

December 2021

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Recommended Citation

Gentry, Thomas J.. 2021. "Rabboni: Christ's Resurrection Through the Eyes of Mary Magdalene." *Eleutheria* 5, (2). <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol5iss212>

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Abstract

In John 20:1-18, Mary Magdalene (hereafter, Mary) holds a significant place in the resurrection narrative. She is the first to tell the disciples of the empty tomb (vv. 1-10), and she experiences a direct encounter with the resurrected Jesus (vv. 11-18). Given the significance of these events, the purpose of this essay is to explore John's record of Mary's report of the empty tomb and her dialogue with the risen Jesus. The discussion entails a brief overview of each encounter with special consideration for their apologetic significance. The relevance of Mary's testimony in these matters is also considered from the vantage point of how beliefs form based on rational and affective evidence. What this discussion hopes to demonstrate is that John's account of Mary's finding the empty tomb and later encountering the risen Jesus offers important apologetic content as well as keen insights into the role of an expansive epistemology in faith formation rooted in Jesus's victory over death.

Keywords

resurrection, mary magdalene, rabboni, apologetics, evidences, passionate reason

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction: One Witness, Two Encounters

In John 20:1-18, Mary Magdalene (hereafter, Mary) holds a significant place in the resurrection narrative. She is the first to tell the disciples of the empty tomb (vv. 1-10), and she experiences a direct encounter with the resurrected Jesus (vv. 11-18). Given the significance of these events, the purpose of this essay is to explore John's record of Mary's report of the empty tomb and her dialogue with the risen Jesus. The discussion entails a brief overview of each encounter with special consideration for their apologetic significance. The relevance of Mary's testimony in these matters is also considered from the vantage point of how beliefs form based on rational and affective evidence.¹ What this discussion hopes to demonstrate is that John's account of Mary's finding the empty tomb and later encountering the risen Jesus offers important apologetic content as well as keen insights into the role of an expansive epistemology in faith formation rooted in Jesus's victory over death.

Mary and the Empty Tomb: John 20:1-10

In the first part of the narrative, John recounts that Mary "went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb" (v. 1), which led her to run to Peter and John, declaring, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him" (v. 2).² This report prompts Peter and John to run to the tomb, the latter arriving first, and, after investigation of the evidence and John's decision to believe, to return to their homes (vv. 3-10). Consider, then, the following regarding this part of John's narrative as it relates to Mary and, by extension, the apologetics of the resurrection.

¹ A distinction is made at this point between apologetics for discipleship and for evangelism. The latter focuses on the role of apologetics in removing obstacles to faith in the process of evangelism and is primarily concerned with bearing witness to unbelievers. The former is concerned to help believers grow in faith amid struggles by fortifying their beliefs with rationally and affectively derived evidence (i.e., *passional reason*). For a more complete discussion of the distinction between apologetics for evangelism and discipleship, see Thomas J. Gentry, *Pulpit Apologist: The Vital Link between Preaching and Apologetics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020). For a more complete discussion of the relationship between rationally and affectively derived evidence, see William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1995).

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

First, John emphasizes the urgency that attends the response of Mary, as well as he and Peter. John reports that “she ran” (v. 2), and that he and Peter “ran together” (v. 4). The word John uses derives from *τρέχω* (*τρέχει* in v. 2, and *ἔτρεχον* in v. 4), which may be defined as running or walking quickly.³ In this context the visual is helpful to consider, as Mary runs from outside of town where the tomb was, coming back into town to find the disciples—and all this in the early morning light. Likewise, when Peter and John hear Mary’s account, they run back to the tomb to investigate for themselves as the morning light continues to initiate the new day.

