

RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION
(JOH 20:14-18)
- A JOHANNINE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF JESUS'
APPEARANCE TO MARY MAGDALENE -

STELIAN TOFANĂ

Abstract. In this article, I pointed out a few aspects from the episode of the meeting between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene on the morning of the Resurrection day (Joh 20:14-18). I have undertaken this analysis by taking into account the paschal theological Perspective of John the Evangelist. By doing this, I have tried to emphasize the identification between the Resurrection of Jesus and His "Ascension" that is equal with His Exaltation which Jesus speaks to Mary Magdalene about. This identification between the two seemingly distinct episodes with a single saving act, i.e. His Exaltation, constitutes a feature of John's Paschal Theology.

Keywords: Resurrection, Ascension, Paschal Theology, Exaltation, Mary Magdalene.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fundamental truth of the Gospels and the crucial biblical point of the whole doctrine of Christianity. Thus, the all four Gospels of the New Testament canon conclude their account of Jesus' life and activity with the description of His Resurrection or "Exaltation" (Matt 28; Mk 16; Lk 24; Joh 20-21). On the other hand, the kerygmatic activity of the early Church is dominated by the emphasis placed mainly on the event of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Savior, which event, together with His Passion and Death on the cross, is the supreme act of His "Ascension" or "Glorification" (cf. Acts 2:24-36; 3:14.26; 4:10-11; 5:30-32; 7:55-56; 10:39-43; 13:30-38; 17:3.31). From this perspective, the Resurrection cannot be treated only as an "important and interesting epilogue" of the suffering on the Cross, as it is the fundamental act of the whole salvation achieved by Jesus Christ.

But a complete description of the theological dimension of the Resurrection are required, mainly from a biblical perspective, detailed analysis and nuances of some aspects of events related to it, especially regarding the appearances of the Risen Lord.

To illustrate these truths, I will refer only to the episode of Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene. This episode reproduces, as well as possible, the perspective

of John the Evangelist on the event of the Resurrection, but especially on the relationship between it and Jesus' Exaltation or Ascension.

1. Some exegetical references to the episode

The appearance of Jesus Christ to Mary Magdalene is the first interaction, narrated by the Fourth Gospel, between the risen Lord and a person from the wider circle of His Disciples. The Synoptic Gospels seem to record the same thing, the name of Mary Magdalene appearing first in all accounts of the Resurrection (cf. Matt. 28:1; Lk 24:9-10). Mark even states, "... *He first appeared to Mary Magdalene...*" (16:9). Therefore, from a certain point of view, Mary Magdalene would be the first witness of the event of Resurrection.¹

John (20:11-13) relates first the appearance of the angels after Jesus' Resurrection and contain also material specific to the Synoptic Gospels. It seems that the Evangelist John takes it from the synoptic tradition, inserts it in his Gospel, but gives to it a different meaning, reinterpreting it.² The presence of the angels probably meant also for John, together with to the empty tomb, an indisputable heavenly proof of the Resurrection.

However, the Evangelist's interest is focused on the *personal meeting between Jesus and Mary Magdalene*. This is an event that operates a real transformation (conversion) in the way she looks at and understands Jesus. In the itinerary of her faith, she walks the path from seeing and understanding an earthly Jesus to that One of the paschal faith and understanding. Mary does not reach this faith through the angels who appeared to her (Joh 20:11-13), but only through Jesus, in the experience of His new presence after the Resurrection.

In the context of this appearance, John the Evangelist mentions a detail not at all insignificant: Mary recognizes the risen Lord only when He calls her by name: Mary! At this moment, she turns (στραφεῖσα - στρέφω) and calls him in Hebrew, Rabbuni, which means, Master! (Joh 20:16).³ Her sudden return to Jesus

¹ Cf. Gerhard MAIER, *Evangelia după Ioan*, Ed. "Lumina lumii", Korntal, Germania, 1999, 837.

² See Jean ZUMSTEIN, *L'Évangile selon saint Jean (13-21)*, Labor et Fides, Genève 2007, 276. The role of the angels in the Gospel of John is reduced, comparable with that of the Synoptic Gospels. Here they do not have the role of announcing that Jesus was risen, but only that to be the passive witness of the event (See details, Rudolf SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium*, III Teil, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1975, 372- 373).

