PARTNERSHIP IN EASTER FAITH: THE ROLE OF MARY MAGDALENE AND THOMAS IN JOHN 20

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Introduction

The risen Christ’s encounters with Mary Magdalene and Thomas (Jn 20.1-18, 24-29) are important but in some respects undervalued episodes in the Fourth Gospel’s resurrection narratives. Where the two stories are read as a connected whole and not just separate incidents, there is sometimes the implication of a hierarchy of faith in which the beloved disciple emerges as superior to the other characters of John 20.

1. Either way the faith of Magdalene and Thomas is seen as limited. Magdalene is contrasted unfavourably with the beloved disciple who exemplifies true faith, while Thomas, lamentantly absent on Easter night, is compared either to his fellow-disciples who receive the Spirit (vv. 19-23) or to the beloved disciple and future believers (v. 29b). Whereas Magdalene tends to be portrayed as the helpless, dependent woman who seeks Jesus but...
foolishly misses her cues; Thomas is the ‘doubter’ whose faith needs a sledge-hammer to move it.

A narrative reading of the text, however, can offer new perspectives on the characterization of Magdalene and Thomas. Within the literary schema of John 20 the two characters act in a narrative partnership that encircles the story of the giving of the Spirit (vv. 19-23). In parallel episodes Mary Magdalene and Thomas engage in a struggle for understanding and come to Easter faith. The struggle involves a level of misunderstanding which for the narrator is to be read in positive rather than negative terms: as in earlier Johannine narratives, misunderstanding is an authentic marker on the journey of faith. The implied reader identifies with the struggle and, through a deepening faith (cf. v. 31), is drawn into the orbit of the Spirit.

The Structure of John 20

The narrative of John 20 can be divided into three scenes, with a conclusion. The central scene is Jesus’ gift of the Spirit, framed on either side by individual encounters with the risen Christ: first Mary Magdalene, then Thomas. Both stories form an inclusio around the central scene which exercises a centripetal power on the narrative. The time and place for each scene is set:


4. F.J. Moloney (‘John 20: A Journey Completed’, Australasian Catholic Record 59 [1982], pp. 417-32) sees a three-stage movement from unbelief to faith, in which Magdalene and Thomas move from lack of faith, to intermediate faith (with the desire to control or impose conditions), to full faith.

a At the empty tomb on Easter morning (vv. 1-18)
Magdalene finds the tomb empty.
The two male disciples come to the tomb and return home.
Magdalene encounters the risen Christ at the tomb;
and receives the apostolic commission

b In a room in Jerusalem on Easter night (vv. 19-23)
The risen one comes to the waiting disciples and shows his wounds.
He gives them the gift of peace (twice);
the commission for mission;
and the life-giving, empowering Spirit.

al In a room in Jerusalem one week later (vv. 24-29)
Thomas is absent on Easter night.
He does not believe the testimony of the others;
encounters the risen Christ one week later;
and, through confession of faith, opens the way for future believers.

c Summation of the Gospel (vv. 30-31)

It could be objected that such a schema is problematical because it relegates Peter and the beloved disciple to minor roles. However, to claim that the beloved disciple is central to John 20 because his faith is greater than the other disciples—a living demonstration of the beatitude in v. 29—is to ignore the ambiguity of vv. 8-9. As regards his faith, the narrator seems to give with one hand (v. 8) and take with the other (v. 9). Does the beloved disciple believe in the resurrection on the basis of the οὐχίδαρα or does he merely believe Magdalene’s report of the empty tomb? We know already that he has a unique relationship to Jesus (cf. 13.23-26; 19.26-27, 35) and that he believes more than Peter, but what that ‘more’ is we do not yet know. This interpretation is confirmed by the surprising fact that the beloved disciple’s response in v. 8 has no narrative impact. He does not speak to anyone and


leaves Magdalene in her uncertainty and grief.

This suggests that the story of Peter and the beloved disciple in John 20 is unfinished. The point is made by Peter’s lack of faith and the plural verb in v. 9: ‘they did not understand the Scriptures’. Despite the strong impression that John 20 is an integrated unit, the story is not yet complete. With a small group, both disciples will receive a further appearance of the risen Christ (21.1-14), in which Peter will be rehabilitated and commissioned (21.15-19), and the beloved disciple confirmed as the primary witness behind the Gospel (21.20-24). From a narrative perspective, therefore—and setting aside diachronic questions of source and origin—Jn 20.8-10 acts as prolepsis, pointing forward to the meeting with the risen Christ in John 21 and the key roles each disciple will play. The narrator is neither stressing nor belittling the faith of the beloved disciple in John 20; rather his coming to Easter faith is not to be the subject of this narrative. In John 21 his faith will be confirmed as he recognizes the Lord on the shore in Galilee (21.7).

