



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 163

Mary Magdalene

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 12th April, 1998 (Easter Sunday)**

Text: *“Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing Him to be the gardener, saith unto Him, Sir, if Thou have borne Him hence, tell me where Thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto Him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father: but go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things unto her” (John 20. 15-18).*

At the beginning of this chapter we have the *fact*, the glorious fact of the resurrection. “The Lord is risen indeed.” And then right through the chapter we have these wonderful displays of the *power* of the resurrection. What a difference it made to Mary Magdalene and to the disciples and to Thomas! The power of His resurrection. Now beloved friends, the resurrection took place almost two thousand years ago, the *fact* of the resurrection. It can never be repeated. But the *power* of the resurrection is still the same tonight as it was when the Lord Jesus broke forth from the prison house of the grave. The glorious power of His resurrection is still the same. Our desire this evening is that together we might know something, if just a little, of the power of Christ's resurrection. That was Paul's desire: “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection” – in that order: Him, the risen Saviour, and the power of His resurrection. It can be known; it can be experienced. And what a difference it made to Mary Magdalene and to the disciples and to Thomas, and what a difference it will make to you and me tonight if we know anything of it! Now we cannot command it – God is sovereign in bestowing it – but we are not forbidden to ask for it; we are not forbidden to pray for it. The Lord waits that He may be gracious.

Now Mary Magdalene is a lovely character, isn't she? It is very clear there is not anyone in the whole Word of God who loved the Lord Jesus more than Mary. He had done so much for her, and being forgiven

much, she loved much. I think you will find, if you follow Mary Magdalene through, that her love was a lot stronger than her faith. O how she clung and she clave to the Lord Jesus! She was there at the cross. She was the last to leave. When Peter and James and John had all fled, Mary Magdalene was still there, and she was there when Joseph and Nicodemus laid His lifeless body in the grave, and she beheld where they laid Him. She was the last to be there and she was the first to be there on the first day of the week. She felt she could only see His lifeless body, and there was that great stone in the way, and who shall roll it away? But sweetly constrained by love to Christ, she ventured. God will always honour the sweet constrainings of His own love. Beloved friends, if you venture, sweetly constrained by the love of Christ, it does not matter what mountains, what stumbling stones are in the way. The Lord will always remove them, will always honour the secret constrainings of His own love.

Mary was one who saw the stone rolled away, and she found that the body of the Lord Jesus had gone. Really that was a wonderful token for good. It was a mark and evidence of the resurrection. But Mary took it the wrong way round. That was where her love was stronger than her faith. Many of the Lord's tried and tempted people take some of the best evidences the Lord has given and use them against themselves. The stone rolled away is the evidence of the Lord's resurrection. "The Lord is risen indeed." The empty sepulchre is an evidence of the resurrection. "The Lord is risen indeed." But Mary took it the opposite. All she can hope for is the lifeless body of her dear Redeemer, and even that is gone. How many of the Lord's little ones take some of their best evidences, evidences of grace, evidences of life, and turn them against themselves! But if faith did not prevail, love did. "Love cannot from its post withdraw." So you find when Peter and John left the sepulchre, Mary was still there. John had believed. His faith was stronger than Mary's. But Mary did not know what had happened, but love held her there. The disciples went away again unto their own homes. Not Mary. "Love cannot from its post withdraw."

"But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping." There is not much of this religion about today, a sinner weeping after Christ, a sinner weeping because she cannot find Christ. Do you know anything of godly sorrow? "Oh that I knew where I might find Him!" That weeping after Christ. There may not be any words in it or any language or any prayer,

but the whole of your case cries out to heaven, and such holy longings and weepings of a living soul will never be discountenanced by God. “Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping.” She was a broken-hearted woman. She had lost her dearest Friend. The Lord her life was gone. But it was more than that. I do not think any of us can ever realise the depth of sorrow there was with Mary Magdalene and the immediate disciples and the other godly women that Saturday between the day when the Lord Jesus was crucified and the day of the resurrection. They knew not yet that He must rise from the dead. It was hidden from them. It seemed as if everything was finished, that they had been deceived, that they were wrong, that Satan had triumphed, that the powers of hell had triumphed. There was all the appearance of it. And more than that, with Mary she was a great sinner and she knew it, she felt it. Her hope was in Jesus. But if Jesus be dead, if His life be ended, then what of her hope? What of her sins? What of her heaven? Mary could enter into that: “If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.”

“Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping.” Blessed woman, weeping after Christ! Well, He is so near, but she does not know it. I believe there are some of you, the Lord is so near you. He is risen from the dead, but you do not know Him and you cannot see Him and you have not found Him. It is the power of His glorious resurrection you need, and that will do the deed. That will put everything right. “But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping.” It was going to be the most blessed day she had ever known. She was going to be the happiest woman on earth. It was not going to be long. “But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping.” If ever a person found that the end of a thing is better than the beginning, Mary Magdalene did. If ever a person walked out that truth, Mary Magdalene did: “Surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off.”

“But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, and seeth two angels.” There they were, majestic sight, these holy angels, bright and glorious, who had come down from heaven. “One at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.” These angels talked with her. They spoke to her. “Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.” I do not think there was any hope, any help, any consolation,

any happiness, any delight in those angels. But thousands of people today love something sensational. Wouldn't there be a cry in our churches if someone woke up in the night and said they had seen an angel? Mary Magdalene wanted something more than angels, and we want something more than angels, something more than sensational things. We want the blessed reality of a personal knowledge of the Saviour and a revelation of Christ to our souls, not these sensational things, not visions, not angels, not dreams.

“When she had thus said, she turned herself back.” She was not interested in these angels. There was the Lord Jesus standing by her side. He had been there all along. He was so close to her in her sorrow. He was watching over her. His heart was overflowing with sympathy, but she did not know it. You dear souls in sorrow, spiritual sorrow, temporal sorrow, family sorrow, how near the Lord Jesus is standing to you, the risen Saviour, with His heart full of compassion, full of love, standing by your side, watching over you. O if only your eyes were opened to see it; if only you had the blessed realisation of it, you would “enjoy a gospel day, and heaven begun below.”

“And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.” Whether it was just because of her tears, or whether her eyes were holden, as we read of some of the others, we are not told. But she “knew not that it was Jesus.” And then the risen Saviour spoke, and beloved friends, these are the first words that the risen Saviour spoke after His resurrection: “Woman, why weepest thou?” May you hear them spoken not just to dear Mary Magdalene, but to the whole, blood-bought church of God right to the end of time. No cause for tears, seeing the Redeemer is triumphant over sin, death, hell and the grave, and is risen triumphant from the dead. “Woman, why weepest thou?” That is the antidote to sorrow.

Let us just linger here a moment, because you have something similar in the fifth chapter of the Book of the Revelation, that scene in heaven, that challenge: “Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals?” – the book of God's decrees. No man in heaven or earth or sea was found worthy to open the book. And John says, “I wept much.” You have a sorrowful man. What of God's purposes if there be none to fulfil them? “I wept much ... and one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not:

behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed.” And he said, “I beheld ... a Lamb as it had been slain.” And beloved friends, that is the antidote for your sorrow. That is the answer to your tears, when you weep over your sins and the day of your death and the judgment day and eternity and over bereavement and sorrow in your family, over your business, your circumstances, your relationships, the church of God. “Weep not: behold.” And he says, “I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne ... a Lamb as it had been slain” – the risen Saviour, freshly risen from the dead, freshly ascended into heaven. This is the antidote, the divinely-appointed antidote for all the tears of the people of God. We read that their tears are in His bottle. I take that to mean that God cares, and He measures them, and He takes note of them, and He will deal with them. He has that blessed ability to sympathise. He is full of compassion. He knows how to deliver. He can give relief. He knows how to support. He has promised He will. “Woman, why weepest thou?”

And then the Lord Jesus, the risen Saviour, asks a second question: “Whom seekest thou?” May I affectionately ask you that question from the pulpit this evening. Why have you come to the house of God? Why are you here on this Easter day? “Whom seekest thou?” O are there some of you here this evening and the angel’s word can be spoken to you: “Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay?” “Behold, He goeth before you into Galilee.” “Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?”

“The soul that with sincere desires
Seeks after Jesus’ love,
That soul the Holy Ghost inspires.”

O may you be that one whom the Holy Ghost inspires, that one who through mercy seeks after Jesus’ love.

“Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing Him to be the gardener.” Her love was stronger than her faith. She supposed Him to be the gardener. You know, in a very blessed, sacred sense, He *is* the gardener. The church is His garden. “A garden inclosed is My sister, My spouse” – enclosed by the hedge of everlasting love and with those many plants of His right-hand planting. Now it is a very

precious theme, if you are led into it, if you can meditate on it: the church as the garden of Christ and Christ Himself as the heavenly gardener.