³ Raymond Brown believes that "the vocabulary of this episode has to do with the scene in Joh 1:38, where Jesus asks two of John the Baptist's disciples, "Whom are you looking for?" And they call him "Rabbi." Likewise, in this episode, Mary addresses Jesus with "Rabbi," after He first asks her, "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" (Joh 20:15). R. Brown's next conclusion, according to which Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus from the beginning, otherwise she could not have exclaimed, "I have seen the Lord," seems to be a little inconclusive, when one takes into account the information given by the Evangelist. Here is Brown's conclusion: "One is tempted to theorise that by using this "old" title the Johannine Magdalene is showing her misunderstanding of the resurrection by thinking that she can now resume following Jesus in the same manner as she had followed him during the ministry. However, such a reasoning is made

by hearing her name has in the theological vision of the author of the Gospel the nuance of a new conversion, in the sense of a new entrance into a new life, inaugurated, from now on, by the Risen Jesus. The moment of turning to Him is an outward gesture, but at the same time it expresses an inward concern of a person who seeks and ends up believing.⁴ Referring to this moment, St. Cyril of Alexandria states: "And she knew him at once, leaving the suspicion from the beginning only through His sight and bringing Him the usual veneration by calling Him "Rabbuni." And, filling his mind with the highest joy, he runs with warmth to touch His Holy Body, in order to obtain blessing from Him."⁵

According to the Fourth Gospel, the verb στρέφω does not simply mean to turn, but to turn to a certain person, in order to enter into a relationship with it.⁶ So, Mary turned to the One she knew with whom she wanted to reconnect, namely, the earthly Jesus. But the relationship with Him could no longer be the same as before the Resurrection, that is a purely human one with an earthly Messiah, object of fascination rather than of faith. The relationship became, from now on, one with a Jesus carrying a spiritual body and which will be recognized, moreover, in the breaking of the bread, that is, in the Eucharistic sacrament of the Church.⁷

But the focus of the Pericope is placed by the Evangelist in verse 20:17, where Jesus, speaking to Mary and not allowing her to touch him, makes an important *comment* on the meaning of the Resurrection and its implications for the Disciples:

less plausible by the fact that in 20:18 Magdalene announces to the disciples "I have seen the Lord"; and so she knows that it was her Lord and not merely her teacher who stood before her" (Raymond E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, II, Garden City, New York-London 1970, 1010).

⁴ Referring to the moment of the identification of the Risen Jesus by Mary Magdalene, R. Schnackenburg states: "... Jesus begegnet jetzt Maria in neuer Weise. Sie wendet sich ihm zu eine äußere Geste, die zugleich ihre innere Öffnung für den auferstandenen Herrn ausdrückt" (*Das Johannesevangelium...*, 375). See also, Jean ZUMSTEIN, *L'Évangile selon saint Jean (13-21)*, 279.

⁵ Sf. CHIRIL al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, in Coll. "Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești" (PSB), partea a IV-a, București 2000, 1143-1144.

⁶ Compare with Lk 7:44; 10:23; 22:61; 23:28.

⁷ The obvious proof in this regard is the episode of Emmaus, described by Luke, where the two disciples traveled with Jesus, talked with Him, but didn't recognize Him except when He has broken the bread (Lk 24: 31-35). For details regarding the sacramental significance of the episode "Emmaus", see Stelian TOFANĂ, "Euharistia la Emaus" (Lc 24:13-35). Repere exegetice și teologice", in vol. *Grai maramureșean și mărturie ortodoxă*, Baia Mare 2001, 167-181. If Luke suggests the recognition of Jesus' presence in the Eucharistic sacrament, John is alluding to another way of recognizing His presence, namely, in His word. In the act of recognizing Jesus by Mary Magdalene, at the mere hearing of her name, she seems to play a role to which the Evangelist alludes in another context: (Joh 10:3) The episode illustrates the "claim" of the Good Shepherd: "I know My sheep, and they know Me" (Joh 10:14.27). Thus, a fulfillment of Jesus' message about Himself as Shepherd seems to have been here fulfilled (See, Raymond E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, II, 1009-1010).