Why is John careful to include the description of their running? It is part of his transparency in indicating that none of Jesus’s disciples, the men or the women, were expecting an empty tomb or, by implication, a resurrection. They were caught by surprise by the empty tomb and were scurrying around trying to figure out what to do about it and where Jesus’s body could have gone. This element adds what Murray Harris describes as an instance of John’s account, which is otherwise “restrained and unadorned...pulsat[ing] with a vitality unmatched by any other...resurrection narrative.”⁴

Further, contra the critics of the resurrection who claim it was something the early believers either developed as part of a hoax or experienced only as a type of group hallucination, Gerald Borchert responds that such conclusions are “absurd given the defeatism that enveloped Jesus’s followers after they realized Jesus was truly dead. The only possibility that crossed Mary’s mind was that the body must have been stolen in clear violation of Jewish burial integrity and Roman practice.”⁵ To wit, John’s narrative to this point reveals that Mary is in a hurry to find the body of her Lord, not to confirm the resurrection, even though that is what will happen eventually.

Second, in this portion of the narrative John gives Mary the role of first witness to the empty tomb, explaining that only after her claim he and Peter go to see for themselves. Further, it is likely their apparent incredulity that motivates them to verify Mary’s story. Likewise, though Mary is certain the body of Jesus was not in the tomb, it is not because she (or John and Peter) were expecting a resurrection. As previously stated, the empty tomb catches Mary and the disciples

³ “G5143, *trechō*,” *Strong’s Greek Lexicon*, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong’s=G5143&t=NKJV>

⁴ Murray J. Harris, *John*, a vol. in the *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, B&H, 2015), 511.

⁵ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, vol. 25B in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 2002), 291.

by surprise, yet John still records Mary as the first to bear witness to it in a culture where eyewitness testimony from women was considered dubious.⁶ As Andreas Kostenberger explains, having Mary (and other women; cf. Matt 28:1; Luke 24:1), “as the first eyewitness to the resurrection stands against those who claim that these accounts are mythical legends produced by the disciples suffering from cognitive dissonance. If first-century Jews were going to make up a story, it would be counterintuitive to make women the first eyewitnesses.”⁷

N. T. Wright makes a similar claim, explaining that if John or the other evangelists “could have invented stories of fine, upstanding, reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact the first on the scene, or that the early church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both.”⁸ Wright goes on to ask whether the gospel writers would have included the story of Mary “unless they were convinced that, despite being an apologetic liability, it was historically trustworthy?”⁹

What, then, is the apologetic value of these details, i.e., the scurrying about by Mary, Peter, and John to see the empty tomb, and John’s giving center place to Mary’s testimony despite its lack of cultural cachet? The answer to that question relates to two aspects of what Gary Habermas discusses in his minimal facts approach to defending the veracity of the resurrection of Jesus. First, Habermas identifies that the historian’s tools include eyewitness sources, embarrassment, and surprise elements,¹⁰ all which are present in the John 20:1-10 narrative. Mary is the eyewitness to the empty tomb, later corroborated by Peter and John; the use of Mary as a witness offers an element of culturally relevant embarrassment to the account; and the surprise elements include the running from and to the tomb and the apparent confusion about what had happened. Thus, the account of John 20:1-10 includes what one would expect to find in reliable historical accounts.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 607.

⁷ Andreas Kostenberger, “John,” in *The Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible: The Gospels and Acts*, ed. by Jeremy R. Howard (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 832.

⁸ Wright, *The Resurrection*, 608.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Gary R. Habermas, *Philosophy of History, Miracles, and the Resurrection of Jesus* (3rd ed.) (Sagamore Beach: Academx, 2012), 26.

Second, Habermas includes the despair of the disciples and the empty tomb among the minimal historical facts concerning the resurrection that are “accepted by virtually all critical scholars.”¹¹ So then, both despair and an empty tomb are present in John’s account this far, which means that there is clear presence of the minimal facts from which to make the argument that the tomb really was empty and that its emptiness was the cause of an increase in the despair that Mary and the others were already experiencing due to the suffering and death of Jesus they witnessed just a few days prior.