“She, supposing Him to be the gardener, saith unto Him, Sir.” You notice even in the depths of her sorrow there is that beautiful, Christian courtesy and respect, speaking just to a gardener. “She ... saith unto Him, Sir, if Thou have borne Him hence, tell me where Thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Did you notice that Mary does not give a hint whom she is talking about? She does not tell the gardener it is the Lord Jesus, it is the body of the Lord Jesus. She is almost incoherent. “Him.” She says, *Him*, three times. “If Thou have borne *Him* hence, tell me where Thou hast laid *Him*, and I will take *Him* away.” Now there was only one *Him* with Mary Magdalene, as if the whole world should know the anguish of her heart. I believe there are times in the experience of a child of God when it is like that. You feel the whole world must know the depth of your sorrow, or the whole world must know the depth of your joy. O there is only one *Him* for Mary Magdalene. She does not mention His name. You find the same throughout Scripture. Job in the depths of his sorrow: “Oh that I knew where I might find *Him*!” As if Job would say, Surely you know. And the church in the Canticles: “Saw ye *Him* whom my soul loveth?” *Him*, the Object of her first desire.

“Sir, if Thou have borne Him hence, tell me where Thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.” If only she could find the lifeless body! But she was going to get something better. Yet this is the wonder of love to Christ. She promises the impossible. This is laying down your life for the brethren. How could a poor, weak woman like Mary, all alone, unaided, carry away a lifeless body? Mary did not think of that, and love does not think of things like that. O the sweet constrainings of the love of Christ in a sinner’s heart! “Sir, if Thou have borne Him hence, tell me where Thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

Then the impossible takes place, and then the wonder of wonders happens. “Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” And that was everything. Her sorrow was turned into joy, her darkness into light, her bondage into liberty, and she “enjoyed a gospel day, and heaven begun below.” “Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” He claimed her as His own. She recognised His voice. Her beloved Lord and Master and Saviour was still alive, and she saw everything in it. “Saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation,”

and heaven at last with Him to all eternity. “Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” And though she has been in heaven nearly two thousand years, she has never heard a sweeter word, even in heaven, than this. “Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” It was only one word, but it did everything. “Mary, ‘Fear not; for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.’” “Fear not, Mary. ‘I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore.’” “Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” It is not how much religion we have: it is whether it is real. Mary had one word, but I do not think there was ever a sinner had a greater blessing than that. Don’t some of you long that the Lord Jesus might call you by your name, say, *Mary* to you? What do I mean? Well, if I called your name out from the pulpit now, it would single you out from everyone else in this chapel. That is what grace does, and that is what happens when the Lord speaks. “Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” “Come, and claim us as Thy portion, and let us lay claim to Thee.”

“She turned herself, and saith unto Him, Rabboni” – my dearest Master. She could not get low enough. Her heart overflowed with love and wonder and adoration and praise. “Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto Him, Rabboni” – my dearest Lord and Master. But that is what we want. We want the Lord Jesus to speak to us personally, and a living ministry, under the power of the Holy Ghost, will. Perhaps some of you have heard of the famous Victorian author, writer and preacher, Paxton Hood. He was a preacher at one time, a minister in Manchester, and used to tell this story. Somebody asked a young woman once, “Why do you go to hear William Gadsby when you could hear the refined Dr. Halley?” She said, “Well, when I was a girl, we used to pass under an aqueduct, and I used to keep shouting my name, *Betty*, and the echo kept coming back, *Betty, Betty, Betty, Betty*. When I hear Mr. Gadsby preach, it is just as if the word keeps coming, *Betty, Betty, Betty, Betty*.” That is the power of real religion and vital godliness. (Paxton Hood called it “the perfection of preaching.”)

“Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” It is for the Lord to speak to you by your name, to claim you for Himself. “Fear not; for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.” May some poor, weeping sinner this evening hear the risen Saviour calling you by your name and saying unto you, “Mary.”