“Jesus said unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend (ἀναβαίνω) unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.”⁸

Thus, verse 20:17a introduces us to the second stage of Mary's itinerary of faith in which she goes beyond the phase of a purely sensitive attachment to Jesus, being now with Him only in the level of faith, the only perspective from which can be understood the mystery of the Risen Christ, glorified and exalted to the Father.

The theme of *ascension to the Father* is a specific Johannine one in which the Evangelist sees the profound significance of the Resurrection: For him, the Resurrection of Jesus also is and signifies, at the same time, His ascension to the Father. But the meaning of the ascending to the Father is in the Fourth Gospel not that which is present in the act of the Ascension of Jesus, mentioned by the Evangelists Luke (Lk 24:50-53) and Mark (Mk 16:19). For Luke, the Ascension marks the end of the earthly appearances of the Risen Jesus. Instead, for the Evangelist John the *Ascension to the Father* means the apogee of Jesus' glorification in the presence of His Father, a process that begins with the Passions, paradoxically continues with the death on the cross and ends in the Resurrection. Thus, *the Ascension to the Father* constitutes together with His Death and Resurrection an *essential Whole* of the "Hour of Jesus", that is, of the moment of His full glorification.⁹

The theological truth that John the Evangelist wants to communicate is, therefore, the *identity*, in the saving work achieved by Jesus, *between the event of the Resurrection and that of the Ascension*, or the identity between the act of Resurrection and the climax of His exaltation.¹⁰

In this context, the Risen Lord entrusts Mary Magdalene with the post-resurrection message: “Go to My brethren (τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου) and tell them; I ascend to My Father and to your Father (τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν) and to My God and to your God (θεόν μου καὶ θεὸν ὑμῶν)” (Joh 20:17b).¹¹ Mary Magdalene, now the symbol of a

⁸ For R. Schnackenburg, the two sentences which speak of ἀναβαίειν (to ascend) are purely Johannine interpretations. In fact, says the author, it is not only a dominant theme in John's theology, but it is also an attempt by the Evangelist to make Kerygma about the resurrection agree with the theme of Jesus ascension **to the Father** and Jesus return **from the Father** (See details, Rudolf SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 376. See also R. E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, II, 1003-1004).

⁹ This is the Johannine meaning of the phrase "My hour has not yet come" (Joh 2:4). A theological explanation of the mentioned expression, from the perspective of Johannine Theology, see Stelian TOFANĂ, "Hristologie, Sacramentalitate și Mariologie în Evanghelia a IV-a, cu specială privire la episodul CANA (In. 2,1-11)", in *Studia Theologia Orthodoxa*, nr. 1-2, Cluj-Napoca 1999, 98-100.

¹⁰ Stelian TOFANĂ, "Hristologie, Sacramentalitate și Mariologie", 99.

¹¹ The verb ἀναβαίω (to ascend) is used 17 times in the Gospel of John. Depending on where it is used, the meanings are as follows:

1- to ascend to heaven, or to the Father (1:51; 3:13; 6:62; 20:17).

2- to go up to Jerusalem, to the Temple, occasioned by a feast (2:13; 5:1.7.8.10.14; 11:55; 12:20).

full faith, becomes, therefore, the *first missionary* in the service of the Word of the Risen One. Here we are faced with an astonishing synthesis of the whole mission and work of Jesus: His Father, who sent Him into the world *among* and *for* His own (cf. Joh 1:11), and to Whom He lived in full obedience, becomes from now on *our Father*; His God, the One who initiates and sustains the Creature-Creator dialogue also is, from now on, *our God*.¹² In this point, marked by what Jesus reveals to Mary Magdalene, namely, that His Father is also our Father, of all Christians, *the Incarnation with the Resurrection is fully met*. J. Zumstein is even of the opinion that the road of the Incarnation ends at this point.¹³

The Apostle Paul makes clear the whole meaning of the Incarnation in the Epistle to the Galatians: "*But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons (ἐστε υἱοί), God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father! (αββα ὁ πατήρ)" Therefore, you are no longer a slave, but a son (υἱός)...*" (Gal 4: 4-7). All these consequences of the Incarnation for the humankind are now confirmed by the risen Jesus after His Resurrection in the post-paschal mandate entrusted to Mary Magdalene.

