you after they tear your place apart.

If someone, for some reason, wanted to steal the body of Jesus, why would you take strip away the wrappings, and only take the body? If anything, you'd take them with you! After all, linen was expensive, as were all the spices. Furthermore, if you're trying to steal a body, which is heavy, the shroud would make the stolen body easier to carry; it would mask the smell of the decomposing body, it would be easier to disguise if you needed to smuggle it out.

Jesus' body has not been moved accidentally or purposefully. This is not the scene of a grave robbery. They are not at the wrong tomb. The only explanation is that Jesus has risen.

Three different Greek words are used for see. In John 20:5, the verb simply means “to glance in, to look in.” In verse 6, the word means “to look carefully, to observe.” The word saw in John 20:8 means “to perceive with intelligent comprehension.” John glanced, then observed, then perceived. For John, the misshapen graveclothes did produce faith. But not yet in Mary.

John and Peter return, but in the meantime; Mary is left there. Mary has seen what they have seen; she has looked into the tomb. But this has not counted as evidence for her. She remains heartbroken, overcome with grief that the body has been moved, the grave desecrated.

A lot of people are not impressed by the truth that Jesus' body was not stolen by anyone: Romans, Jews, or disciples. They are not impressed that Jesus' body was not moved to another tomb. They are not impressed that something had to have happened to the crucified man who had been wrapped in those garments. There remains plenty of debate around the Shroud of Turin, as to whether it is the actual burial shroud of Jesus, or a forgery. But as fascinating as it is, not everyone is persuaded by it.

An empty tomb did not produce faith in her. Misplaced burial garments did not produce faith in her. So what did?

III. Messiah's Word Produced Faith in Her

¹¹ But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down *and looked* into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. ¹³ Then they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”

Mary stands there, weeping. Why? She is distraught. This is more tragedy. Not only was her master crucified, now even His body is being mishandled, manhandled. Not even respect for Him in death, she must be thinking.

She looks inside the grave, and sees these two angels, and as often happens, it doesn't register who she is talking to. Two angels, who often take the form of humans dressed in white, are in the tomb. Luke is likely speaking of these two as well, Matthew and Mark focus on the one who had rolled the stone away. When these two met the other women, they told them Jesus had risen and to tell the apostles to meet Jesus in Galilee.

Here they sit in the tomb, and the fact that one is at the head, and the other at the feet of the shelf where Jesus had lain makes us think of the two cherubim on the mercy seat, one on either side, spreading their wings over the mercy seat, the place where the atoning blood was placed. It's as if there's this image: the one who lay here, He is gone; He is the true mercy seat, the true atonement. One asks Mary why she is crying, and almost without really thinking about what she is seeing, she replies that they have taken her Lord's body away. She doesn't think to ask them who they are, why they are there.

Perhaps something in them gestured to someone behind her. Or perhaps she heard a sound and she turned around.

⁴ Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing *there*, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, “Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

Of all people, of all the righteous of the ages, of all the prophets and sages and scribes who had longed for this moment, Mary Magdalene, the ex-demoniac becomes the first person to see the Risen Messiah.

But like almost everyone: the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the disciples at the end of this day, Mary does not recognise Jesus. Perhaps something in the Resurrection body is so corrected, so perfected, so beautified, that it takes a moment to recognise the old face and body hidden in the new. Perhaps the Resurrection body belongs so strongly to the Heavenly realm, that faith must be mixed with optical sight. And like all the others, they simply did not expect or look for Jesus to rise from the dead. She thinks one of the gardeners is just a few meters away, maybe there to ask why she is hovering around one the the tombs.

You remember that this whole site had once been a rock quarry, but now was a garden and a site where people could buy tombs. So it would be natural that early in the morning, you'd find one of the gardeners tending the site. Whether she didn't really focus on him, whether she was embarrassed by her tears and was part looking away, but clearly she still hasn't completely turned to face Him.

Jesus asks the same question that the angels asked, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" It's a question that a gardener could have asked, and Mary speaks to Him as the supposed gardener, on the possibility that He is the explanation for the missing body." "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." You can tell her grief is clouding her judgement, because it's not like she would have been able to carry Jesus' body alone, even if this was some kind of mix-up.

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher).

The Bible doesn't tell us how loud or soft He said her name, with what tone, with what inflection. But I imagine it to be that same tone we sometimes use when someone is emotional, and overtalking and losing focus. It's a gentle but firm, attention-getting, loving word. One word: her name.

Of course, no anonymous gardener would know her name. Only people who know you know your name. And only one person could say her name in that way, and instantly she would know it was Him. And as He says her name, it is like a muffled sound suddenly becoming a crystal clear voice, like a blurred, out-of-focus image suddenly sharpens into the face she knew so well. Recognition now floods her consciousness. Memory overwhelms her as she understands the one she knew is the One before her.

