

‘The Resurrection according to John: a powerpack of transformation stories’

Last week I stumbled upon a secret. It’s a secret I’m going to share with you.

It’s this: within the famous, transformation story which is the Resurrection in the Gospel of John are three hidden transformations. It’s almost as though John is so keen to convey the miracle and wonder of God bringing mankind new life in Christ that he ‘cubes’ the message – he tells three separate and marvellous stories of transformation within the one big story.

Let me explain.

The first hidden, almost secret transformation lies in this: John’s account of the resurrection is set, very definitely, in a garden. Mary actually takes the man she sees near her for the gardener. Is this co-incidence? Perhaps not.

What other part of the Bible do you think of where you have a man and a woman in a garden? ‘Genesis’ would be a pretty good answer. And what do you have there? The ‘type’ or ‘first version’ of man and woman, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, set there by the creator of the Garden – God. One of the phrases that gets attached to Jesus early on by the first Christians is ‘the new Adam’... It might just be that the writer of the fourth gospel is already alive to this. The resurrection, he is saying, produces ‘the new Adam’ – the full human being God that God wishes and intends all human beings to be. And, just to re-enforce the point the gospel writer has Mary Magdalene identify Jesus with ‘the gardener’ – the creator and tender of the Garden, God himself. So, do you see, within those opening verses, as the resurrected Christ and Mary Magdalene encounter each other in the garden of resurrection, a transformation of Old Testament understanding is being pointed to? Now resurrected, Jesus is the new, improved Adam.

Now let’s find the second, almost secret transformation.

All of the gospels report messengers from God giving news to the disciples that Jesus had risen. John’s account is very particular. He writes: Mary Magdalene ‘saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.’ It’s reckoned, once again, that this is an allusion to another Old Testament passage. If I ask: ‘where else do you find two angels, one at one end of a plinth or platform, and the other at the other end?’ you might be hard put to answer. The verse you’re looking for – the one that’s on the tip of your tongue – is... Exodus 25.18. Here the Ark of the Covenant, the ‘Holy of Holies’ holding the most precious objects in all Judaism, the tablets of the 10 Commandments, is being described. Exodus 25 says: ‘Make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. Make one cherubim on one end and the second cherub on the other.’ Do you see what the writer of the fourth gospel might be pointing to? The old order, the Old Testament has, with the resurrection, been superceded. No longer are the 10 Commandments the Holy of Holies – the most important parts of God’s revelation to Man. No. The two cherubs either side of Jesus’ empty funeral plinth attest to the truth that the Resurrection has taken the Tablets place. Out with the Law: in with the new, transforming, unpredictable and personal transformation of Christ-centred resurrection.

That’s John’s hidden, subtle indication of the resurrection pointing to radical transformation squared. Just one more to go – but to have three stories hidden within just one bigger story of seven verses isn’t bad, is it? Let’s find the third.

Jesus’ first words to Mary include the question: ‘Whom are you seeking?’ And then, a few moments later, when Mary realises that she has encountered the Risen Lord, Jesus says ‘Do not hold on to me’. The theme being picked up here is most probably God’s longing search for his people. Again in the Old Testament, this time in the Song of Songs, we can read a passage with strong associations to this cameo picture in John’s gospel. One passage goes: ‘All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him...I will search for the one my heart loves’. Then ‘when I found the one my heart loves, I held him and would not let him go.’

The Song of Songs is an allegorical poem about God's love for his people. The whole of the Old Testament, one could say, is a love story, in which God and Israel dance and promise and separate and reconcile. Mary Magdelene represents the lowly band of outcasts that now supercedes the old Israel in turning to embrace the love of God – now offered in ultimate, redeeming form in the Risen Christ. This is a well hidden but powerful pointer towards the transformation offered in the Risen Christ indeed.

And that allusion to the Song of Songs, in those one or two verses of John's gospel, I suggest, brings the total of our discovery and examination of hidden accounts of transformation to three. The overall and powerful enough story of the Resurrection is 'cubed'.

But there is one more gem, one more great theme for us to quarry from these few, seven verses. And that comes in the final verse: 'Mary Magdelene went and announced to the disciples 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.' Here was have Mary Magdelene, a woman with a supposedly dubious history given the privilege of being the first person in all of human history to proclaim the good news of Christ's resurrection. What bigger and better transformation of the old ways of the old priorities and ways of understanding things could there be than that? Mary, here, tells the gospel- the good news, whose spread is the subject of the rest of the New Testament. And it all begins with Mary Magdelene's words to the amazed disciples 'I have seen the Lord'.

So, this morning and this Easter, let us take heart and inspiration from the way the writer of the fourth gospel wants to pack so many allusions to the total and radical transformation brought into the world by Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus' resurrection points to the arrival of the New Adam. Jesus' resurrection points to the superceding of the Law by a truly personal connection with God. And Jesus' resurrection points to God and humanity's long search for each other being complete in this once and for all act of divine and human reconciliation.

Let us give thanks for this power pack of transformations wrought by God – and resolve' like Mary Magdelene, to tell the good news that Jesus has risen in our turn.