The parallel roles of Magdalene and Thomas, rather than Peter and the beloved disciple, are the key to understanding the structure of John 20. The goal of the literary partnership formed by the two episodes is to communicate Easter faith (20.31) and draw the implied reader into the apostolic community where the Spirit is breathed by the risen Lord. The stories match each other in three ways:

1. Both characters show a similar determination to meet the Lord.
2. Each receives a revelation and makes a paradigmatic response of faith.
3. Each is portrayed as playing a major role for future believers.

1. Determination to Meet the Lord
The determination of Mary Magdalene and Thomas to see and touch the Lord is not a point that has been stressed by commentators. Magdalene’s weeping at the tomb and her thrice-stated conviction that the Lord has been taken (vv. 2, 13, 15) are read as evidence that, despite the grave-clothes, she believes the tomb has been robbed. Yet nothing is said in the opening verses about Magdalene seeing the grave-clothes. Verse 1 states only that it is dark (πρῶτη σκοτίας ἦτο οὖσα) and that

Mary’s assumption is based, not on the grave-clothes, but on the removal of the stone (βλέπει τὸν λίθον ἡμέραν ἐκ τοῦ μνηστηρίου). In fact, it is too dark for her to see inside. She does not look inside the tomb until vv. 11-12 and what she sees then is something quite different.

From the beginning of this narrative we recognize Mary Magdalene as a woman of faith whose credentials have been established at the foot of the cross (19.25). She is one in a group of mainly female disciples who witness Jesus’ exaltation on the cross. Thus the resurrection narrative begins with a ‘beloved disciple’ who has shown herself faithful, who has seen Jesus’ life-giving glory in death and whose fidelity has brought her to the tomb. The point is underlined in the contrast between Magdalene and the other two disciples. Their response acts as a foil to Mary’s response: Peter’s lack of faith and the beloved disciple’s silence contrast with her grief and persistence (v. 11). Indeed, their dramatic arrival at the tomb does not affect her predicament; for her it is another false lead. Their departure focuses attention on Magdalene’s faith and the determination of her search.

At the same time, like other characters in the Fourth Gospel, Magdalene’s response shows misunderstanding. Her faith still needs to develop. The Lord’s body is gone and Mary does not know why. Does the narrative suggest that she is open to the possibility that God has removed the body? It is more likely that here we have a parallel with Martha, another woman of faith in the Fourth Gospel, whose misunderstanding is tempered by an openness to faith (cf. 11.21-24, especially v. 22: καὶ νῦν οἶδα ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἀνέστη τὸν θεοῦ δόξης σοι ὁ θεοῦ). Again from previous Johannine narratives, we know that such ambiguity will be clarified in Magdalene’s meeting with Jesus.

The ambivalence of Magdalene’s faith is demonstrated in her weeping which begins (not insignificantly) the moment her fellow disciples leave (v. 10). The weeping suggests frustration as well as grief, and creates further misunderstanding. Because she is blinded by tears, Mary fails to recognize the signs: the angels inside the tomb (v. 12), the Lord’s living presence (v. 14). Yet, despite misunderstanding, she does not abandon her search. Her tears, therefore, reveal love and determination as much as misunderstanding. It is this persistence which is finally rewarded when Magdalene turns for the second time and joyfully recognizes the Lord (v. 16).


The same is true of the problematical command in v. 17: μη μου ῥηθησον. Again the narrative presents Magdalene in positive and sympathetic terms. Why does Jesus repel her after all her seeking, and why, having asked her not to touch him, does he invite Thomas to touch him (v. 27)? Mostly this problem is resolved by giving the present tense of the imperitive its full weight, as if Magdalene were already touching Jesus: 'Don’t hold onto me!' What Mary does in reaching out to Jesus is the natural response of one who has lost, searched and finally found (Cant. 3.1-4). She is determined not to lose him a second time.

It follows, therefore, that the desire to touch Jesus is not just a matter of misunderstanding. Magdalene is right to assume that Jesus is to remain with her (μετέτρων). Yet he distances himself from her for a reason that, at this stage, she could not possibly know. His permanent abiding with her is to be not in the flesh as she supposes—not at least in the old way—but in the Spirit (see v. 22). Here, as before, understanding coalesces with misunderstanding. Both are intrinsic to the revelation which follows and both enable Jesus to unfold the meaning of Easter. His ascent to the Father is incomplete until he gives the gift of the Spirit.

