

Why did Jesus First Appear to a Woman?

Written by Bill Perkins

The risen Lord first appeared to Mary Magdalene (Mk.16:9, Jn. 20:15-17). He next appeared to: “Joanna and Mary, the mother of James, and the other women with them” (Mt. 28:9-10). Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn’t first appear to Peter or one of the other disciples? While nobody knows for sure, I’ve found an intriguing answer.

The Empty Tomb

You may recall Jesus delivered Mary Magdalene from seven demons (Lu.8:2). She, along with other women, traveled with Jesus and the disciples and helped “to support them from their own means” (Luke 8:3). All of this happened before the Lord’s death and burial. On the first day of the week, after his crucifixion but before sunrise, Mary walked to the garden tomb where she found the stone rolled away and the body gone. Fueled by confusion and fear she raced to Peter and John and told them the body had been stolen.

Upon hearing this, the two sprinted to the grave. John arrived ahead of Peter and glanced inside. When Peter arrived, he entered the tomb. Then John stepped inside and upon seeing the vacated grave clothes and the facecloth lying by itself, we’re told, “he saw and believed” (John 20:8-9).

What Did John Believe?

Many conclude John saw the cocoon-like grave clothes and believed Jesus had been raised. How else could he have vacated the grave clothes. While that makes sense, it ignores the context. Mary had just told the disciples the body had been stolen (John 20:2).

What John saw convinced him, not that Jesus had risen from the dead, but that his body had been stolen--as Mary reported. The next verse says as much: “They did not yet understand the Scripture, that Jesus had to rise from the dead” (John 20:9-10).

While Peter and John returned to their homes, Mary stayed outside the tomb, weeping. When she looked inside, she beheld two angels. A moment later, outside the tomb, she saw a man she presumed to be gardener. But, as you know, the supposed gardener was the risen Lord Jesus. The two had an emotional exchange and then Mary ran back to the disciples and told them she had seen the risen Lord.

How did they respond? You might expect a celebration. Instead, we’re told, “They did not believe it” (Mark 16:11). Nor did they believe the report of the other women (Luke 24:9-11), or the couple who saw Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Seems clear John didn’t believe Jesus had been raised when he looked in the tomb. He thought the body had been stolen.

A Possible Answer

In this setting of confusion and unbelief, my initial question remains unanswered: Why did Jesus first appear to Mary, a woman? After all, since at the time of Jesus women were not allowed to testify in a court of law, why did the Lord want his first witness to be a woman? My friend, Dr. Rodney L. Cooper, recently shared an idea that makes sense. He noted that it was in a garden that the first woman, Eve, ate the forbidden fruit and offered it to her husband. That act, followed by Adam's sin, resulted in a curse of death upon humanity and creation.

Millenniums later, in another garden, another woman saw the resurrected Savior. To her Jesus first revealed that his resurrection had broken the curse of death and replaced it with life.

From a garden removed

to a garden restored.

From Eve to Mary

The cycle replete.