Those to whom Mary Magdalene sends the Paschal message are, first and foremost, the Disciples of the Lord and whom Jesus calls brothers: "*Go to My brethren (τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου)...*"

Therefore, at the end of the salvation work, the Apostles and the disciples of the Lord, and since then all Christians, have also been becoming *brothers with Him*, because through the Resurrection of Jesus they enter into a new relationship with God, who is none other than the Father of their resurrected Teacher.

2. The Identity between "Resurrection and Ascension" – a feature of Johannine Paschal Theology

The words of Jesus "*Do not touch Me (μή μου ἅπτου), that I have not yet ascended to My Father*" (Joh 20:17a) seem to be part of the category of the most

3- to ascend (climb) in relation to the image of the gate (10:1). In John 20:17 one can find two great Johannine theological themes, which emphasize the Evangelist's vision with regard to the Resurrection: the ascension of the Son of Man and the return of the Son to the Father (See, Georges ZEVINI, *Commentaire spirituel de L'Évangile de Jean*, Paris 1996, 206).

¹² See details, Sf. CHIRIL al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, in Coll. "Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești" (PSB), partea a IV-a, București 2000, 1148-1149 ; G. RICHTER, "Der Vater und Gott Jesu und seiner Brüder in Joh 20,17", in *MüThz* 24, 1973, 95-114.

¹³ "Du point de vu théologique, l'élévation du Christ a une double signification. D'une part, la révélation arrive à son terme et à son accomplissement. Le Logos qui était sorti du Père, retourne auprès de lui. Le chemin de l'incarnation prend fin" (cf. Jean ZUMSTEIN, *L'Évangile selon saint Jean (13-21)*, 280).

"enigmatic passages of the New Testament."¹⁴ Indeed, in modern Bible research, many exegetes have tried to interpret these words in a variety of ways.

Raymond Brown considers, for example, that the attention paid by so many exegetes to the meaning of the words "*Do not touch me*" is exaggerated. He thinks that the emphasis should be on the second part of the verse, "*because I have not yet ascended to My Father*", where it is clearly stated that the return of the Son to the Father has a precise saving purpose in relation to the Disciples and to the world, Jesus following to send to them the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Here is what he writes: "*He is not going to be content to prepare heavenly dwelling places to which one day He will take his disciples (Joh 14:2-3); rather, He will return from his Father to the disciples to establish them in a new relationship to God by giving them the Spirit.*"¹⁶ I think, R. Brown is right if we take into account John's view to the relationship between the Resurrection and the Ascension, expressed in the words "*because, I have not yet ascended to My Father*" and where the emphasis seems to be placed by the author more on the expression "I haven't yet ascended."¹⁷

In this context, however, there are some questions that need to be answered: Why did Mary Magdalene intend to hold Jesus back? And what is the reason for Jesus' simple motive for not allowing her to touch Him? Might be that of not having ascended to the Father yet?

Raymond Brown believes that Mary's attitude could be interpreted in the light of Jesus' promise at the Last Supper before His Passion: "*I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see Me; but you will see Me, for I am alive*" (Joh 14:18-19). It is possible that when Mary Magdalene saw and acknowledged Jesus, she thought that He had already returned, as He had promised, and that He would now remain with His disciples, giving thus a new shape to His former presence in their middle.¹⁸

¹⁴ Cf. G. MAIER, *Evangelhia după Ioan*, 843; R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium*, III Teil, 377.

¹⁵ Cf. Raymond E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, 1011.

¹⁶ Raymond E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, 1011.

¹⁷ The difficulty in understanding this expression is due in large part to exegetes who have made a comparison between not allowing Jesus Mary Magdalene to touch Him and Thomas' invitation to touch Him. It should be noted that the verb ἅπτω - *to touch, to retain*, in the words of Jesus, addressed to Mary - μή μου ἅπτου (Joh 20:17), does not appear in the episode "Thomas", where we have, instead, the verb φέρω - *to carry, to bring*, etc. (See details, R. E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, 1011; G. MAIER, *Evangelhia după Ioan*, 843). Other exegetes, however, see in Mary's rejection that the time has not yet come for the true worship due to Jesus (cf. G. MAIER, *Evangelhia după Ioan*, 843). However, we believe that such an interpretation is foreign to the meaning of the text.

