



THE
THIRD
DAY

Living the Resurrection

TOM BERLIN
WITH MARK A. MILLER

CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
Chapter 1: Mary Magdalene	1
Chapter 2: Simon Peter	21
Chapter 3: Thomas	41
Chapter 4: Emmaus	63
Chapter 5: Paul	85
Chapter 6: Jesus	105
Acknowledgments	125
Notes	127

CHAPTER 1

MARY MAGDALENE

At St. Mary's Church in Newport, Rhode Island, a woman was discovered hidden in the sanctuary when the church's organ was removed to be refurbished. It was actually a sculpture of a woman's head. Half of each side of her face peered out of the end of an arch. "They had been covered up for a very long time," said Rev. Kris von Maluski, the parish priest at St. Mary's, Rhode Island's oldest Roman Catholic parish.

There were different theories about the identity of this woman. One suggested St. Cecilia, the patron saint of musicians. But the choir loft and organ were not originally on that end of the sanctuary, and it seemed odd that the musicians would allow their patron saint to be hidden by an organ. Another assumed the sculpture to be Mary, the mother of Jesus. Few believed a Roman Catholic Church would allow Mary to be hidden, or let an architect divide her face with an arch.

Father von Maluski believes she is Mary Magdalene. He observes that the other arches are adorned by twelve male figures, representing the twelve male apostles identified in the New Testament. If Father Von Maluski is correct, the architect of the church made a statement that a later renovation of the church covered up: Mary Magdalene is also an apostle. She is the first follower of Jesus who saw the

resurrected Jesus. She is the first to share the message of hope found in the good news that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Mary Magdalene ministered to the other disciples when she told them that Jesus, who they knew had died, was now alive and had spoken to her.¹

**Mary Magdalene is also an apostle.
She is the first follower of Jesus
who saw the resurrected Jesus.**

Mary Magdalene is often referred to as *apostolorum apostola*, or “the apostle to the apostles” because of her role in sharing the news of the Resurrection with the male disciples. Given that Mary Magdalene faithfully shared the news of Jesus’ resurrection, it is surprising that the church thought it acceptable to hide her sculpture with a renovation for all those years, while leaving the other twelve fully visible.

The good news is that the importance of Mary Magdalene and her unique role following the Resurrection is celebrated in many parts of the Christian community. This has been done in some quarters for many years. Outside the Saints Peter and Paul Church in Krakow, Poland, there are twelve statues of the apostles on pedestals. Judas, who betrayed Christ prior to his arrest, is not present. Those who planned the building and grounds in 1605 decided to give that place to Mary Magdalene, the apostle of hope.

Mary Magdalene’s story did not start with a celebration, but it has a lot to teach us about the meaning of the Resurrection. On the morning Mary first met the resurrected Jesus, she had no thought of ever being remembered in statuary. The experience of the Resurrection typically comes at the lowest points of life’s journey rather than the highest. It comes during the worst seasons, not the

best. Mary Magdalene was in a personal fog and gloom as she made her way to Jesus' tomb. The experience of the past two days weighted her every step. We cannot know the power of Jesus' resurrection in the life of Mary Magdalene until we consider her journey that morning and feel the weight she carries as she makes her way to the tomb that holds the body of her Savior.

The Weight of Trauma

Just two days earlier, Mary endured the hours of Jesus' crucifixion. Few experiences in life help us understand what she experienced that day. Mary Magdalene stood helplessly at a distance with a small band of women until Jesus took his last breath. It is hard to see someone you love die, to be physically present at a bedside or nearby after an accident. Such moments stay with us. They are sketched on our memory. We carry them in our body and spirit. When death comes in a surprising manner, when a person is too young, or after an accident, so that we have little time to prepare, we experience it uniquely.

Imagine, then, what imprint was left in the minds and hearts of the women who witnessed the Crucifixion. Everything that happened in the past three days was unexpected. His arrest, trial, and crucifixion all seemed to come out of nowhere. They saw Jesus tortured. That would have been hard if he had committed a terrible crime that led to this punishment. It would have been remarkably painful to watch knowing that Jesus was innocent of any wrongdoing, that his life was full of miraculous good works and teaching that called people to love and righteousness. Mary's despair includes the juxtaposition of the perfection of Jesus' life and the depravity of humanity, which has condemned him. She and the other women marked the hours of his misery and suffering and saw him die.