Her Lord, her Teacher, her Master, alive, and well. All it took is one word – her name. And in reply, all she can say is one word: rabboni. In later years, the Jews recognised three levels of teachers: rab (the lowest), rabbi, and rabboni (the highest). The word was even used for God.

Edersheim wrote: "She had not known His appearance... But she could not mistake the Voice, especially when It spake to her, and spake her name. So do we also often fail to recognise the Lord when He comes to us 'in another form' than we had known. But we cannot fail to recognise Him when He speaks to us and speaks our name."

What a living illustration of what Jesus had taught just a few months earlier about His role as the Good Shepherd, and His people as the sheep. "the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will

flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:3–5)

The Good Shepherd knows His people by name. When He calls us to salvation, it is not with a generic, impersonal term, “Hey, you!” He calls us individually, and He calls us personally. When you know you are being drawn to salvation, you sense that this is truly your Creator with His eyes on you, as if there were no one else in the world. He loves all, extends a general call to all, but you know when God is calling you to salvation, it is powerfully individualised, powerfully personal. In place of that name “Mary”, there is your name said.

This is when we go from hearing Bible verses to hearing the Word of God. Suddenly those texts that seemed theoretical and general and for others seems to have your name on it. Suddenly you realise, this is for you, this is God speaking to you through His Word.

The physical, visible evidence did not persuade her. Her faith did not come by seeing. Paul tells us how faith comes.

¹⁷ So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17)

Faith rose up in her heart when she heard the Living Word speaking His Word to her. Faith comes by hearing. So God has not preserved the empty tomb to cause faith to rise up. God does not make faith depend on the burial shroud, whether or not we have it. What has He preserved? He has preserved His Word. Because wherever it is faithfully preached, read, and heard, the Spirit of God, takes the Word of God, and speaks to us the voice of the Son of God. We hear the call to salvation, and we keep hearing the call to sanctification, to holy living, to a walk with Him.

John doesn't say, but we picture Mary perhaps falling down and clasping His feet, or stretching out her hands to take His. And now Jesus says something unusual .

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’ ” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and *that* He had spoken these things to her. (John 20:1–19)

At first, this sounds like Jesus is saying, “Don't touch me.” But that wouldn't make sense. Matthew tells us that when the women first saw the risen Lord they “came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him”¹ Instead, the Greek has the idea not of “don't touch me”, but of “stop continuing to cling to Me”. The reason Jesus give us “I have not yet ascended to My Father.” So what does that mean, and how does that explain what He says to Mary?

We know that at the ascension, the Father as it were coronated Jesus, rewarding and crowning Him with dominion. “²⁰ which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. ²² And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, (Ephesians 1:20–22)

What this means is that the God-Man that Mary and the disciples knew will no longer be clothed in humiliation. John lay on Jesus' chest at the Lord's Supper. But when He saw the risen Jesus on the

¹ Morris, L. (1995). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (pp. 741–742). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Isle of Patmos at the beginning of the book of Revelation, he fell at his feet.

This is what Paul means in 2 Corinthians 5 ¹⁶ Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him thus* no longer. (2 Corinthians 5:16)

That does not mean we no longer know Jesus in His humanity. He will always be truly and fully human, untied with His deity. But what it does mean is that Mary was not to cling to the rabbi from Galilee, trying to keep Him homely and familiar and perhaps even tame. She was to accept that the one she loved and served was the risen and ascended King. That doesn't make Him less personal, or more remote; it simply adds all the more majesty and weight and glory to this Jesus we know.

The fear of the Lord is to experience the tension of both the goodness of God drawing you in, and the greatness of God humbling you, His love attracting you, and His holiness convicting you, His meekness making you feel prized and loved, His majesty making you feel small and weak.

The Risen Jesus calls us by name, and we respond, not with words or deeds that wish to domesticate or control Jesus, but with wonder and awe, with gravity and gladness, trembling joy, humbled adoration.

If today you're an interested bystander when it comes to Christianity, you may find all the evidence around the resurrection interesting. If you look hard enough, I think you'll find it compelling, almost irresistibly persuasive. But what will eventually make you a Christian is not merely your mind finding good reasons. It will be that you read the Word of God, and you hear Him, not audibly, but in your heart, you hear Him say, "Believe. Trust Me. Accept Me. Repent of your old life. Give up your rejection, your unbelief, your hardness." And if you hear Him in that personal call to you, the right response is "My Master!" My Lord.

Christian, if your faith burns low or dull right now, if you are more like Mary, looking at outward circumstances and weeping, you need to return to where you know you will hear His voice. Go to the place where you will hear words with your name on them. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing of the Word of God.