

Easter Scenes

Hans Holbein the Younger (c.1497–92)

Noli me tangere (1532–3), Royal Collection

Titian (c. 1488–1576), *Noli me tangere* (1511–12)

National Gallery, London

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Songs of Songs 3: 1–5 *John 20: 1–18*

Some of the greatest paintings in the history of art have been inspired by the Bible, and in particular by the narratives of Christ's life and death as found in the four gospels. The scene we are thinking about this evening ostensibly represents a quiet moment within this story. In the well-known painting by Titian, one of the two pictures in your service booklet, he wonderfully conveys the quietness and promise of an early morning. Mary Magdalen has discovered Christ's empty tomb, and, as we have heard, she runs to tell the disciples Peter and John and all three run back to the sepulchre to affirm what she has discovered. They are excited but also confused, as they had been earlier in the gospel according to St John, when Christ says to his disciples: 'A little while and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me.' This utterance is so gnomic that he has to repeat it, and he adds: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy.'

This turning point has now been reached. The darkness that covered the earth for three hours at the time of the Crucifixion is in the past and the resurrection stories begin. Mary Magdalen, with other women or alone, is in all the gospel accounts of the empty tomb and also experiences the reappearance of Christ, the two proofs of the Resurrection, which is central to the Christian faith. We should note too that specific mention of her presence at the Crucifixion can be found in all four gospels, St John telling us that she stood at the foot of the cross beside Jesus's mother. And while other disciples fled to save their lives, she stayed. After Joseph of Arimathea has negotiated with Pilate over Christ's body and it has been wrapped in a clean linen shroud and laid in a new tomb, Mary Magdalen is still there. Matthew tells us that after a great stone has been rolled into place to block the entrance to the tomb and all have departed, Mary Magdalen and Mary the mother of Jesus remain, sitting opposite the sepulchre. And it is Mary Magdalen, on her own, who is the first to revisit the tomb on Easter morning. Is it surprising that Baldassare Castiglione, the great Renaissance author who specialised in etiquette and morality, wrote: 'You must remember that St Mary Magdalen was forgiven many sins because she loved much'?

The reference to her sins reminds us that in popular imagination she is both a noblewoman and a whore; a reformed prostitute. Her harlotry is said to explain her saintly universality because her sinful life embraced both carnality and venality, flesh and money. Yet her biblical identity is complicated. In Matthew's gospel (26: 6–13), in relation to the visit to the tomb, she is referred to as Mary of Magdala, a fishing town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee associated with harlotry. Mark likewise names her Mary of Magdala and records that Christ had earlier driven seven devils out of her, which suggests a troubled past. But Pope Gregory I, commonly known as St Gregory the Great, was among those who identified Mary Magdalen with Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who, during Christ's visit to their house, anoints his feet with oil of nard, a costly perfume, the fragrance of which fills the whole house (John 12: 1–8). The Magdalen also became linked with a similar event in Luke (7: 36–50), where a female worshipper, unnamed but firmly identified as a sinner by Simon the Pharisee, wets Christ's feet with her tears and anoints them with myrrh; and similar events, involving an anonymous woman and an expensive perfume, are described in Matthew (26: 6–13) and Mark (14: 3–9), both ending with Christ's affirmation: 'I tell you this: wherever in all the world the Gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told as her memorial.' For those of us who saw the recent, visually stunning feature-length film *Mary Magdalene*, directed by Garth Davis, our image of her will have been additionally complicated by the considerable subtlety brought to its exploration of the main protagonists' motivations and character.

Let's now turn to the two images of this scene. Titian, as you can see, represents the moment when Mary realises that the man she had initially thought was a gardener is in fact Christ. She has fallen to her knees; one hand rests on her jar of ointment and the other reaches out to Christ. In turn he gathers his shroud around him and bends away from her but at the same time leans towards her, in a comforting, sheltering manner. X-rays of this painting reveal that it went through many alterations, and that Christ was originally shown stiffly moving left, away from Mary, a pose replaced in the final rendering with this more satisfactory dynamic spiral motion.

It may surprise you that Christ holds a gardening tool, a hoe, with its point sharpened to a tiny gleam of light and a small ring around its pole, not visible in reproduction but to be found just beneath Christ's hand. It's an odd tool to give Christ, but of course it acts as a mnemonic for the preceding moment, when Mary mistook him for the gardener. The hoe also creates a clear divide between the two figures, which Mary unwisely tries to cross. 'Touche me not', Christ says in Tynedale's 1526 translation, and modern translations uphold this ban with 'Do not touch me' or 'Do not hold on to me'. But it is the Latin translation usually given to images of this scene; and, as Neil Macgregor has observed, it is the courtliness of the Latin imperative – *Noli me tangere* – meaning 'Desire not to touch me', that perfectly matches the graceful swaying of Christ's body in Titian's picture.

