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Jesus the Gardener – a View of the Garden Scene Through Text and Image

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Introduction

Our previous speaker, Jim Cregan, has given us a rich view of the notion of the Royal Gardener, the cosmic gardener, and the understanding that the gardener image is not simply a way of suggesting that Mary Magdalen was very confused, but rather the evangelist of the Fourth Gospel presenting us with a very rich symbol of the Risen Christ. From the garden of Eden, to the garden of Gethsemane and then to the garden of Paradise, the power of the symbol is there. As Jim noted, the allegorical motif of Jesus as the ‘cosmic gardener’ “achieved prominence in the Middle Ages but had its origins in much earlier Christian homiletics.”¹ Katherine Jansen maintains that the reason for the popularity of this particular scene in the middle ages was the development of the cult of the Magdalen. This cult was powerfully developed by Dominican and Franciscan preachers who saw the Magdalen as the perfect penitent. Jansen has worked extensively on original sermons from the period not only to understand the voice of the institutional church as relayed through homiletic discourse, but she also found that the preachers responded to their audience’s feedback and hence the voice of the people can be heard as well.² Mary Magdalen was not a penitent prostitute. This misconception possibly originates in Gregory the Great’s homily in 591 where he identified the unknown woman sinner in Luke’s gospel as Mary Magdalen.³ Hence the artworks that we have all identify her through her attributes (personally meaningful symbols), emblems (generic symbols) and symbols as the penitent prostitute.

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While Jim limited his chosen pericope to verses 14-15, this paper explores the garden imagery from John 20:11-18 because the art through which this text will be viewed in some instances includes imagery relating to verses 11-18.

The Text

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ Mary Magdalen went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her. John 20:11-18

The Narrative

Mary returns to the tomb ‘very early on the first day of the week’ while it was still dark (20:1) heralding the new creation made possible through the resurrection. Prior to this event, all material creation that was considered ‘good’ by the Creator had death as a distinguishing mark. Jesus initiates a new creation and a hope of full resurrection of all of creation.4

The text does not tell us anything about Mary’s return to the tomb but when Peter and the Beloved Disciple leave, Mary is described as standing, weeping outside the tomb, in the

“darkness of unbelief.”

Peter and the Beloved Disciple have seen the empty cloths in the tomb and have gone back to their homes. The Beloved Disciple already believes, even though he has not seen the Lord as he accepts Mary Magdalen’s witness. Bruner translates 20:11a as “But Mary stayed right there, just outside the tomb, crying and crying”. His intent was to capture both the grammar elucidating Mary’s action and her fidelity. Her action is faithful and the result is that she becomes faith-filled. Her emotion “represents the emotion of the whole world in the presence of the overwhelming cruelty of death.”

The angels ask Mary why she is weeping. She responds “They have taken my Lord away... and I don’t know where they have put him” (20:13). Jesus is still her personal loss, her personal grief, she has not yet been able to see beyond the personal relationship that she enjoyed before the resurrection that ended when she was at the foot of the cross with Jesus’ mother (19:25). The angels are seen first framing the absence of Jesus’ body, now they speak to her and she is not afraid as would be the usual response to the appearance of angels (Luke 24:5, Mark 16:6 and Matt 28:5). Perkins suggests that this absence of fear means that John did not think of this story as an angelophany but that the story is truncated and the emphasis placed on the real focus which is Mary’s encounter with the risen Lord.

Schnackenburg reinforces this view as he considers the angels function to be quite unclear as they do not answer Mary’s complaint and they do not announce anything. From a different point of view though, Mary is given the opportunity to see the angels, unlike the other two disciples, so the presence of God is emphasised in her encounter, and then she is the first to see the risen Jesus.

“As she said this she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not recognise him” (20:14). The evangelist is hinting that full recognition cannot be received in an instant.