My mind goes back to some of those former days here at Bethel, to Mr. Joseph Rutt, who is now the pastor at Matfield. Some of you know how wild he was while he was young, and the Lord cut him down under that word, “The way of transgressors is hard.” He felt his name was in the Bible: *transgressor*. He lay on his bed and felt as though the eyes of God were looking through the ceiling into his heart, and he felt as if he was immediately related to Adam, and there was no sinner in between. The Lord raised him up to a sweet hope, and he united with us in church fellowship. One day, he came to the Lord’s table weighted down under a sense of his sin and guilt, and the only thing he could feel was this: *transgressor*, that his name was written by the finger of God in the Bible: *transgressor*. That evening at the Lord’s table, I spoke of this: “He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” He read his name clearly in the Word of God in a different sense: a transgressor forgiven, a transgressor washed in the blood of Christ. That is what it is: to be separated by the Spirit of God, by the Word of God. That is what it is for the risen Saviour to speak to you personally and call you by your name. “Fear not; for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.”

“Jesus saith unto her, Mary, She turned herself, and saith unto Him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch Me not.” Now this at first sounds strangely upon our ears, because we read of those dear women who met Him returning from the sepulchre. “And they came and held Him by the feet, and worshipped Him.” Just after this we read that Jesus said to Thomas, “Reach hither thy finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side.” But here Jesus said to Mary, “Touch Me not.” Now there are two things here. The first was this: it seems that Mary thought that it was just going to be the same relationship it had always been. But there was a difference. The Lord Jesus is now risen. His work of humiliation is ended. The atonement has been made. The work has been finished. It is a different relationship now, Mary. “Touch Me not.” But secondly, I understand the root, original meaning is this: cling not to Me, Mary; do not hold Me fast. The Lord explains: “I am not yet ascended to My Father.” Mary thought He was going to continue on earth for ever, living on earth just as He always had. She gloried in it. She was delighted in it. Mary, touch Me not. Keep Me not here on earth. My work on earth is finished. I must ascend to heaven.

My place is in heaven. “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” I must go, Mary, as your Forerunner into heaven. My love is still the same. My presence will still be with you, but it will not be this human, natural relationship. It will be in spirit. “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.” But, “Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father.” It was necessary that Jesus should die. It was necessary that Jesus should rise again. It was necessary that Jesus should ascend into heaven, there to live and reign eternally as a great High Priest, touched with the feeling of our infirmity, ever living, ever interceding. “Touch Me not, for I am not yet ascended to My Father.” I am going to ascend. For forty days I am going to show Myself by infallible proofs. But it is only for a season. I must ascend to My Father.

“But go to My brethren.” The old divines used to say the Lord appointed Mary Magdalene “an apostle to the apostles”! She was the first one to whom the Lord Jesus revealed Himself after His resurrection and she was the one appointed by the Lord Jesus personally to take that testimony of having seen the Lord, to take it even to the apostles themselves. What an honour He put on love! And the Lord Jesus always will honour the love of His people. “Go to My brethren.” O but the mercy of it! “They all forsook Him, and fled.” A doubting Thomas, a denying Peter – but the Lord Jesus says, They are My brethren. There is a relationship here that can never be broken. “Go to My brethren.” In the second chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the apostle takes it up. He says, “He is not ashamed to call them brethren.” You read in the papers of some eminent, titled family; they have a black sheep in the family, a wayward son, and they are ashamed of it. They do not want to know him. They disinherit him. “*He* is not ashamed to call them brethren.” “Go to My brethren.” O the solemn point that you and I are sometimes ashamed of Christ! “But O may this my glory be, that Christ is not ashamed of me.”

“Go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God.” O that sweet assurance He gives them that Almighty God is their God and that He is their Father in Christ! “Say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father” – *your* Father because *My* Father – “and to My God, and your God” – *your* God because *My* God.

“Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things unto her.” I have sometimes wondered if this was the most blessed church meeting that was ever held. You think of it: those wondering disciples and this dear woman with her heart overflowing with wonder, love and praise. And she bears this simple testimony. Two things: that she has seen the Lord, and that He has spoken these things to her. These are blessed church meetings, even today, when poor, trembling, unworthy, guilty sinners come with all their fears and they tell us that they have seen the Lord and that He has spoken these things unto them.

I want to close today, Easter day, by reading the lovely little hymn about Mary Magdalene:

“I no more at Mary wonder
Dropping tears upon the grave,
Earnest asking all around her,
‘Where is He that died to save?’
“Dying love her heart attracted.
Soon she felt its rising power,
He who Mary thus affected,
Bids His mourners weep no more.”

“Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things unto her.”