¹⁸ Cf. R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, 1012. See also, Sf. CHIRIL al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evangelhia Sfântului Ioan*, 1147.

The question raised by such an interpretation is whether Mary Magdalene, who was not present at the Discourse during the Last Supper, could have known so well the words of Jesus concerning His return which will bring to the disciples a joy that no one else will take it from them? (Joh 16:22). Taking into account that the disciples were scattered in the Passion and that Jesus' meeting with Mary took place sometime on the morning of the Resurrection, when they were locked up for fear of the Jews, it is unlikely that Mary would have had the opportunity in this relatively short period of time to encounter an Apostle who would have talked her in detail what Jesus said at the Last Supper. Therefore, such an interpretation may be more difficult to support.

What Jesus actually says to Mary through the words "Don't touch Me!" it is rather a reference to the fact that the new relationship with Him will not be one generated by a mere appearance of Him, but one marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit which will be sent over the Apostles and into the world after His ascension to the Father, that is, after His glorification. In this context, it should be noted: If John the Evangelist speaks about the "ascension" of Jesus to the Father, he does not consider the event of the ascension to heaven after forty days from the Resurrection at which episode the book of Acts refers: *"To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many convincing proofs, being seen of them forty days...And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight"* (Acts 1:3.9). The exegetes clearly state that the Evangelist John had in mind another ascension of Jesus, namely, His *exaltation* in the presence of His Father, and not the "ascension" understood as the "terminus point" of His post-resurrection appearances.¹⁹

Therefore, in John 20:17 the author is not concerned with the final point of the appearances of the risen Jesus, but with the final point of "His hour" in which He was to pass from the earthly world to the Father (Joh 13:1), that is, the Resurrection and His Glorification through the Resurrection.

What is clear from the pages of the New Testament is that the risen Jesus did not return to the normality of a life he lived before His death. The new condition of His existence after the Resurrection was given by the eternity of His presence, also as Man, in the communion with the Father. This new eschatological status of His post-paschal Person was no longer characterized by the features of an earthly existence, so one cannot imagine an earthly place, spatially circumscribed, in which He would have lived during the forty days in which He shewed himself to different people.²⁰ *From the moment Jesus rose from the dead through the power of God, the Father, He is already in heaven with God, His Father* (cf. Acts 2:24; Rom 1:4). From this point of view, the Resurrection means, at the same time, His glorification or

¹⁹ See details in this regard, P. BENOIT, "L'Ascension", in *RB*, 56, 1949, 161-203.

²⁰ Cf. R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, 1013.

exaltation, which Jesus spoke in the “Farewell Discourse” about: “*And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself with the glory which I had with You before the world was*” (Joh 17:5).

R. Brown is even of the opinion that when Jesus appears after the Resurrection, He appears from heaven.²¹ Therefore, the phrase “I ascend to the Father” (Joh 20:17) is nothing more than a mere expression in a “spatial language” that describes the exaltation or glorification of Jesus after the Passover.²²

From this perspective, in the theological conception of the author of the Fourth Gospel, Christ enters in the process of His glorification still from the cross, which is nothing but a step in the act of His eternal exaltation and glorification in the presence of the heavenly Father: “*And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself. But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die*” (Joh 12:32- 33).²³

The ascension of the Son to the Father by Resurrection, or His glorification by ascension, meant the full spiritualization or deification of His humanity, i.e. its full filling of the Spirit. Thus, His humanity being fully spiritualized became a good communicator of the Spirit, too. It should be also noted, that His humanity

²¹ R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 1013.

²² This identity between *resurrection* and *ascension* seems to be expressed by some of the oldest texts of the New Testament.

- Acts 2:32-33 records: “*God raised up this Jesus...therefore being exalted to the right hand of God...*”

- In Rom 8:34, the Apostle Paul writes: “*..it is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God*” (see also Ephes 1:20).

- In Philipp 2:8-9 Christ's humility through death contrasts sharply with His ascension to the Father: “*He humbled Himself, and became obedient to the point of death, and still death on the cross. That is why God also exalted Him...*” (comp. 1 Pet. 3:21-22).

The Gospels seem to be even more explicit in this regard:

- The risen Jesus, from the Gospel of Matthew, is the One who was given all power in heaven and on earth: “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth*” (28:18b).