Mary and the Gardner: John 20:11-18

As the next portion of John’s narrative reveals, Mary continues to despair while remaining behind when Peter and John return home, grieving as she looks into the empty tomb (vv. 11-12).¹² John explains in v. 13 that, as she continues to weep, Mary is asked by angels attending the tomb, “Woman, why are you weeping?”, to which she responds, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.” The introduction of the angels in the tomb and their conversation with Mary enhances the validity of the historical narrative since it is not identical to, though it may be corroborated with, the other gospel accounts of the angels at the tomb (cf. Matt 28:5-6; Mark 16:5-6).

The value of the differences between the accounts across the gospel narratives is that, though harmonization is possible, “no one should be surprised at the presence of different perspectives on an event as significant as the resurrection.”¹³ Here, again, John’s inclusion of a detail that differs in exact presentation from other gospel authors adds to the tinsel strength of the overall historical reliability of the account and the commitment of the early church to convey what was true, not what could easily be harmonized (though it can be harmonized). As a Habermas-ian minimal facts approach to the resurrection goes,

¹¹ Habermas, *Philosophy*, 49.

¹² It is possible that Mary departed with Peter and John, then returned a third time (i.e., first in the early morning to prepare the body; second with Peter and John); such is the position of Borchert, *John 12-21*, 299, and Habermas, *Philosophy*, 3. However, in favor of this being the same visit as the one Mary made with Peter and John (i.e., she only went twice), Edward Klink’s commentary is helpful, as he explains that “the pericope begins directly in front of the tomb, with the ‘but’ (δέ) contrasting the departure of Peter and [John] with Mary, who remained ‘at the tomb’ (πρὸς τὸ μνημεῖον)” (see Klink, *John*, a vol. in the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 1115). Regardless of the position taken on the number of Mary’s trips to the tomb, the veracity of the account is defensible.

¹³ Kostenberger, “John,” 835.

the details of the narratives of the resurrection related to angels (and other details already discussed) comport well with the historian's rule that there should be eyewitness sources with multiple attestation that allows the fullest picture to be realized based on different but complementary perspectives.

At this point it is clear that Mary is still convinced of an empty tomb while remaining unaware the resurrection has occurred. John highlights the latter even more by recounting her conversation with Jesus, whom she thinks is the gardener (v. 15), as she stands looking at him and continues to weep, stating, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Such details emphasize, once again, what the earlier portion of the narrative offers concerning the apologetic significance of the minimal facts of an empty tomb and despairing disciples, as well as the historian's tool of embarrassment (i.e., Mary still does not recognize Jesus, though she had been with him for much of his ministry, and yet, John still offers her as the eyewitness to the empty tomb).¹⁴

Further, another helpful apologetic detail concerning embarrassment based on this exchange between Mary and Jesus is that "the intimacy of the statements...led later Gnostics to theorize that Mary...had been the consort of Jesus. That scenario...is part of the sexual philosophic orientation of Gnostic thought, where the bridal chamber became the symbol of a heavenly, pleromatic paradise."¹⁵ The point of all this is not to suggest that there actually was some type of sordid affair between Jesus and Mary, but that the specific details John provides reveal a commitment to the genuineness of the historical narrative regardless of what embarrassment or wrong implication it might lead to. Again, the description of Mary with Jesus has all the marks of historical veracity, and nothing of the alleged fictional contrivances the gospel writers are often accused of attempting and the church is said to believe.

Continuing through the narrative, John explains in vv. 16-17 that after the initial exchange with the one Mary thinks is the gardener, "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to Him, 'Rabboni!' (which is to say, Teacher)." Here Mary finally comes to an awareness of Jesus's presence, gaining clarity that he is alive when she recognizes the sound of her name coming from his lips. This is followed by Jesus's directive in v. 17 that she must 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.'" Dutifully as ever, Mary does as Jesus commands and "came and told the disciples

¹⁴ Habermas, *Philosophy*, 26.