Mary's experience of this trauma was recent and raw. It was the third day since his death, and she can clearly recall the final indignity

done to Jesus' body when a soldier pierced his side with a spear to make sure he was dead before his body was taken off the cross. As time ran out for a timely and proper burial, she saw his body brusquely taken to a tomb just before the sabbath began. Nothing else was allowed to be done as the sun began to set. Customs and laws related to the sabbath made it clear that she could not walk that distance, carry spices, or prepare his body.

She waited in the discomfort of the unfinished task nearly thirty-six hours from sunset on Friday to sunrise on Sunday. How slowly those hours must have passed for her. Mary slept fitfully and rose early. The first glimpse of the sun signaled that the time had come to make things right.

The Weight of Grief

As a pastor I have been with people when someone they love dies. When death is sudden, as with an accident or act of violence, there is one thing people want to do: make sure the body of their loved one is secure and properly laid to rest. They want to be near the one who died. People want to do something. Anything. Waiting is hard. In moments of such deep loss, in a time when everything is upturned and out of control, the first questions often asked are, "Where are they and can we see them?"

This impulse is out of the devotion of love that we hold for those dear to us. To be devoted in life is to be devoted in death. We see our obligation clearly. We want to make sure that the person we love is cared for well, so that no further injury can happen to them in death as it did at the end of their life. Sometimes, when a person enters the presence of a loved one who died, whether it is in a hospital room or a mortuary, they do not want to leave. They don't know how to leave. They will sit and stay until a pastor or nurse comes to say that the time has come for the next step in the arrangements to be taken. Mary, on her way to the tomb to care for Jesus' body, did not know it

was Easter. She did not know it was the Resurrection day. She just knew that she had to be near Jesus.

To be devoted in life is to be devoted in death.

Mary and the other disciples had heard Jesus say that he would rise on the third day. The Gospel writers are clear that none of the disciples understood what he was telling them when he said,

“He will be handed over to the Gentiles. He will be ridiculed, mistreated, and spit on. After torturing him, they will kill him. On the third day, he will rise up.” But the Twelve understood none of these words. The meaning of this message was hidden from them and they didn’t grasp what he was saying.

(Luke 18:32-34)

There was a range of beliefs among Jews in the first century about what happened to a person after their death. Resurrection was often defined as a time when people who were dead would be reembodyed and a new age would dawn that would include the return of the presence of the great men and women of the Hebrew Scriptures from the patriarchs and matriarchs to the prophets. It would be a time when God would reorder the world in justice and righteousness.² Since this had not happened, Mary probably did not have it on her mind. The third day for her was little more than an opportunity to properly care for the lifeless body of Jesus so that he was respectfully laid to rest.

Grief can be hard. But grief for those departed by death that is unaccompanied by hope of eternal life is unusually difficult. I recall standing by a graveside with a young mother whose child had died. It had been a long struggle. A medical team had done all they could

to save the child's life. Her family, friends, and church had all prayed for a different outcome. She and her husband could not have loved this child more or hoped more that life would be sustained. After prayers were offered, Scripture read, comforting words shared and the other elements of the service were concluded, she stood by the graveside crying. Then she turned to me and said what I have heard others say at such moments: "How do people endure this without any hope of eternal life?"

Mary Magdalene, whose grief is infused by nothing but loss, is such a person as she walks to Jesus' tomb.

The Weight of Anxiety

There is one more possible weight that Mary carries that morning. When Mary first met Jesus, she was not well. We know very little about her past. The Gospel of Luke tells us, "After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out..." (Luke 8:1-2).

The demons that impacted Mary's life are not named in the Bible. Mary's condition could have presented as physical, emotional, or spiritual illness. What is apparent is that she could not have been more grateful that Jesus healed her. She gained freedom from her disorders. She knew the power Jesus had to heal her and this gave her a sense of security about her future, that she would no longer be a victim to the whims of her condition.