- In Luke 24:26, it is Jesus who explains that “*Christ must suffer and enter into His glory.*” Therefore, the New Testament testimonies, according to which the resurrection from the dead presupposes the ascension of Jesus into the presence of God and the sitting by the right hand of the Father, do nothing else but explain the dramatization of Joh 20:17 (See details in this regard, P. BENOIT, “L’Ascension”, 170 ff; A. M. RAMSEY, “What is Ascension?”, in *Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament* (Theological Collections) 6, London, SPCK, 1965). What is really difficult to specify, however, in these texts, is whether the reference to the ascension refers to the event mentioned by Acts, namely the ascension to heaven after forty days or that of Jesus glorification through the Resurrection. I believe that the reference is rather to the “terminus point” of the appearances after the Resurrection and to His ascension to heaven after forty days.

²³ Cf. R. E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 1013; See also, R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 378.

even if it was exalted to the supreme stage of deification that is of the work of the Holy Spirit, it did not cease to remain human for all the time.²⁴

Therefore, the identification of Jesus Resurrection with His glorification may be called a characteristic of John's paschal theology. In this regard, it is important to point out that while in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus foretells His passion three times, in the Fourth Gospel we will find a Jesus anticipating not His passion, but His glorification, or exaltation. Moreover, when Jesus speaks in His Farewell Discourse about His victory, he does not mean the Resurrection, but His ascension to the Father (cf. Joh 14:12.28; 16:5.10.28). Therefore, all these events — the crucifixion and death on the Cross, the resurrection from the dead, the ascension to the Father, and the sitting at His right hand — taken together, are but parts of one saving action and of one "Hour of Jesus."²⁵

The Resurrection thus becomes part of the act of Jesus glorification and the extension of His presence in the world, through the Spirit, will be accomplished only after His ascension to the Father. So, the One who appears in the next scene before the Disciples (cf. Joh 20:22), sharing the Holy Spirit to them, is none other than Jesus, the glorified One. From this point of view, in this scene mentioned in 20:22 ff. the act of Jesus' glorification is already involved, for it is clearly stated in John 7:39 that the Spirit will not be given until Jesus is glorified: "*But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*"²⁶

During the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, at one moment specific to the preparatory phase of the Holy Sacrifice, the priest utters the following Troparion: "*In the Grave with the body, but in Hell with the soul, in that You are God; in the Paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, was You. O Christ, filling all things, in that You are incomprehensible.*"²⁷

The presence of this Troparion, precisely in this moment of the Holy Liturgy, clearly shows that the sacrifice, that is, the death of Jesus, is inextricably linked with the resurrection, at the hypostatic level and, therefore, did not exist a moment in which Jesus, as real God and real Man in the same time, wouldn't have existed, or existed separately. This close connection between death and resurrection is a consequence of the hypostatic Union, in which the human nature of Jesus is united forever with the divine nature, in an undivided and inseparable, unmixed and unchanged way.

²⁴ Sf. CHIRIL al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, 1146, note 2162.

²⁵ See details, Dumitru STĂNILAOE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, București 1978, vol. II, 143.

²⁶ See also, R. E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 1014.

²⁷ *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic, Apostolic Church* (By Isabel Florence HAPGOOD, Seventh Edition), SUA, New Jersey 1996, 97.

Therefore, the risen Lord does not allow Mary Magdalene to touch Him because she was not ready to understand the new relationship with Him, which, after the Resurrection, could no longer be one with a Jesus understood only as a historical Person, but first and foremost, one with a meta-historical Jesus.

The exegete R. Schnackenburg is of the opinion that in the explaining Jesus' gesture of forbidding Mary Magdalene from embracing his feet, should also be taken into account the possible intention of the Evangelist he had when he mentioned this episode, namely that of referring to Jesus words addressed to His disciples during the Farewell Discourse: "*I am going to prepare room for you...*" (Joh 14:1-3). The author of the Gospel would thus suggest that Jesus' refusal was meant to remind that those places had not yet been prepared and, therefore, the new communion with Him could only take place in those specially arranged places in heaven.²⁸ In this sense, the episode would be in the theological-paschal line of the Gospel. Here is what the mentioned biblical scholar writes: "*Damit wird das Ostergeschehen in die theologische Linie des Evangeliums einbezogen und finden andererseits die Ankündigungen der Abschiedsrede ihre österliche Bestätigung und Verwirklichung.*"²⁹

