

“The Resurrected Gardener”

John 20:1-18

I should confess that when I read about Mary mistaking Jesus for the Gardener, I immediately think of the movie, *“Being There.”* In that movie *“Chance the gardener,”* a simple-minded man is constantly mistaken for being, *“Chauncy de Gardener,”* a brilliant visionary who only speaks in deceptively simplistic anecdotes. The twist to the movie, of course, is the very last scene when Chance does something that makes us re-evaluate him as potentially a *Christ-figure*.

So, I’m reading John 20 and *“Being There”* as almost *opposites* of one another. *Chance the gardener is mistaken for a brilliant prophetic savior. Jesus the resurrected One is mistaken for the gardener.* Then, when Jesus speaks and calls Mary by name, she *recognizes* him.

But who *exactly* is this Mary?

In the Gospel of Luke (8:2), Mary Magdalene is described as a woman who became a follower and friend of Jesus after he had cast seven demons out of her. [Not a terribly auspicious start for a person who’s then mentioned as many as twelve times throughout the Gospels (more than most apostles)].

According to Candida Moss, this might seem like a straightforward spiritual flaw (demon possession), but demonic possession in the ancient world was more ambiguous than it is today. Women, by virtue of the (perceived) heightened porosity of their body, were considered more susceptible to demonic possession than men. For the ancient Greeks, this is one of the things that made women such excellent prophets.

Some modern interpreters want to diagnose Mary with mental illness, often with the commendable goal of providing comfort to those who struggle with mental illness today. But it is worth recognizing that, to an ancient reader, her condition, while negative, was suggestive of heightened supernatural receptivity and sensitivity. After all, in the Gospel of Mark it’s those who were possessed with demons that could recognize who Jesus was.

And by the way, *prostitution* is never mentioned as one of her demons in any account! [She also wasn't married to Jesus and we don't know how old she was or what she looked like!].

But we do know she had money.

What the Bible tells us about Mary is that she was *comparatively wealthy*. Along with Joanna, Suzanna, and other women she traveled with Jesus. And it is these women who are specifically mentioned as having “*provided for*” the group out of their financial resources. In ancient terms, therefore, Mary Magdalene was one of *Jesus' patrons*. Where did her money come from? We aren't entirely sure, but Magdala was a fishing town so it is possible that she owned some kind of fishing business. The fact that she did support Jesus financially adds further weight to the argument that she wasn't a prostitute; as classicist Kyle Harper has written, your average prostitute earned about the price of a loaf of bread per customer. A prostitute would not have been in a position to sponsor a messiah.

All of this makes Mary's fate that much more tragic. Imagine devoting your time and money to supporting a fledgling religious movement only to have history remember you as one of its greatest whores?¹

But, (intriguingly), in all four Gospel accounts, Mary Magdalene is said to have been present with Jesus's mother and various other women at the crucifixion (Matt. 27:56, Mk. 15:40, Lk. 24:10, Jn. 19:25ff.).

After Jesus was taken down from the cross, his mother, Mary, and other women accompanied the body to the tomb. (The accounts of which exact women were there are not consistent, but the interesting thing is that it was always women who accompanied the body, with the exception of John's Gospel).

And when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene went back to the tomb at dawn and found it open and empty. She hastened to tell two of the apostles this startling news, and they ran to the tomb to confirm it. Suspecting that a thief had stolen the body, the apostles returned to their homes. But Mary Magdalene stayed, weeping and grieving the loss of her beloved friend and teacher (Matt. 27:61). *She is the consistent and faithful witness—this is why she is called the Apostle to the Apostles!*

¹ Candida Moss, *The Biggest Myths About Mary Magdalene*, Daily Beast, 4/14/18

In John's account, two angels appear and ask her, "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" She replies, "*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.*" She then turns around and sees a man whom she doesn't recognize. Mary supposes he is the gardener (Jn. 20:15) and asks him where he has taken Jesus.

Then, in one of the most dramatic moments in the Gospels, the man simply pronounces her name, "*Mary!*"

What happens next? Translations say, "*she turned,*" or "*she knew,*" or "*turning to face him,*" she cries out, "*Rabbouni!*" which means "*Master*" (Jn. 20:13-16).

Instantly, Mary sees the one before her in a different way, you might say *relationally instead of merely physically*. She realizes it is still Jesus, but he has fully become the *Christ*.

In reply, Jesus the Christ speaks a somewhat shocking line variously translated as "*Do not touch me*" or "*Do not cling to me*" (Jn. 20:17a). Ask yourself, *why would he suddenly give such a cold response?* The answer lies in an understanding of the *Eternal Christ*.