The same determination is present in the Thomas episode. No explanation for Thomas’s absence on Easter night is offered and we are not encouraged to seek one: absence is a favourite literary device of this narrator. Moreover, the traditional picture of Thomas as the doubter is a caricature of the role he plays in this scene. Thomas is in the same position as the other disciples before their encounter with the risen one. He is no more doubtful than are they. Just as we find them cowering behind locked doors after Magdalene’s witness, εἰρωνεύει τὸν Κυρίον (vv. 18-19), so Thomas refuses to believe their witness, εἰρωνεύει τον Κυρίο (v. 25). His misunderstanding is characteristic of the community which has known the pre-Easter Jesus.

Thomas’s response displays a typically Johannine intertwaving of faith and misunderstanding. On the one hand, his determination to see and touch the Lord has positive value. Thomas’s stress on the incarnate presence of the Lord, and his conviction that the wounds are intrinsic to that reality, are signs of awareness and insight. This makes his desire to see and touch, in Johannine terms, comprehensible. On the other hand, as well as faith and insight, Thomas’s request displays misunderstanding. He does not believe the witness of the other disciples and, in desiring to touch the Lord’s wounds, he misunderstands the nature of Jesus’ presence. Like Magdalene, he assumes it is a tangible reality. In the end, it no longer matters whether or not Thomas touches the Lord (vv. 27-28). He comes to perceive that the Lord’s ongoing presence with his disciples is to be on a different level, the level of πνευμα. Thus understanding and misunderstanding combine in Thomas’s desire to see and touch the Lord. Like Magdalene, he too is determined to experience the risen one for himself.

2. Each Becomes the Recipient of Revelation and Responds in Faith
The result of the two meetings with the risen Christ is that Magdalene and Thomas come to Easter faith. As we have seen, this narrative partnership is based on a common experience of misunderstanding and

14. Thomas’s other appearances in the Fourth Gospel (11.16; 14.5) do not portray a sceptical character. Both interventions are examples of Johannine misunderstanding.
struggle. It also arises from the response of faith to which each gives expression. In different ways, each becomes the recipient of christological revelation for the implied reader. For Magdalene, this revelation is communicated by the Lord himself. For Thomas, it is evoked by the Lord’s appearance and the sight of the wounds.

Magdalene’s confession of faith occurs in response to the Lord’s naming of her: Μαριάμ (v. 16). Behind this encounter lies the pastoral imagery of Jn 10.1-18. Mary reveals herself as one of the flock, responding in faith to the voice of the Good Shepherd (10.3); she enters the fold of which he is the Gate (10.7, 9). There is more significance than this, however, in the allusion to John 10. The Shepherd is good (καλός) because he gives life to the sheep through the laying down and taking up of his life (10.15, 17-18). Because of her presence at the cross and empty tomb, Mary implicitly perceives this: she recognizes the authority (ἐξουσία) of the one who, in obedience to the Father, has laid down his life in order to take it up again. It is on this basis that she responds with the intimate form ‘Rabbouni’, expressing love for Jesus as well as understanding of his teaching.

The self-revelation of the Shepherd to Mary is unfolded in the following verses. Jesus uses the language of ascent to clarify further misunderstanding (v. 17). What is revealed to Mary is the confirmation of Jesus’ promise in the Farewell Discourse: his final presence with the community is to be through the Spirit (see 14.26; 15.26; 16.7-11, 13-15). The revelation to Mary relates to the promised sending of the Spirit/Paraclete. The Good Shepherd reveals himself to her and she responds with faith and understanding, as the witness to his laying down of life (crucifixion) and taking it up again (resurrection, sending of the Spirit). There is a further dimension to the revelation Mary Magdalene receives, arising from the commission of v. 17b. The expression οἵ ἀδελφοί articulates a new relationship for the believing community through the Easter events. The term recalls the birthing imagery of the Prologue where believers are God’s children (πεπνωμένοι, 1.12; also 3.3, 5), and brothers and sisters to one another, and to Jesus (cf. 15.15). Closely linked are the covenantal overtones of v. 17c: πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ θεόν μου καὶ θεον ὑμῶν (see Jer. 31.33; Ezek. 37.28; also Ruth 1.16). This language expresses the strong sense of identification between Jesus and the disciples in relation to God. But it is also carefully nuanced to reflect the difference in status between Jesus and his disciples. The covenantal relationship in which believers become God’s ‘family’ is dependent on Jesus as Son (14.6; also 10.7, 9). Here again the forming of a new community as the people of God, and as sisters and brothers, takes place in and through the Easter events (see 19.26-27). The risen Lord reveals this new relationship to Mary Magdalene as she meets him in faith.