¹⁵ Borchert, *John 12-21*, 299.

that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her” (v. 18).¹⁶ Thus ends the pericope centering on Mary’s encounter with the risen Jesus, and in this final portion there are two important considerations related to resurrection apologetics.

First, while it is not clear from the text exactly why Mary did not immediately recognize Jesus (perhaps her tears or the day’s early light made it difficult to see), there is the definite transition from not knowing to knowing concerning who he was.¹⁷ Mary is transformed by her encounter with the one she now knows is no longer dead but has risen. Here, again, is another fact from Habermas’s list of the minimal facts accepted by even the most critical scholars concerning resurrection; that Jesus’s followers experienced a radical transformation based on their belief in his resurrection.¹⁸ Of note, especially, is that Mary first seeks to physically hold on to Jesus (i.e., to fasten herself to/grab hold of him so that she is not at risk of being without him again; ἄπτου from ἄπτομαι, meaning to adhere to, cling to, to touch),¹⁹ but then she quickly and seemingly without hesitation detaches from him and goes about the mission he gives her concerning telling the disciples he is risen. Mary goes from deep despair, grief, and confusion, to worshipful, joyful intimacy with Jesus and a clear commitment to his mission for her.

Second, just as Mary was the first witness to the empty tomb, so she now becomes the first witness to the resurrection. This is, again, what may be thought of as an embarrassing detail in the narrative, since here John is once more giving center place to a woman as an eyewitness and proclaimer of a key part of the resurrection, in addition to her role in several other important moments in the ministry of Jesus. Edward Klink offers an apropos summary of Mary’s importance prior to and at this moment in John’s narrative.

The pericope concludes with Mary’s obedient response to Jesus’s command. She left the resurrected Lord and went to the disciples to announce what she saw and what Jesus said to her. Mary has

¹⁶ Admittedly, the theological aspect of Jesus’s statement about not having yet ascended to the Father, etc., poses some enigmatic concerns which are beyond the scope of the present discussion, though not of the sort that undermine the veracity of the narrative. For more discussion on these matters see Borchert, *John 12-21*, 301-302; and Klink, *John*, 1163-1166.

¹⁷ Borchert, *John 12-21*, 298-300.

¹⁸ Habermas, *Philosophy*, 49.

¹⁹ “G680, haptomai,” *Strong's Greek Lexicon*, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G680&t=NKJV>

had a remarkable role in “the hour” of Jesus: she was near the cross at his death (19:25), she was the first to discover the empty tomb (20:1), and she was the first to see and talk with the resurrected Jesus (vv. 14–17). Here she is given the commission to make this important announcement to the disciples.... Mary should be viewed no differently than John the Baptist, both of whom were sent by God and therefore function as part of his self-witness.... Just as the Baptist preceded the start of Jesus’s public ministry and heralded his arrival in the flesh (cf. 1:6–8), so also Mary preceded the conclusion of Jesus’s public ministry and heralded his arrival in and by the Spirit.²⁰

In this way, Klink highlights the powerful witness of Mary as a follower of Jesus, generally, and as a herald of the empty tomb and resurrection, particularly. In keeping with the historian’s tool of willingness to include what could be embarrassing details (what Brian Chilton describes as “irritating details”²¹) concerning a key role in the gospel that was given to a woman, to someone the prevailing culture would not have chosen based on social convention.

Summary of the Apologetic Aspects of John 20:1-18

Before transitioning to a discussion of the significance of John 20:1-18 for matters of religious epistemology, it will help to summarize the apologetic points established thus far.

- John clearly portrays Mary as witness to the empty tomb and the one to make haste to tell the disciples of her discovery, even though she was not a culturally approved source of eyewitness testimony. This is an important instance of the historian’s tool of a willingness to include embarrassment in the narrative. If the narrative were fabricated it would not likely include such a detail.
- Mary was not aware of the resurrection when she reported news of the empty tomb and neither were the disciples upon hearing it. This is an instance of the historian’s tool of surprise, as well as another instance

²⁰ Klink, *John*, 1167.