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and presents her unbelief as profound. Mary is distressed and confused by the absence of
the body and through the veil of her tears, unable to recognise the Easter symbols present.
She is moving closer to the truth, the risen Jesus himself, but recognition of him still eludes
her. The evangelist focuses on this lack of recognition and much of this christophany
narrative is devoted to it. In this account, the lack of recognition reflects the Johannine
theme that only Jesus’ ‘own’ can hear his voice. Respect for Mary’s incomprehension can
also rest on the “simple fact that one does not expect to be talking to a resurrected person.”
This non-recognition aspect of post resurrection appearances is common to the gospel
accounts. There can be two reasons for this: firstly, that the emphasis is on the unexpected
nature of such appearances, and secondly, that the risen Jesus is very different to the Jesus of
the Galilean ministry. In 1 Corinthians 15: 42ff, Paul talks of resurrection as being
perishable and imperishable, a “two fold aspect of continuity and transformation.” The
body has died and has been buried but the resurrected body is imperishable so is no longer
dependent on physical existence but on spiritual life. The stories of the empty tomb show the
continuity of the life and death of Jesus, but the recognition of the risen Jesus can only be
experienced through transformation in faith.

Mary’s distress is questioned again, this time by Jesus using the same words as the angels,
“Woman, why are you weeping?” (20:15). This repetition indicates that Jesus alone as the
“Revealer has the privilege of resolving Mary’s problem.” Mary supposes him to be the
gardener, as explored by Jim in the previous paper. Once again this links to the account of
creation. God created a garden in Eden, in the east where he put the first created human being
(Genesis 2:8). Jesus is the new creation, the new gardener, the one who brings humankind to
the new paradise and full restoration of relationship with God. Mary is still preoccupied with
her own personal grief at the loss of “my Lord” (20:13) and wishes to go and remove him
from wherever he has been laid. Yet, despite her misunderstanding, she is persistent and
through her intense love for Jesus she is determined to find where he has been laid.

Once her name is called there is radical transformation. The NRSV, NJB and NAB all translate this phrase as “She turned” showing that this was a moment of conversion for Mary Magdalen and the moment of the “call” to believe in the risen Christ. Paul talks about the conversion of the gentiles as a “turning to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). Even Paul’s own experience on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22, Gal 1:15-22), can be seen as a call, a radical change that has come about by association with Jesus, died and risen.  

19 Bruner describes Jesus’ vocative “Mariam” as being the shortest sermon in the Gospel of John, this one word that changed Mary’s whole life. In the short space of time that it took her to ‘turn’, history also changed. She was now in the presence of the “death-conquering Central Figure of history.” As the first person to experience the Risen Lord she was present when “human history took a turn to a responsible hope for the vincibility of death and, so, to the conquest of meaninglessness.”

Mary has now been called and has arrived at “a partial faith, a belief in the Jesus who best responded to her present hopes and needs.”  

21 For the Johannine community this could reflect their understanding that merely seeing the risen Christ is not enough, one must look through the eyes of faith. She calls him Rabbouni – which means Master (NJB) or Teacher (NRSV, NAB). Rabbouni is the Aramaic name used in John’s gospel throughout his ministry and with a first person possessive ending it becomes “my master”.  

23 She has recognised Jesus as her teacher, the one she has loved and followed throughout his ministry.  

24 Mary names Christ after he names her, as aspect of great significance as names in the ancient world reveal identity, presence and relationship.  

25 Mary has revealed herself as one of the flock when she responds to the voice of the Good Shepherd and since she was present at the foot of the cross (19:25), and the empty tomb (20:1) she has been through the devastation of loss and into the “overpowering joy of rediscovery and awakening.”  

26 As with Martha, and with the lover in the Song of Songs, the one who has been lost is now restored.

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As mentioned above, many artworks have been focussed on this particular section of John’s Gospel showing penitent Mary Magdalen reaching out to the Risen Christ. This paper will now examine a number of images and through reading the visual theology of each artwork elucidate the interpretation of John 20:11-18. The images have been placed in chronological order to assess the possible developments of the theme.

The Artworks

Giotto, “Noli me Tangere”

Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel: angels, tomb, Mary Magdalen, the risen Christ.

Not in John’s gospel: sleeping soldiers (note resemblance to later images e.g. Piero della Francesca “The Resurrection”), flag of victory, Mary in red of the prostitute but also the red

28 Giotto, “Noli me Tangere”, 1304-1306, fresco, 200x185, Cappella Scrovegni, Padua.
of divine love, Jesus clothed in celestial cloths as are the angels, tree of life and tree of knowledge.

**In John’s gospel but not in the artwork:** gardener, stone rolled away. The foliage from the trees has been reduced over time. The only garden image is from the plants that spring up wherever the victorious Christ has walked.