Mary's gratitude to Jesus for her new life inspired her remarkable devotion to him. With the other women who, like her, had been healed of diseases and cured of evil spirits, she supported Jesus' ministry from her own resources. Before Mary encountered Jesus, she may have been a broken and lonely person. Her condition could

have made her an outsider to those who lived in the town of Magdala, a prosperous community that was able to afford a large synagogue on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. She may have been rejected by her family and friends as a person whose life was so out of control that others simply did not know how to help or manage her. It is possible that Mary, in those days, was hopeless.

A reason we believe Jesus to be both fully divine and fully human is that he was not only present to people like Mary but also had the power to restore them to the people God intended them to be. Whatever Jesus did or said to Mary, we know it brought her hope. Jesus set her free of her demons. She could be in community with other people again. We don't know if her family or friends welcomed her back into their lives. We do know that she was welcomed to a group of women who had also been healed, and she traveled with the larger band of Jesus' disciples. Mary became devoted to the purposes of Jesus. She wanted other people like her to be healed by him. She supported Jesus and the other disciples so that he could share his wisdom, heal the sick, extend grace to the lost, and help people become whole, well, and alive again. She wanted others to experience the ways Jesus had transformed her life, and she was happy to invest her resources to see that happen.

**Whatever Jesus did or said to Mary,
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One might wonder what else Mary was thinking about as she made her way to the cemetery. It is not uncommon for loss to ignite anxiety or fear. When we depend on someone, and suddenly they are gone, we wonder how our life will continue in their absence. We question if it will. Mary Magdalene's greatest fear may have been that without Jesus, those demons would have the power to return.

Jesus was dead. He could no longer protect her. The other disciples had never demonstrated the ability to heal people as readily as Jesus did. What would become of her now that Jesus was gone?

Most people who have struggled with demons in their past know that anxiety. A man is sitting in traffic. He is a calm person. Cars are not moving, but it is fine, he tells himself. He tells himself this because earlier in his life he did not know how to handle anger. He would yell at his children. He would be furious with his wife. He hid it well at work but would sometimes privately seethe at his workstation after a meeting where he didn't get his way. When he finally realized that he had a problem, he did the work. He talked to his pastor. He went to the counselor. He read books and shared his struggle with some friends who called out the best in him. That is why he is not worried about this traffic. He is not reactive after ten full minutes of a standstill. But after another ten minutes, when he realizes that he is going to miss his daughter's program at school, he slams his hand on the steering wheel. He is honking at the universe. The long line of traffic in front of him doesn't even shrug. He realizes how ridiculous he is being and then says, "I thought I was past this."

Demons come in many forms. Addictions to drugs, alcohol, and pornography surely count. A gambling addiction that destroys trust in a marriage while also making it impossible to pay the rent or buy groceries to feed children is a form of evil. We have demons in relationships in which we choose to pick fights with people we love rather than enjoy time together. Some of our demons are not choices we make but things that have happened in our past. Veterans take years to learn to cope with the trauma of combat. Women who have been the victims of sexual violence find themselves fearful long after the assault. People of color, having endured microaggressions and outright racial slurs, along with other overt acts of prejudice or wrongful associations with crime, can be hypervigilant even in the safety of a social setting. In the best of worlds people are set free of

such things. But the question lingers, “is this the day all of that is coming right back into my life?”

The Hope of the Resurrection

Mary doesn't want it to all come back. Mary is carrying the weight of “what now?” as she completes her journey and stands before the tomb that holds Jesus' body. Just when she thinks things could not possibly get any worse, she finds the stone that sealed the tomb rolled away. The one thing she thinks she can control and do, honor the one she so appreciated in life by caring for him in death, now seems in question.

There are moments in life when all you can do is cry. Mary is suddenly in that moment. She looks inside. There is no body and no indication of what has happened.

Mary doesn't know it, but she is about to have all the weight she carries lifted from her shoulders. Inside the tomb, she sees two figures near where Jesus' body should have been. One asks, “Woman, why are you crying?”