²¹ Brian G. Chilton, *The Layman’s Manual on Christian Apologetics: Bridging the Essentials of Apologetics from the Ivory Tower to the Everyday Christian* (Eugene: Resource, 2019), 114.

of embarrassment. Again, a fabricated narrative would not likely include such details.

- Peter and John, along with Mary, made haste to visit the tomb (for Mary a second time), and after examination Peter and John leave and Mary remains. She is still distraught, and her grief demonstrates an instance of a fact skeptics recognize concerning the despair of Jesus's disciples.
- Mary encounters angelic messengers, explaining to them that she does think Jesus's body has been taken. This signals that she did not yet believe the resurrection had occurred, thereby highlighting her despair once again, as well as the "irritating detail" of her unbelief. Again, fabricated narratives are not likely to include such details.
- Mary encounters Jesus, thinking he is the gardener, and asks, once again, where the body has been taken. This is another instance of her clear unawareness of the resurrection and her inability to recognize Jesus (though she had spent years with him) because of despair. Fabricated narratives do not benefit from this type of detail.
- When Mary realizes Jesus is alive, she demonstrates a dramatic transformation and undertakes the mission of being the first to proclaim the resurrection to the disciples. Her transformation in the wake of encountering what she believe is the resurrected Jesus is another instance of a fact accepted by skeptics concerning the followers of Jesus, and the assignment she is given as herald to the resurrection is another example of an embarrassing detail so important to faithful historical recounting.

The Significance of Mary's Narrative for Religious Epistemology

This final section turns from the apologetic aspects of John's narrative concerning Mary and considers the area of religious epistemology, which is concerned with the philosophical aspects of how beliefs are formed.²² In considering Mary's story through the lens of religious epistemology, three concerns come into focus: 1) rational evidence in Mary's narrative; 2) affective evidence in Mary's narrative; and 3) how the rational and affective brought Mary to a faith commitment. However, before considering each of these three areas, a key concept—passional reason—bears explanation.

²² See Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 9-11.

What is Passional Reason?²³

Apologists are often stereotyped, and sometimes deservedly so, as logic choppers whose primary engagement with life is cerebral and rational. To summarize a remark from one of this researcher's parishioners during a discussion following an apologetic conference a few years ago, it is apparent apologists have a head, but not always apparent that they have a heart. Sadly, what this parishioner recognized is that when apologetics is primarily cerebral and rational it is out of balance and possibly even unbiblical. Consider how it might be unbiblical for apologetics to become primarily cerebral and rational. In Peter's words, the purpose of apologetics is to "give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15). This passage reveals, among numerous other things, that apologetics is tied to hope, the hope abiding in a Christian even in the most difficult circumstances. Such hope certainly contains a rational component, but it is more than a logical process that generates and sustains hope—hope involves the whole person's mind, will, and emotions in trusting God and knowing that he will take care of his children. Thus, to engage in apologetics is to engage in more than a cerebral consideration of premises and conclusions.

Further, if apologetics is only engaged in the rational components of fact and argumentation it is out of balance, since to be balanced in apologetics requires the passional and affective elements of a person that are associated with hope and confidence in God. Balanced apologetics engages the whole person, appealing to what William Wainwright describes as passional reason, "the possession of the appropriate moral and spiritual temperament" as concomitant to reason in "track[ing] truth."²⁴ What Wainwright recognizes is that there is a necessary relationship between a person's rational and affective capacities that come together in forming faith. Such a coming together, a nexus of belief based on the rational affective, is passional reason; and it is precisely such passional reason that Mary demonstrates in various ways in John 20:1-18.

Rational Evidence in Mary's Narrative

Rational evidence (i.e., the facts of the situation from which reasoned conclusions may be drawn) in Mary's discovery of the empty tomb and encounter

²³ Adapted from Gentry, *Pulpit Apologist*, 45-46.