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Duccio’s “Appearance to Mary Magdalen”

**Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel:** Mary Magdalen, the risen Christ.

**Not in John’s gospel:** flag of victory, Mary in red of the prostitute but also the red of divine love, Jesus clothed in red for divine love and blue of heavenly truth, the striated lines of his garment in gold to show his divinity, tree of life and tree of knowledge, mountain rent by earthquake (as in Matthew’s gospel), gold sky – presence of God, beyond time and earthly energy.

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29 Duccio di Buoninsegna, Appearance to Mary Magdalen, 1308-1311, tempera on wood, 51x57, Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Siena.
In John’s gospel but not in the artwork: gardener, tomb, angels, stone rolled away. The only garden image is from the plants that spring up wherever the victorious Christ has walked.

Giotto’s “Noli me Tangere”

Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel: Mary Magdalen, the risen Christ, angels, tomb,

Not in John’s gospel: Mary in red of the prostitute but also the red of divine love, Jesus robed in celestial garb as are the angels, tree of life and tree of knowledge, striated mandorla, extra angels in the sky to announce the event.

In John’s gospel but not in the artwork: gardener, stone rolled away. The only garden image is from the plants that spring up wherever the victorious Christ has walked.

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30 Giotto de Bondone, Noli me Tangere, 1320s, fresco, Magdalen Chapel, Lower Basilica, San Francesco, Assisi.
Fra Angelico, “Noli me Tangere” 31

**Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel:** Mary Magdalen, the risen Christ, the tomb, gardening tool, garden, stone rolled away.

**Not in John’s gospel:** Mary in red of the prostitute with hair uncovered and flowing freely but also the red of divine love, walled garden. Jesus’ feet, the position suggests the ‘already, not yet’ aspects of Redemption.

**In John’s gospel but not in the artwork:** angels. Fra Angelico was a theologian in his own right and this is the closest rendition of John’s gospel. Other artists have all depended on theologians who perhaps had a particular homiletic point of view.

31 Fra Angelico, “Noli me Tangere”, 1440-1442, fresco, 166x125, Convent di San Marco, Florence.
Riemenschneider’s “Noli me Tangere”

Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel: Mary Magdalen, the risen Christ, tomb with stone rolled away,

Not in John’s gospel: Mary with flowing partially uncovered hair of the prostitute, jar of oil for anointing the body (in John’s gospel Nicodemus provides the oil and spices) Jesus robed in a cloak only, tree of life, flag of victory, walled garden, Peter asleep – link to Gethsemane.

In John’s gospel but not in the artwork: gardener, angels.

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32 Tilman Riemenschneider, “Noli me Tangere”, 1490-1492, Limewood carving, Parish Church, Münnerstadt.
Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel: Mary Magdalen, the risen Christ, rising sun (early in the morning), Jesus as gardener.

Not in John’s gospel: Mary with jar of oil for anointing the body (in John’s gospel Nicodemus provides the oil and spices) Jesus robed in a cloak only, other women returning to the city.

In John’s gospel but not in the artwork: angels, tomb, stone rolled away.

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Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel: Mary Magdalen, the risen Christ, rising sun (early in the morning), tomb and angels, stone rolled away, Peter and the Beloved Disciple returning to the city (faith of Mary contrasted to the doubt of Peter), Calvary close by.

Not in John’s gospel: Mary with jar of oil for anointing the body (in John’s gospel Nicodemus provides the oil and spices) Jesus robed in red for divine love and blue for heavenly truth, tree of life.

In John’s gospel but not in the artwork: gardener.

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34 Hans the Younger Holbein, “Noli me Tangere” 1524, oil on wood, 76.8 x 94.9, Royal Collection, Hampton Court.
Symbols and narrative aspects present as per John’s gospel: Jesus as gardener, Mary Magdalen, rising sun (early in the morning), tomb and angels, stone rolled away. The particular way in which Rembrandt has rendered the light on Jesus’ indicates that his stance is one of action. Mary Magdalen is partially in the light because she has not yet fully understood. The angels remain in the dimness as in John’s gospel because they have nothing to say, they are not the messengers in this instance, the Risen Jesus is the whole message.

Not in John’s gospel: Mary with jar of oil for anointing the body (in John’s gospel Nicodemus provides the oil and spices) women returning to the city.

Rembrandt’s “The Risen Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalen”

35 Rembrandt, “The Risen Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalen”, 1638, oil on panel, 61x49.5, Royal Collection, Buckingham Palace. London.