Yet this is a scene less about prohibition than interaction. Mary's presence at the tomb evidences her own suffering and loss. The angels in the tomb ask why she weeps, and her reply is poignant: 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.' And when Jesus speaks, he too asks her 'Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?' At first her grief is so great she does not recognise him, blinded as she is by tears and by her firm intent. 'Sir,' she replies, 'if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.' And then comes the *éclaircissement* as she sees who it is. Interestingly, Jesus does not so much comfort her as give her a task – go and tell – for her his resurrection is a mission to take her vision to others. And this instruction

creates a new dynamic, visible here in the rising movement established by Mary's pose that continues up into the tree, which bursts into leaf, filling, very satisfactorily, that top left hand corner, but which may also have a symbolic resonance, similar to that found in the tangle of grass and foliage around Christ's feet, showing that he has passed from death to life.

Only when you stand in front of the actual painting, in gallery 6 in London's National Gallery, can you experience fully the tenderness and love in Christ's gaze as he looks down at Mary, and thereby experience, in Neil MacGregor's phrase, 'the perfect equivalence in yearning'. Then, too, you can enjoy Titian's brisk handling of paint in his creation of white cloth, notably in the Magdalen's sleeve and Christ's loin cloth, as well the sublimity of the painting as a whole. During the Second World War, Kenneth Clark, then Director of the National Gallery, successfully fought to keep the gallery open for temporary exhibitions and concerts, but the permanent collection had moved for safe-keeping, to a slate mine in North Wales. In January 1942 Clark, sensing the public's hunger for great art, conceived the idea of bringing back each month one picture which would hang alone in one of the galleries, and this proved a huge success, partly, perhaps, because he invited the public to nominate what they would most like to see. As a result the very first picture shown in this way was Titian's *Noli me tangere*, a picture about love transformed, not diminished, by death.

Whilst preparing this address I encountered the painting by Hans Holbein the Younger, which has been kindly added to the service booklet. Holbein is more usually associated with portraiture, made magisterial by this calm, cool, objective observation of his sitters. When this painting was shown in the recent exhibition, *Charles I: King and Collector*, at the Royal Academy in London, I was not the only art historian surprised and astonished by the strikingly inventive drama which he brings to this scene. Everything is here: an echo of the Crucifixion in the crosses on the hillside; the empty tomb with a glimpse of the two angels seated inside; the bustling urgency of John and Peter as they rush back to the other disciples with news of the empty tomb, thereby missing a sighting of Jesus himself; and above all the fierce tension of the pull/push emotional exchange between Mary and Jesus which creates a kind of formal dance, while above searing clouds tear through the sky. Did I suggest at the start that this was a relatively quiet moment? How wrong I was.

If we think back to the Crucifixion, to what was regarded as a most shameful form of death, it must have seemed to the disciples that everything they had hoped for, been promised and believed in, had been destroyed. No wonder they fled, faced with this image of isolation, shame, loss, failure and death. Yet it is here, in this black hole of negativity that we encounter a great paradox, that out of this comes salvation and new life. It is hinted at in one of the medieval windows in Hereford Cathedral, amid scenes of the Passion, where Christ is shown carrying a cross that is coloured a vivid green.

It must have needed great depth of love on Mary Magdalen's part to remain at the foot of the cross, to wait patiently while the body of Christ was haggled over and to be there, right to the end. And then to return. Our first reading this evening this evening came from the Song of Songs, otherwise known as the Song of Solomon. It was chosen because in the second century a literary trope began which found in the scene of Mary at the empty tomb and her search for Christ's body a parallel with the figure of the Shulamite Woman in the Song of Songs, inquiring for and eventually finding her beloved. Both women convey ardent love, a love that is also erotic, explicitly so in the Song of Songs, and implicitly so with Mary Magdalen, sensuality being one of her primary characteristics. Hence that eloquent gesture of human desire in Titian's painting.

Mary Magdalen is uniquely privileged among human kind as the first witness of Christ's resurrection. As such she stands for all subsequent believers. I have always been puzzled as to why Jesus chose to come back in human form, in these Resurrection scenes, but his exchange with Mary in the garden is surely an affirmation that he remained continuous with his earthly existence while also transformed into his existence in eternity with God; and that what Mary 'sees' is a Jesus in transition. Yet the story of Mary Magdalen moves us in all kinds of way, 'because she loved much'. And this abundance of love must also have given her the strength and insight to move on; a love that also enabled her to let go.