

The Gospel today is deservedly amongst the most-loved of all passages, because in it the giver of absolute joy meets the deepest human sorrow. The love of Mary of Magdala for Jesus has been overshadowed by every vulgar speculation, but nevertheless it is a real and powerful influence in the Gospel; and here it is given its highest and most intimate description. Mary was alone at the grave, before the sun had risen; her priority gives her precedence over others, her aloneness - which appears to have been chosen by the Evangelist rather than attested in the tradition, for she says "We don't know where they have laid him" rather than *I* - her solitude sets the scene for a quite unique encounter with Jesus.

Her impulse, on finding the tomb emptied - as she believes, *violated* - is to send for the leaders of the disciples: the visit of Peter and John bring the masculine, hierarchic wing of the Church into the picture. They absorb the forensic evidence of the cloths, and return amazed: and Mary is left to weep - copiously, perhaps, since the text says it twice - and at last she makes her own approach to the deserted grave. There she meets angels; not men in white, but straight angels - who question her weeping. This gives Mary the chance to echo something precious from the past: the figure of the bride in the Cantic of Canticles, who searches fruitlessly through the long hours of night for her Beloved, but does not find him. In her confused state, she unprecedentedly turns away from angels to look behind her; she sees, but does not know, the Lord for whom she was seeking. He too questions her tears, as if opening her eyes gradually to the truth into which she is stumbling so clumsily.

*She supposed him to be the gardener.* In Genesis, at the other end of the Bible, God himself planted a garden as the setting for the first Man, his new creation. The irony is clear. Jesus is at this very moment inaugurating a new Creation and a new humanity; once again the construction-site is a garden, and we recall the testing of Adam in the Garden of Eden, and the Garden of Gethsemane, where there was an oil-press, and where the anointed Messiah was tested, and declared himself with the name of God, *I Am He*. Now we are in a dawn setting, not the dark and shameful scene of the arrest; the sun is rising on the new world of Easter.

There is no recourse to theology here, no forensic accounts of what has happened. He speaks her name, *Mary*. The intimacy of the relationship is so intense, that Mary of Magdala has been fused with the figure of Mary of Bethany, who sat at his feet, choosing the one thing necessary. The Biblical language is responsive to this moment of blinding revelation: *she knew him then*. This completes the circle of the Cantic of Canticles, as the bridegroom has returned, and the long, darkened search is over. *Rabbuni*, "dear Master"- the salutation is chaste, submissive, but full of affection, and we should make it our own, whatever our sense of loss, or failure, or sin: however bitterly we may have been weeping. His rejoinder refers us forward, from out of this garden of rebirth, out of the created and redeemed cosmos, to the heart of the Holy Trinity:

*I must ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*

He is speaking of our accession to the divine life, accomplished with his return to the Father. It is immensely eloquent that Mary is content to leave him immediately, and to do his bidding: to find the brothers, and tell them the Gospel.