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**Bronzino captures the moment when Mary Magdalene recognizes the resurrected Christ and receives his instruction, “Do not touch me.”**

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# The First Witness

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In John's gospel, after Mary Magdalene discovers the stone has been removed from Jesus' tomb, she seeks out Peter and another disciple who investigate the empty tomb. After the men return home, she lingers in the garden. When two angels inside the tomb ask why she is crying, she says that someone has moved Jesus' body. As she turns from the angels, she sees Jesus standing near her, but mistaking him for a gardener, she pleads with him to return the body if he has taken it. Jesus then calls her by name and she recognizes him.

Bronzino depicts the next moment in John's narrative: "Jesus saith to her: Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brethren, and say to them: I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17, Douay-Rheims Version). The painting's title *Noli me tangere* is Latin for "Do not touch me." The story concludes with Mary seeking out the disciples to tell them, "I have seen the Lord" (20:18).

In the painting, Jesus looks like a gardener with a shovel in his right hand and freshly planted flowers and upturned soil at his feet. An angel stands beside the empty tomb in the right background; other women (mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels) are nearby. Mary's vibrantly colored attire—ultramarine gown, deep red cloak, and lush green undergown—elegantly coiffed hairstyle, and ornamented clasp at her neck are characteristic of Mannerism, an affected style of painting between the High Renaissance and Baroque periods in Italian art. The depiction of Jesus' body with elongated torso and disproportionately small head reflects the artist's careful study of anatomy, and draws on Michelangelo's Christ in the *Last Judgment* on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel as a source.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Mary Magdalene's complicated (and confused) identity in church history and visual art, she is undeniably the first disciple—either alone, or with other women—to see the resurrected Christ.<sup>2</sup> Her message "I have seen the Lord" typifies the most important function of a disciple of Christ today.

## NOTES

1 Deborah Parker, "Bronzino and the Diligence of Art," *Artibus et Historiae*, 25:49 (2004), 163.

2 See Mary Ann Beavis, "Who is Mary Magdalene?" on pp. 23-29 in this issue.