

PCG: Discipleship Exploration

Holiness, Purification and Trust in the narrative of the women visiting Jesus' Tomb

Introduction

This exploration comes from a question asked during a discipleship discussion about the women who visited Jesus' tomb with the aim and hope of anointing Jesus' body. The question touches on both the practical aims of the women and the Jewish customs.

- 1) The question challenges why they thought it necessary to go and anoint Jesus' body since some of their number knew that Joseph and Nicodemus had wrapped Jesus' body in linen and placed it in the tomb on the evening before the Sabbath began.
- 2) The question assumes that it was against the law of Moses for the women to go and anoint Jesus' body and to touch a dead body defiles them.

Biblical Texts

Although our discipleship discussion was focused on Mark's Gospel, to consider these questions more fully all four Gospel accounts relating to this event are included. (The NIV (2011) Version is used as this matches LPBC's church Bible's)

Matthew 27:56-61, 28:1	Mark 15:42-47; 16:1-3	Luke 23:50-56; 24:1	John 19:38-42; 20:1
As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb. 28. ¹ After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.	It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome	Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. ⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. ⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had	Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about thirty-five kilograms. ⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. ⁴¹ At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was near by, they laid Jesus there. The empty tomb

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	bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ² Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³ and they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?'	prepared and went to the tomb.	20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.
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1) Why did the women think it necessary?

Of the four gospel accounts it will be noticed that only one, John, says that Nicodemus took 'a mixture of myrrh and aloes' with Joseph. 'Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.' The other accounts say only that they wrapped Jesus' body in linen. John does not say the women took spices, only that Mary Magdalene¹ went to the tomb.

In Matthew's telling of the events, not only does he fail to mention anything about spices being taken by the men on that evening, but he also says nothing about either Mary taking them. If we were only to have the accounts of Matthew and John, the answer to the question would be that the women (or just Magdalene in John) wanted to go and see the tomb. As I consider why they wanted to do this, I do not think it was a macabre fascination but because the women had a close relationship with Jesus and a natural desire is to be as close as possible to one whom they loved but thought they had lost.²

However, both Mark and Luke tell us that the women took spices with them. Like Matthew they have Joseph and Nicodemus as wrapping but not anointing, Jesus' body, and Mark is explicit in saying the women intended to anoint Jesus' body. Using only these two accounts, it would not be unreasonable to see the women's actions as pragmatic since this was the earliest opportunity for them to anoint and wrap Jesus' body. Going at that early hour could be viewed in a similar, practical way, as they would want to be there before decomposition, only some 36-hours after death and with the body stored in a cool place.

Although an answer on motive, this observation cannot answer the question as presented because we do have all four accounts, and so the fact that the women knew Jesus' body to have already been anointed is presupposed. It is this knowledge that leads to the challenge in the question, but there is also an unsaid expectation within the question that the first anointing with spices was carried out properly. At this point, 'properly' may be taken as either *done thoroughly* or *done in accordance with Jewish custom*. Therefore, another answer may be that the women did not trust the first anointing and wanted to ensure either or both meanings of proper burial rights.

That answer shares the same pragmatic reasoning as the second but we have not yet taken into account the emotional reasoning noted from the observation made about Matthew and John's accounts. John's account communicates this well. Unlike the other accounts he has Mary Magdalene speaking first, asking, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they

¹ Magdala is her place of birth, and this Mary is identified as Magdalene to identify which of the Mary's this was.

² Something I can attest from officiating funerals.

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have put him!' This acts as a reminder to consider the women's characters and relationship with Jesus from the time spent with him, rather than looking at the events of the tomb in isolation.

Two earlier events, although involving two different women, give a clue to the type of relationship that Jesus encouraged. We have narrative on Jesus staying with Mary and Martha (*Luke 10*) and another when Jesus came to raise their brother Lazarus (*John 11*):

In the first Martha set to the work of hosting Jesus but Mary adopted came and sat at Jesus feet. What Martha did was not wrong, since hosting was important, as the example of Abraham hosting strangers shows (*Gen.18*) and is later confirmed by the writer to the Hebrews (*Heb.2*), however Jesus valued Mary's more intimate seeking of his presence over the works that Martha did. Jesus used the opportunity to teach them that it was their hearts that needed to be prepared and this was more important than works.

In another incident both women were grieving the death of their brother Lazarus. Martha was first to go and meet Jesus while Mary stayed at home. In their conversation Martha declared that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been with them, and responded to Jesus saying, 'I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is come into the world.' When Martha tells Mary that Jesus was there and wanted to see her, Mary then goes to see him too.

Both Mary and Martha have learnt that seeking God has higher priority than works, for only God can rescue the heart.

When it comes to the women at Jesus' tomb, three of the Gospels name Mary Magdalene who Jesus saved from demonic possession (*Luke 8*). Mary Magdalene is at the cross of Jesus next to another Mary, Jesus' mother. In the scene at the cross John tells us that both these Mary's were there in a deeply touching scene where Jesus commends his mother into the care of the disciple John. We would already expect that Jesus mother Mary retained an intimate relationship and not be surprised to find Mark telling us that she is one of the women to visit with spices that morning, but that model of relationship can be seen to apply to all Jesus' close disciples.

This background information seems to me to support a view that the women who went with spices were working out the call of their hearts. There was more to it than cold logic, more than pragmatism over the burial rituals and not simply a distrust that those rituals had not been properly completed. The women's hearts were oriented toward the Lord as their first love, and I find it both heart-warming and comforting to know that this is what the Lord desires above all.

This attitude of heart is confirmed in Jesus' quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 when he answered a Pharisee about the greatest commandment, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' (*Matt.22*). As we investigate the second part of the question it does us well to remember that all the commands begin there.