She replies, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him.”

Things are happening fast now. Another voice behind her asks, “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?”

Mary assumes it is the gardener, the man who maintains the cemetery grounds. She pleads, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

The gardener says to her, “Mary.”

It is Jesus. Jesus says to her, “Mary.”

This is the experience when one word calms the anxious heart and brings everything in motion to a stop. There is something that happens when someone who cares for you calls out your name. When Mary hears her name, she knows it is Jesus. Startled, she replies, “Rabbouni”, meaning, “Teacher.” Just a moment ago

she was filled with despair. She was dead inside. When she hears the resurrected Christ say her name, she is suddenly alive again. Just as she discovered new life in her first encounter with Christ, hearing Christ speak her name reawakens the hope and possibility she found in life with him. She is alive to hope, alive to discipleship and alive to the knowledge that the death she witnessed on the first day does not rule the third day. (See John 20:11-16.)

This is what the Resurrection does in our lives. It establishes hope that death has not ended the story. It brings us life and a more vital faith at the realization that God's power is ultimately victorious. This hope begins when we understand that while the Resurrection is cosmic in scope, changing the way we understand the rules of life and death for everyone, it is also very particular. It is intimate. It is a proclamation made to the masses. It is also a whisper in our ear. The use of Mary's name is reminiscent of the title Jesus gave himself months earlier when he said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep" (John 10:14-15).

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that God was not impersonal and disinterested. God knows all of us by name.

Jesus tells us that we can have a new kind of relationship with God, one in which we can know and trust God. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that God was not impersonal and disinterested. God knows all of us by name. This is why Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. "The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep...the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:2-3).

ON THE THIRD DAY, HE ROSE AGAIN.

By utilizing the lives of those who were the first to be impacted by the Resurrection, Tom Berlin provides fresh insight not just into how the Resurrection affected their lives, but for how it is relevant for ours. What better way to speak to lives than through those who have been impacted by this world-changing, life-transforming event that literally changed everything?

—**Byron Thomas**, District Superintendent, The North Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church

The resurrection of Jesus powerfully proclaims that suffering, sin, and death do not have the final word. In this inspiring book, Tom Berlin unpacks the Bible's Easter stories and helps the reader see their significance in the lives of people today. This a compelling, honest, and hope-filled book.

—**Adam Hamilton**, pastor and author of *Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith*

Bishop Berlin reminds us that when hope fades, so does our capacity to recognize God's presence with us. This marvelous reflection on the Resurrection opens our eyes to the same hope and healing those first disciples discovered at Emmaus. This timely resource reminds us the church has unique gifts to offer to the world: communal life in Jesus, resurrection hope, union with Christ.

—**Michael Beck**, Director of the Fresh Expressions House of Studies at United Theological Seminary and Director of Fresh Expressions for The United Methodist Church

The resurrection of Jesus Christ promises human possibility far beyond an annual worship gathering or a single religious experience. Within the pages of *The Third Day*, Tom Berlin masterfully weaves the stories of Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas, Paul, and Jesus himself into our own, describing lives that surpass human limitation.

—**Rachel Billups**, Senior Pastor, New Albany United Methodist Church, and author of *Be Bold* and *An Unlikely Advent*

By painting a clear picture of the humanness of Mary Magdalene and the disciples, Tom Berlin invites us to discover how the transforming power of God can impact our lives as it did those early followers of Jesus. Tom helps us not only see how the Resurrection changed the course of their lives, but how the third day is "the beginning of all of our stories."

—**Thomas J. Bickerton**, Resident Bishop and President of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church

Tom Berlin has an extraordinary ability to connect our lives with the characters of the Bible. *The Third Day* not only gives us fresh glimpses into the people of the Easter story; it also reveals our human condition and the unfailing presence of God's resurrection power. You won't just read about the Resurrection; you will see it happening in you and around you.

—**Magrey R. deVega**, Senior Pastor, Hyde Park United Methodist Church, Tampa, Florida, and author of *Questions Jesus Asked* and *The Bible Year*



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