In the parallel scene with Thomas the narrative focus appears to be on confession of faith rather than revelation. Nevertheless, both elements are present. Thomas’s confession, ὁ κύριος μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου

18. Cf. Mary’s use of κύριος throughout the narrative (vv. 2, 13, 18).

21. For Neyrey (Resurrection Stories, pp. 74-75), the language of ascent indicates the highest Christology of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is portrayed as a heavenly figure ‘whose natural place is face-to-face with God’; the knowledge given to Mary is equivalent to Thomas’s confession and this ‘indicates her special status as a receiver of heavenly revelations’. 22. The NRSV assumes that ἀδελφοί refers only to male disciples: either the brothers of Jesus (which is unlikely; cf. Barrett, St John, p. 566) or the twelve (see Witherington, Women, pp. 181-82). However, the twelve are unimportant for John (cf. Lightfoot, St John, p. 335, and Haenchon, John, II, p. 216). Cf. Jn 13.1 where ‘his own’ includes women as well as men; cf. D.A. Lee, ‘Presence or Absence? The Question of Women Disciples at the Last Supper’, Pacifica 6 (1993), pp. 1-20. Against this view, cf. M. Davies, Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 254, who argues that the message Magdalene is given is only for the male disciples.
(v. 28), embodies the Easter faith of the believing community, echoing the covenant language of v. 17. At the same time it is an unparalleled moment of revelation in the Fourth Gospel (cf. Mt. 16.16-17). The risen Christ with the wounds of his death is revealed to Thomas as the divine Logos-become-flesh (1.14), the one who lives in eternal communion with the Father (1.1, 18). For Thomas, as for Magdalene, Jesus’ identity is revealed in his origins and destiny, his descent and ascent. Only at this point in the Gospel, after the foundational events of Easter—crucifixion, resurrection and sending of the Spirit—could such a confession of faith occur on human lips. Thomas’s confession is thus the pinnacle of the Gospel’s Christology. Yet it is also an expression of personal faith, a faith achieved through misunderstanding. The struggle to understand Jesus’ identity, for John, is bound up with the search for identity and self-knowledge. In the nexus between theology and spirituality Magdalene and Thomas parallel each other as bearers of revelation.

3. Each Plays a Major Role for Future Believers

The central role that Mary Magdalene and Thomas play, as we have seen, from the revelation and confession of faith in which each participates. In narrative terms, they are partners in communicating that faith. Mary’s task is that of witness to the resurrection. The commission she is given is more than affirming the presence of the risen Lord, though that is the basis for her witness. Like any other witness in the Fourth Gospel, she is to announce to the community the significance of the event (ἀγγέλλωνος τοῖς μαθηταῖς, v. 18a). The purpose of being sent (cf. Ps. 22.23) is to unfold the inner meaning of Jesus’ risen presence in relation to his ascension and the establishing of a new, covenant community. As representative of the community of faith, she prepares the implied reader of the Gospel for the giving of the Spirit in the following scene, by which Jesus’ ascension is completed.

Mary Magdalene’s role as witness to the resurrection is unique in the Fourth Gospel. It stands in a long line of witnesses beginning with John the Baptist (1.7-8, 15, 19; 3.26-30), and including the Samaritan woman (4.39-42) and the beloved disciple (19.35; 21.24). While the Gospel makes no specific reference to ‘apostles’, Magdalene is given a ‘quasi-

apostolic’ role. As the ‘first disciple of the risen Lord’, she is comparable in status to Peter elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Lk. 24.34; 1 Cor. 15.5). The Christophany she receives is a ‘protophany’, an appearance that, in a sense, is set apart from subsequent apparitions. No other disciple in John’s Gospel, male or female, plays this role.

The role that Thomas plays is equally important for the implied reader. Exegetically the episode is problematical, and considerable debate has gone into the meaning of Jesus’ response to Thomas’s confession. Are we to read Jesus’ utterance in v. 27c—μὴ γίνον ἂπιστος ἀλλά πιστῶς—as a rebuke of Thomas? Are Jesus’ words in v. 29a meant to censure faith that is improperly tied to empirical verification? Does Jesus’ beatitude in v. 29b (μακάριοι οἱ μὴ ἴδοντες καὶ πιστεύοντες) draw an unfavourable contrast between Thomas and future believers?