2) Was it against the law of Moses for the women to go and anoint Jesus' body, because to touch a dead body defiles them?

This was very much assumed by the questioner and so we need to consider the instructions given by God to the Israelites. To highlight their importance it is worth noting that, in addition to the books we traditionally associate with the law, there are nearly sixty references to the law of the Lord in the Psalms alone, such as:

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Psalm 1's, 'Blessed in the one [...] whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.'

And Psalm 19's, 'The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.'

What is this law?

The law of the Lord is made up of Commands and Precepts. As instructions given by the Lord God, they are found within the books of the Law³ which are also generally known as the Torah. As a result, the Torah is often known as the Law which, for us, are the first five books of the Old Testament. However, the Torah includes historical events and so it is helpful to note for our study that the law is given within the context of the Lord framing the relationship he desires with people he chose to be his representatives.

Further, in Hebrew parlance the commands are the Ten words⁴ and, rather than over-simplifying the law as a legal system of rules, the Torah gives direction and wisdom to the chosen people on how to live righteously. Within the commands and precepts are fixed boundaries that the people are not to cross, such as the 'you shall not' and 'you shall' statements, plus specific instructions to those who act as mediators between the people and God who were the Priests and Levites.

Laws about handling the dead

These laws are found in the precepts rather than in the Ten Words / Ten commandments and our question relates only to the handling of dead people and so we will not consider laws about dead animals.

For the Priests, they begin with instructions in Leviticus 21:1-2

The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: "A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, ²except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother'.

And a stricter command for the High Priest, given in 21:11,

'He must not enter a place where there is a dead body. He must not make himself unclean, even for his father or mother'.

Likewise, for Nazirites, (those who make a vow to be separated for the Lord either for a period or for life) in Numbers 6:11,

'Throughout the period of their dedication to the Lord, the Nazirite must not go near a dead body.'

For the people there was a different nuance, given in Numbers 5:2,

'Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has a defiling skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body.'

³ The Jewish division of scripture books is Law, Prophets and Writings.

⁴ For a fuller discussion on The Law see, Hetty Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2004).

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It will be noticed that the precept for the people is different to those dedicated for specific service to the Lord in that they are not instructed to avoid touch with a dead person, but they do become ceremonially unclean by such contact.

This became a problem for some of the people who found themselves unable to obey another of the Lord's commands to observe the Passover, because they had been in contact with a dead body. Which of the commands should take precedence? They went to Moses with this question and Moses consulted the Lord on how to direct the people. The Lord's decision was to have those people celebrate the Passover a month later (Numbers 9:9-11).

Like the command to send anyone away from the camp who had come into contact with a dead person, there was a time limit on their separation from the rest of the people. This is given in Numbers 19:11,

'Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days. ¹²They must purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then they will be clean.'

Back to the women

The women who went with spices to anoint Jesus' body can only come under the law regarding the Israelite people as none served the Temple structure in a formal capacity.⁵ Among the women who visited Jesus' tomb on that early morning immediately after the sabbath was Jesus' mother who, even if we ascribe to her a Priestly status as most blessed of women because she was the mother of the Lord, was permitted to become ceremonially unclean for a close relative. Under such status (which the Jewish leaders would not have given to Mary) she would then be required to follow the purification process.

An assumption that the women were breaking the law by attempting to anoint Jesus' dead body is, therefore, a mistaken re-assignment to all Israelites of a law that was given only to the High Priest.

Conclusion

To the first part of the question my response was to investigate the women's motive using both the narratives given in the Gospel accounts and a small sample of the relational interaction that has developed over the time of Jesus' ministry.⁶ When investigating whether the women's motive was then contrary to the law, I hope to have established that this was not the case. We can only say it was contrary to the law if we wrongly assign a law for the High Priest to the women.

My own conclusion is that the women showed the depth of their bond with Jesus through their desire to visit the tomb and to ensure, if they could, that Jesus' body was properly honoured through anointing with spices. Rather than being an unnatural act, this concords with the spiritual maturity that Jesus had taught them that, like his many acts that appeared to be against the grain of the law, was actually based on the intent of the Lord for relationship with his people. His instruction is to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart'.

I also think it helpful to remember that the focus for each of the Gospel writers is on Jesus. When we consider the accounts of his interaction with others, each Gospel writer is communicating something

⁵ Although many may think women were not permitted to serve, we have Exodus 38:8 informing us that women served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and the example of the daughters of Zelophehad who stood at that entrance when they came to consult Moses (Numbers 27:11).

⁶ The obvious exception to this is Jesus' mother Mary, noted more in the second part of the response and whose relationship began with the visit from Angel Gabriel.

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about who Jesus is. In these accounts all confirm both his actual physical death and his bodily resurrection, foundational to Christianity, and they tell us how surprising and unnatural the men and women found it. We can forget that even his close disciples were grappling with Jesus' identity, such as his statement to Martha telling her he is 'the Resurrection and the Life'. Deep in their spirit they discovered Jesus is God come in human form and they were trying to work that out in their lives.

Their coming to Jesus' tomb is an example of both the cry of their hearts and an unconscious response to come to the Holy of Holies. I hope this statement provokes another question about Jesus' identity as God, and that a born-again Christian's body becomes identified as a 'temple of the Holy Spirit'! (1Cor.6:19-20). If the women were spiritually born in this sense, do we have a group of 'made-holy' women coming to meet the Holy of Holies?

Likewise, the narratives invite us to think about who Jesus is and prompt to consider our own reaction or interaction with him. Can we, like the women say, 'I love you Lord with all my heart'?