The syllogism is interesting, but since Mary Magdalene was not present at such a promise, such an intention of Jesus would have been misunderstood for her. Therefore, such an interpretation has its weaknesses. Mary Magdalene could have the task of reminding the Disciples of Jesus' promise, through the command given to her to announce them that He is ascending to His Father, but Jesus' refusal would remain, in this context, still incomprehensible for her. However, instead of being allowed to touch Him, Mary nevertheless receives from Him the mandate to be the first who was going to announce to the Disciples Jesus' ascension to His Father.³⁰ Mary Magdalene thus becomes the first who was entrusted, by the risen Lord, with the great post-resurrection mystery, namely, that of the act of Jesus glorification achieved through His passions, death, and resurrection. She thus also becomes, through the mandate received, the *first confessor of that mystery*.³¹

However, regarding the identification of Jesus Resurrection with the act of His glorification, the episode of Jesus appearance to Mary Magdalene may raise another issue which, in fact, retained already the attention of some biblical scholars. Here is what it is about: If Jesus does not allow Mary Magdalene to hold Him back because He has not yet ascended to the Father, then the appearance took place before His ascension, in which case the Resurrection no longer means one and the same event

²⁸ See details, R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 377.

²⁹ R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 377.

³⁰ Cf. Udo SCHNELLE, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament - 4), Leipzig 1998, 303.

³¹ J. Zumstein calls her "le premier apôtre pascal" (Jean ZUMSTEIN, *L'Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 281).

with Ascension. Thus, the appearance to Mary Magdalene would have taken place before the Ascension, while the other appearances have taken place, logically, after the ascension.

Put the problem in this way, such an interpretation denies that the Resurrection is identical with the Ascension, since, in this case, there would be a time that separates the two events. Moreover, believes R. Brown, "it would mean that it was not the glorified Lord who appeared to Mary Magdalene and thus she was granted only an inferior-grade appearance."³² Such a hypothesis in the explanation of the episode is shared by some biblical scholars.³³

However, such assumptions do not take into account the theological purpose of the author of the Fourth Gospel, which *unifies a theology of Resurrection with that of Ascension* and which, by definition, does not involve units of time and space in the narrative act of the event which are, moreover, logically, sequentially necessary. If, however, the theological goal of the Evangelist is overlooked, the attempt to dramatize in temporal scenes what is under the "specie aeternitatis"³⁴ creates huge misunderstandings and real theological confusions.

Therefore, when the risen Lord explains to Mary Magdalene that He must ascend, the emphasis is placed on identifying the act of the Resurrection with that of the Ascension, and not on a certain interval of time, which is supposed to be mentioned by the Evangelist in his text.

In John's paschal theology there is only one risen Jesus, and He reveals Himself in His appearances only in the fullness of the exaltation of His glorified person. What is important to be emphasized in this context is the fact that Mary Magdalene, who meets the risen Lord, apparently, "before His Ascension," exclaims, "I have seen the Lord!" (Joh 20:18). Exactly the same words are exclaimed by the Disciples who met the risen Jesus "after His Ascension": "So the other disciples said to him (Thomas), "I have seen the Lord!" (Joh 20:25). From this point of view, R. Brown rightly states that the expression "I ascend to the Father" (Joh 20:17b) "is not an exact determination of time and has no implication for the state of the risen Jesus previous to that statement. It is a theological statement contrasting the passing nature of Jesus' presence in his post-resurrection appearances and permanent nature of his presence in the Spirit."³⁵

³² See R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 1014.

³³ For instance, for H. Kraft "the Jesus of this appearance is not yet in the process of being lifted up but is in the depth of his abasement, for he still has his dead body" (cf. H. KRAFT, "Johannes 20:17", in *TLZ* 76, 1951, 570).

³⁴ R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 1014. See also, C.H. DODD, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge 1953, 441.

³⁵ Cf. R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 1015.