I don't believe the resurrected Jesus was being aloof or rejecting of Mary's friendship, nor was he afraid of intimacy. Rather, he was saying that the *Christ* is untouchable in *singular form* because he is omnipresent *in all forms*—as we soon see as the "*gardener*" at the tomb (Jn. 20:15), as a wayfarer on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13), as a man tending a cooking fire by the side of a lake (Jn. 21:4).

In each of these inner and outer journeys, Jesus was in the process of returning to his God, whom Jesus tellingly describes as both "*my God*" and "*your God*" (Jn. 20:17b).

Jesus now speaks from his *omnipresent* and *inclusive* Christ role. Jesus of Nazareth, an individual man, has become *Christ, the Corporate Personality*.^{*2}

^{*2} For a detailed discussion of this idea see: Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Harper Collins, NY, NY, 2018

The revelation of the Risen Christ as *ubiquitous and eternal* was clearly affirmed in the Scriptures (Colossians 1, Ephesians 1, John 1, Hebrews 1) and in the early church, when the euphoria of the Christian faith was still creative and expanding.

In our time, however, this deep mode of seeing must be approached as something of a reclamation project.

When the Western church separated from the East in the *Great Schism of 1054*, we gradually lost this profound understanding of how God has been liberating and loving *all that is*. Instead, we gradually limited *the Divine Presence* to the single body of Christ, *when perhaps it is as ubiquitous as light itself—and uncircumscribable by human boundaries*.

We might say that the *door of faith* closed on the broadest and most beautiful understanding of what early Christians called the “*Manifestation*,” the “*Epiphany*,” or most famously, the “*Incarnation*”—and also its final and full form, which we still call the “*Resurrection*.”

But the Eastern and Orthodox churches originally had a much broader understanding of these ideas, an insight that we in the Western churches, both Catholic and Protestant, are only now beginning to recognize.

John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan, by the way, make this point rather convincingly in *Resurrecting Easter* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2018), a study of how differently Eastern and Western art understood and depicted the Resurrection].³

That is surely what John meant when he wrote in his Gospel, “*The word became flesh*” itself (Jn. 1:14), using a universal and generic term (*sarx*) instead of referring to a single human body. In fact, the lone word “*Jesus*” is never mentioned in the Prologue! Did you ever notice that? “*Jesus Christ*” is finally mentioned but not until the second to last verse!

But you and I can reopen that ancient door of faith with a key, and that key is the proper understanding of a word that many of us use often, but often too glibly.

Christ is not *Jesus*’ last name!

³ John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan, *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision*, Harper Collins, Publishers, NY, NY, 2018

What if **Christ** is a name for the **transcendent within** of every “thing” in the universe?

What if **Christ** is a name for the immense spaciousness of all true Love?

What if **Christ** refers to an infinite horizon that pulls us from within and pulls us forward too?

What if **Christ** is another name for everything—in its fullness?⁴

As G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “Your religion is not the church you belong to, but the cosmos you live inside of.”

Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, (even in a pandemic!) enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply. This kind of deep and calm seeing is called “contemplation.”

A “cosmic” notion of the Christ competes with and excludes no one, but includes everyone and everything (Acts 10:15, 34) and allows Jesus Christ to finally be a God figure worthy of the entire universe.⁵

As Albert Einstein is supposed to have said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though **nothing** is a miracle. The other is as though **everything** is a miracle.” (I opt for the latter!).

Friends, the word used in the Bible for this idea was *Logos*, which was taken from Greek philosophy and which can be translated as “blueprint” or “primordial pattern for reality.”

This means that *the whole of creation—not just Jesus—is the beloved community, the partner in the divine dance.* Everything is the “child of God.” No exceptions.

Unfortunately, the notion of faith that emerged in the West was much more *a rational assent to the truth of certain mental beliefs rather than a calm and hopeful trust that God is inherent in all things, and that this whole thing is going somewhere good.*

⁴ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, Convergent Books (Penguin), NY, 2019

⁵ Ibid.

Such wholeness is personified in the cosmos as Christ, and in human history as Jesus.

No one religion will ever encompass the depth of such faith.

No ethnicity has a monopoly on such hope.

No nationality can control or limit this flow of such universal love.

Frankly, *Jesus came to show us how to be human much more than how to be spiritual*, and the process still seems to be in its early stages.⁶ *That* is what Easter is all about.

⁶ Ibid.