²⁴ Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 5.

with the risen Jesus is laced throughout the narrative. Instances include:

- She notices the stone is rolled away from the tomb (v. 1), concluding that Jesus's body has been taken (v. 2).
- She looks into the tomb, seeing that it is empty (and likely seeing the linen cloths John and Peter saw) (vv. 5-6, 11).
- She recognizes the voice of Jesus (v. 16), and (likely) physically touches his resurrected body (v. 17).

These rationally derived bits of evidence are fundamental to Mary's narrative, but they are not there is more to consider. Mary's story also includes affective evidence, as several instances of the emotional aspect of the story reveal.

Affective Evidence in Mary's Narrative

Affective evidence is often reducible to the emotions of the person involved in faith formation, but there are other aspects of affective evidence. For example, one's disposition toward evidence, a willingness to consider it, for example, is included in the passionate reason definition given by Wainwright. Thus, in looking for affective evidence in Mary's situation, the following instances are notable:

- Mary is agitated and resorts to running to inform the disciples of the empty tomb (v. 2) and would likely have joined them in running back to the tomb (v. 4).
- Mary is weeping as she stands outside the tomb, likely exacerbated when she peers inside to see the tomb empty (v. 11).
- Mary exults when hearing Jesus call her name, and she passionately calls out "Rabboni!" (v. 16).
- Mary, as implied by the text, is excited and emotional as she hears and responds to Jesus's voice, embracing him (v. 17).
- Mary goes to tell the disciples about her encounter and about his directives to them, and it is likely that her emotions were charged as she did so (cf. Mark 16:10).

Though different from the rational evidence Mary received, her affective capacities were certainly engaged throughout the narrative. Thus, when coming to make her declaration, "Rabboni!" (v. 16), her faith is expressed as an outcome of the rational and affective elements of her experience.

How the Rational and Affective Brought Mary to a Faith Commitment

How, then, might it be that the rational and affective come together in helping Mary use her passionate reason to believe in the resurrected Jesus? There is a trail of rational evidence given Mary to follow, and along the way the affective evidence is building until the rational and affective come together to make belief possible.

- Rational evidence includes the fact of the empty tomb, the likely viewing of the grave cloths, the conversations with the angels and the gardener, the familiar voice of Jesus calling her name, and the (likely) physical touch involved in embracing him.
- Affective evidence includes her excited state in running to tell the disciples the tomb was empty, returning to the tomb with Peter and John, standing alone and weeping at the tomb door, pleading with the gardener to tell her where Jesus's body was, and then her excited response to hearing her name spoken by Jesus.

Taken together, the rational and affective make Mary's belief more likely than not, as she would have experienced the emotion of the moment(s) built upon the trail of factual evidence she had encountered since her arrival at the tomb in the early morning. Thus, when her faith formed—when she chose to believe—her whole person was involved as streams of rational and affective evidence came together in the form of her passionate reason. As such, Mary is a paradigm for apologists in all areas, but especially in the areas of resurrection apologetics. Further, by examining Mary's journey it is possible to better understand how faith forms by an engagement with the whole person, mind and heart.

Conclusion: He Lives, and She Told Us So

Mary made quite the journey on that first day of the week over two thousand years ago. She dutifully sought to serve the Lord she loved, even after his crucified body was laid in a borrowed tomb. She traveled to the tomb early in the day to continue caring for what she thought would be his corpse. The tomb was open and empty. Her encounter with the empty tomb, the confusion, excitement, and grief, the coming and going of the disciples, and her own discovery that Jesus was alive reveal an event—the resurrection—that is both apologetically defensible and instructive of how an expansive epistemology leads to a passionately reasoned faith decision. Indeed, Jesus lives, and Mary continues

to proclaim his resurrection through the pages of Scripture and through the lives of those who believe because she believed and invited others to do the same.

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