

The Vigil of Easter

HOPE BEARING BODIES: CHRIST'S AND OURS

John 20:1-18

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together; but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you

weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on [literally, "cling"] to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

DIAGNOSIS: Bodies Bearing Despair

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Still Living in the Dark*

Traumatized by the events of Friday, Mary goes to the tomb of Jesus. Although John doesn't tell us why she goes—no embalming needs to be done as in other accounts—the context implies she goes to continue a "memorial" relationship with Jesus, which is inevitably very different from the "living" relationship she had before. That she goes "while it is still dark" is significant. "Darkness" is John's great symbol for the human condition. In the case of Mary, it conceals from her memory the very words that Jesus gave to his followers about his "exaltation" (his death AND resurrection) so that they would not be overtaken by the sight of his crucifixion, specifically, his words in the upper room after the foot washing: "I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he" (13:19). Mary goes to the tomb to remember Jesus, but her memory is too "selective," too shrouded in darkness, too dominated by death. Might that not also be our problem?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *They have taken the Lord out of the tomb...*

But more than Mary's memory is traumatized by events and shrouded in darkness. Even her meager hope of knowing that she can go to the place where her dead Jesus is laid is shattered. Seeing the tomb opened and the body missing, she runs to Peter and the Beloved Disciple with a message of despair: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb..." (v. 2). It seems as though the powers of darkness have gained total victory. Not only have they stripped Mary of her memory of the words of Jesus, but they have robbed her of every last trace of him—body included. No evidence remains that he ever existed. One wonders what dark thoughts might be entering Mary's heart at this time. Could she be harboring the belief that if all the accusations against Jesus are true, given the evidence before her of a crucified Jesus and an empty tomb? Rather than the beloved Son, might he be a blasphemer? Isn't Mary's message of despair ("They have taken the Lord...") simply the outburst of a heart rent of all faith and hope, a soul left to her own devices? Are we too prone to such outbursts?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal problem) : *God Operating in the Darkness*

That Mary is still in the dark means more than loss of memory and faith, it means that she is also still in her sins and condemned to oblivion. Earlier words of Jesus come to mind: "Those who believe in [me] are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already" (3:18) and "whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; who disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath" (3:36). What is operating in the dark is more than the opponents of God—evil, sin, unbelief. The more is the wrath of God on all these things; the judgment of God working to bring an end to these things and all who are caught up in them. Mary included—us too. No wonder Mary is left

with nothing but a body of tears as a sign of her despair at this point. Having no Jesus and no faith, she has no sign of life in her body, only the sign of death—her tears.

PROGNOSIS: Bodies Bearing of Hope

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Resurrected Jesus-Body and All

While it is true that the wrath of God is operative in the darkness, within the human condition, working to get rid of sin, evil and unbelief by death, that's not all God is doing there. The ugly events of Friday are also God at work to rid the world of sin, evil and unbelief, but by another way: by way of Jesus. The empty tomb does not mean "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb..." It means "He is risen!" "He is alive!" in his entirety—body and all! Still, Mary needs to be enlightened as to what that means. She thinks her relationship with him can now simply be picked up where it left off. She thinks she can "cling" (v. 17) to the Jesus of the past, as though Friday never happened. But No!, says Jesus! "Don't cling to the ME of the past, but to the ME who is crucified and raised!" The Jesus of the resurrection—which includes, but which evidently has not yet happened here, the "ascension"—is bodily different from the Jesus leading up to and dying on Friday. That Friday body was subject to death; the Easter body has conquered death. Clinging to the Eastered Jesus is what Jesus wants for Mary... and us too.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : I have seen the Lord...

Having noted the change in Jesus—body and all—we can also now note the change that the encounter with the resurrected Jesus makes in Mary. The outward sign of the change is embodied in the words she announces to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18) and, especially, in her own bodily demeanor: The body of tears has been transformed into a body of joy and full-throated

testimony. That change in outward demeanor is a sign of a change in her inward demeanor, her heart. In a word, her heart has been changed from despair to a faith that abounds in hope. By virtue of this faith not only does Mary now grasp and rejoice in Christ as the crucified and resurrected one—body and all—but she is also beginning to appropriate that change in herself—body and all. Her body, because of Christ’s body, is by faith a body bearing hope.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Now Living in Christ*

What this Christ and faith in him ultimately means is a change in the human condition. No longer does Mary the believer live in the Dark, but she lives in Christ. John’s language of “abiding in Christ” (i.e., Chapter 15) is his great image for the life of faith. What’s important to note here is that this “abiding” is not merely cerebral or spiritual or memorial—but also bodily. It is easy to understand why Mary at first wanted to cling to the pre-Easter Body: it has a tangibility that even unbelief could understand. But that pre-Eastered Body no longer exists. Christ’s body has been changed into an Eastered Body, a body that, as John indicates in the post-Easter appearances, has the divine quality of being ubiquitous, that is, available everywhere, to everyone, all at once. That is not a drawback, but a feature that is most beneficial to believers. For it make it possible for Christians to continue to cling to the crucified and risen Christ—body and all—which they do most tangibly in what they call the Eucharist, Christ’s self giving—body and all—under the signs of bread and wine (Cf. John 6). True, this tangibility is discernible only to faith, but that is not a drawback. To the contrary, it reveals just how mind changing faith is that it can open the eyes of believers to see such wonderful things under such ordinary signs. Be sure to preach this also to the edification of the believers. For it is an

essential part of the Easter experience.