In the parallel account of Jesus' appearance to the myrrh-bearing women, recorded by Matthew (28:10), one can see that the Saviour commands to Mary Magdalene and to her companions to go and tell to His disciples that He will go to Galilee and there is going to appear to them. Mary Magdalene receives, in this context, a simple spatial indication regarding the framework of a future appearance of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, instead, Mary Magdalene is the beneficiary of the explanation of the meaning of the Resurrection.

Therefore, the Evangelist's concern in neglecting temporal implications to the detriment of theological meanings, as a working method, is as obvious as can be.

Speaking of His exaltation (cf. Joh 20:17), Jesus is not so much concerned with drawing the attention to His own glorification as to the meaning and significance which has the act of His glorification for men, for their history, namely, the offering of the Holy Spirit, that will make them children of God.³⁶ In this sense, the exegete Ch. Dodd states: *"It is not the resurrection as Christ's resumption of heavenly glory that needs to be emphasized, but the resurrection as the renewal of personal relations with the disciples and with the world as a whole. These relations are in mind when Jesus speaks of the disciples as "my brothers" and describes the goal of his ascension as "my Father and your Father, my God and your God."*³⁷

Therefore, with "Mary Magdalene" episode, two of the events foretold by Jesus are fulfilled:

1. *"His Hour"* in which He was to pass to the Father, and which is predicted in Joh 13:1: *"Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end."*

2. *The request to be glorified* by the Father: *"And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had before the world was"* (Joh 17:5).

These two events outline the act of the glorification of Jesus, and which, in the theological view of the author of the Fourth Gospel, is a paradoxical one: the glory of the risen Christ is not only one of victory, but also one of suffering.

³⁶ R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 1016.

³⁷ C. H. DODD, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 442.

As a *final conclusion*, it may be stated that His “Ascension”, which Jesus speaks about in the dialogue with Mary Magdalene, is a saving act that coincides with His glorification that is reached in the final act of the triumph over death, namely, His Resurrection, and not a temporary event, which occurred forty days after it.

Stelian TOFANĂ
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of Orthodox Theology
Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Bibliography

- BENOIT, Pierre, "L'Ascension", in *RB*, 56, 1949.
- BROWN, E. Raymond, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, II, Garden City, New York-London 1970.
- CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, Coll. "Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești" (PSB), partea a IV-a, București, 2000.
- DODD, Charles H., *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1953.
- HAPGOOD, Isabel Florence, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic, Apostolic Church* (Seventh Edition), SUA, New Jersey, 1996.
- HENDRIKSEN, William, *John* (New Testament Commentary), Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007.
- KRAFT, H., "Johannes 20:17", in *TLZ* 76, 1951.
- MAIER, Gerhard, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, Ed. "Lumina lumii", Korntal, Germania, 1999.
- MOLONEY, J. Francis, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina), The Liturgical Press Collegeville, Minnesota, 1998.
- RAMSEY, Arthur, Michael, "What is Ascension?", in *Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament* (Theological Collections) 6, London, SPCK, 1965.
- RICHTER, Georg, "Der Vater und Gott Jesu und seiner Brüder in Joh 20,17", in *MüThz* 24, 1973.
- SCHNACKENBURG, Rudolf, *Das Johannesevangelium*, III Teil, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1975.
- SCHNELLE, Udo, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament - 4), Leipzig, 1998.
- SCHULZ, Siegfried, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD), Band 4, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, Göttingen and Zürich, 1987.
- SIMONOPETRITUL, Ierom. Theologos, *Sfânta Maria Magdalena*, Ed. Doxologia, Iași 2015.
- STĂNILOAE, Dumitru, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, București, 1978.
- TOFANĂ, Stelian, "Euharistia la Emaus" (Lc 24:13-35). Repere exegetice și teologice", in vol. *Grai maramureșean și mărturie ortodoxă*, Baia Mare 2001.
- TOFANĂ, Stelian, "Hristologie, Sacramentalitate și Mariologie în Evanghelia a IV-a, cu specială privire la episodul CANA (In. 2,1-11)", in *Studia Theologia Orthodoxa*, nr. 1-2, Cluj-Napoca 1999.
- ZEVINI, Georges, *Commentaire spirituel de L'Évangile de Jean*, Paris 1996.
- ZUMSTEIN, Jean, *L'Évangile selon saint Jean (13-21)*, Labor et Fides, Genève 2007.