These questions need not lead automatically to an affirmative answer, especially if we read the Thomas episode in its wider narrative framework. In this reading Jesus’ words to Thomas in v. 27c are an encouragement to faith, and parallel the way Jesus names Mary Magdalene (v. 16), which is likewise an encouraging rather than a rebuking of Mary. Jesus’ statement in v. 29a applies to the Easter community as a whole and not just to Thomas. Jesus’ beatitude, therefore, need not be seen as denigrating Thomas (or anyone else). Rather it functions as narrative paraenesis for a community struggling to understand Jesus’ absence and discouraged by distance from the Easter events and the tangible signs of


31. Assuming χριστοφανίας μὲ προφητείαν to be a statement rather than a question against the punctuation of the 26th edition Nestle – Aland text; so Barrett, St John, p. 573, Schnackenburg, St John, III, p. 334, and Beasley-Murray, John, p. 386.


the resurrection (empty tomb, grave-clothes, appearances). The narrator’s point is that the community is not disadvantaged by this distance. The faith of future believers, and thus the implied reader, is singled out for blessing. 34 It may be dependent on the witness of the apostolic community, but it is in no way limited by this dependence. This positive reading of Jesus’ beatitude is confirmed by the conclusion which immediately follows it with its emphasis on faith as the goal of the entire Gospel (vv. 30-31).

There is a further dimension to the Thomas story, underlining the role he plays for the implied reader. A major difference between Thomas’s experience of the risen Lord and the rest of the community is that it takes place one week later. Thomas’s confession of faith, the highest confession of the Gospel, takes place, significantly, outside the foundational events of Easter Sunday. Yet it is also integrally related to them. The narrative thus implies a link with the liturgical life of the believing community (cf. Rev. 1.10). 35 Thomas’s confession is a narrative bridge between Easter Sunday and the life of the believing community. His faith in the risen Christ as ‘my Lord and my God’ embodies the faith of the apostolic community on Easter Sunday. For John, it is also the faith of the ongoing community of faith Sunday-by-Sunday, where the Easter events are celebrated.

Conclusion

In both episodes and their effect on the implied reader, a centripetal force is at work in the narrative of John 20. Jesus’ appearance to Magdalene leads into the central scene in which the Spirit-Paraclete is given. Similarly, the appearance to Thomas flows out of vv. 19-23, bringing the Gospel to its climax. The commission to Magdalene is the pre-condition for the giving of the Spirit; in proclaiming the message she prepares the way for the risen Lord to manifest his presence. Everything she says and does in the first scene, therefore, represents an inclining towards the Spirit. Even Thomas, though absent from the central scene, is drawn into its dynamic. His demand to see and touch is likewise an inclining towards the Spirit. His confession of faith, and the blessing on future believers which it invokes, are vivid signs of the Spirit’s activity. The same dynamic is operative for the implied reader. By identifying

with the faith of Magdalene and Thomas, he or she is drawn into the centre of the narrative and, in company with the gathered disciples, meets the risen Christ behind locked doors, hears the words of peace, sees the wounds and is given the commission for mission and the authority to forgive and retain sins.

In the literary partnership that emerges from John 20, Mary Magdalene and Thomas meet the risen Jesus and thus bring Easter faith into being for the implied reader. Magdalene is not a weak, helpless woman moving blindly from one misapprehension to another, nor is Thomas a pessimistic character prone to existential doubt. Just as Magdalene is the witness to the resurrection and announces its meaning, so Thomas brings that faith to a climax and acts as a bridge for future believers. It is their faith journeys which the implied reader traces. Mistaken turnings, confused demands and unfocused longings are all part of the journey for this narrator. The characterization of Magdalene and Thomas draws the implied reader, through misunderstanding, along the pathway of faith which in this Gospel is the journey to the centre of life.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the narrative of John 20 and, in particular, the characterization of Mary Magdalene and Thomas. It argues that the two stories function in a literary partnership that encircles the giving of the Spirit. In parallel episodes, Mary Magdalene and Thomas engage in the struggle for understanding and come to Easter faith. Magdalene is not a weak, helpless woman moving blindly from one misapprehension to another, nor is Thomas a pessimistic character prone to existential doubt. Just as Magdalene is a witness to the resurrection and announces its meaning, so Thomas brings that faith to a climax and acts as a bridge for future believers. Their faith-struggle involves misunderstanding that is to be read in positive rather than negative terms. The implied reader identifies with the struggle and, through the centripetal force of the narrative, is drawn into the presence of the Spirit.

34. Watson, Easter Faith, p. 103.