

Today we celebrate the life and ministry of St. Mary Magdalene.

I want to talk a little about

- the historical understanding of her
- more about her portrait in the Gospels
- and then the ways that I connect to our gospel reading today.

My initial images of Mary Magdalene were picked up by osmosis in American culture & European art work

- I was raised Unitarian/Universalist where Bible stories are not a big deal.
- My image of her was the not-so-happy hooker.
- It is not consistent with the Scripture but there are good reasons why this image is so prevalent.

Pope Gregory the Great preached a powerful sermon in 571

- in which he combined the stories of two women named Mary in the Gospels and a woman who was never named.
- Amazingly, he combined them as if one person
  - ...sort of like collapsing all six men in the New Testament named “James” into a single person<sup>1</sup>.

Pope Gregory’s sermon conflated

- Mary of Magdala, from whom Jesus cast out seven demons
- Nameless woman in Luke who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears and whom religious leaders deemed unclean
- Mary of Bethany, who anoints Jesus with nard in the gospel of John

Shortly thereafter, the western church also identified Mary Magdalene

- with the adulterous woman Jesus saved from stoning
- and then with a 4<sup>th</sup> century hermit, Mary of Egypt, a prostitute who converted to Christianity and lived the rest of her life in a cave.

The Vatican corrected Pope Gregory’s mistake in 1969.

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<sup>1</sup> Men named “James” in the New Testament: Apostle James Zebedee (brother of the Apostle St. John) martyred circa 42 AD; Apostle James son of Alphaeus; James the father of the Apostle Jude; [probably one: James, the brother of Jesus; James whose mother is Mary; James, brother of Jesus and Bishop of Jerusalem martyred circa 62 AD].

A generation later (2016) Pope Francis pushed the Vatican to upgrade the observance of Mary Magdalene<sup>2</sup>

- from a memorial to a feast - just like the other Apostles
- The Episcopal Church upgraded this day to a feast in 1979 – but we don't have much room to brag
- the Vatican's recent decree even cites St. Thomas Aquinas calling her the Apostle to the Apostles (which I never discovered in reading Thomas' *Summa Theologica*<sup>3</sup> - because he wrote it in another book)

I think the prevailing western image of St. Mary Magdalene is still

- the less-than-happy hooker as patron saint of “fallen women”
  - translate sexually active or powerful women
- whose proclamation of the resurrection was a peculiar sidebar.

Easter Orthodox Christianity tells different stories about Mary Magdalene.

She is:

- A generous community leader who helped pay the bills for Jesus and his band of itinerant disciples.
- A devoted student who carried news of the resurrection
  - not only to the terrified disciples,
  - she preached across the Mediterranean, including the court of Tiberius Caesar, where she was admitted because of her high social standing.
  - The wonderful icon of Mary Magdalene in San Francisco's Grace Cathedral shows her giving an object lesson on the resurrection to the emperor during a dinner party.
- Possibly a martyr to the faith in 67 A.D.<sup>4</sup> - like Peter, Paul, at least two of the New Testament's James, and many of her contemporary leaders in the church.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/mary-magdalene-apostle-to-the-apostles-gets-upgraded-feast-day-77857>

<sup>3</sup> Because he used this title for her in another text: “Saint Thomas Aquinas says, she becomes the “apostolorum apostola” because she announces to the apostles what in turn they will announce to the whole world (Rabanus Maurus, De vita beatae Mariae Magdalene, XXVII; Saint Thomas Aquinas, In Ioannem Evangelistam Expositio, c. XX, L. III, 6)” <http://liturgy.co.nz/upgrading-the-apostle-to-the-apostles>

<sup>4</sup> “For Modestus, patriarch of Jerusalem (fl.630), Mary Magdalene died a virgin and a martyr in Ephesus.” <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mary-magdalene-fl-early-1st-c-ce>

So what portrait do the Gospels paint of Mary Magdalene?

- A woman freed from the seven demons;
  - her life has been transformed in ways she probably never could have imagined,
  - and certainly, could not do on her own.
- A devoted student who is generous with her resources helping support Jesus in his ministry.
- A witness to the crucifixion – keeping watch only with Jesus’ mother, his aunt and the “beloved disciple” – to unbearable suffering.
  - Just as we are sometimes called to be there, our presence a seeming miniscule comfort as we watch someone we care about go through things which make us, like St. Mary, cry:
    - *Unfair! Cruel! Where are you God? This should not be happening! Someone make it stop!*
  - But our greatest gift in that moment is to cry – silently or aloud – while keeping our eyes on the person who is in pain...so the person we care about knows they are not alone.

And then, in the Gospel, the unimaginable happens.

- Jesus died.
- The teacher, leader, hope for political overthrow of the hated occupying army, worker of healing and unfathomable miracles...died.

We follow Mary a few days later. Devastated by grief, she makes her way to the tomb.

Oh! Just when we thought this could not get any worse...Jesus’ body has been stolen.

- Murdered in agony and now even his corpse has been desecrated!
- Mary rushes back to tell the other disciples;
- they come, see the empty tomb and flee from this new horror.

Which brings us to today’s reading in the Gospel of John.

Mary is again keeping lonely witness, this time at the empty tomb.

- She bends over to look in the tomb again
- She is the only person I’ve ever heard of who is not ruffled to speak with angels.
- When they ask about her tears she explains that someone has taken away her Lord’s body.

Then, blinded by grief, she does not recognize Jesus standing there.

*Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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).*

For me, this is the turning point, the emotional heart of the reading.

- Jesus calls her by name in a way that reaches past her grief, her pain, her suffering, and her life circumstances.
- In a way that allows her to recognize and affirm who he is: Teacher, healer and – astonishingly – the risen Lord.

How do we hear Jesus call us by name?

- Is it in the face of a hungry person to whom we serve a hot meal?
- Is it in the story of a refugee seeking asylum being held for months before their first court date?
  - or the wails of their infants, torn from their arms?
- Is it the beauty of the liturgy?
- In exquisite musical harmonies we hear or sing?
- In the elegance of a mathematical formula?
- In the light of the stars in Orion’s Belt which we see in a telescope...light which left those stars in the Middle Ages?

There are so many ways we can hear our name being called.

- When we, like Mary Magdalene, realize we are intimately known and cherished by God.
- Usually this passage reminds me of when I first clearly heard God call me by name.

But recently I heard something else. I heard

- the echo of the woman at the well earlier in this Gospel
- how she realized Jesus knew her deepest self
- how she went to tell others what she heard
- how - amazingly - Jesus first disclosed himself as the Messiah to this outcast woman

The Samaritan woman was a triple threat:

- 1st, she was a woman.
  - Like Mary Magdalene, by her gender she was not allowed to be a witness in a court of law
- 2nd, she was a Samaritan
  - the Jim Crow laws of her day were fiercely in place
  - Jews and Samaritans would not share anything
    - a well of water in the desert; a cup to hold the water; a place of worship
- 3rd, she was divorced - more times, even, than our 45th President

And this person, this triple threat to Jesus' contemporaries, is the person to whom Jesus first identifies himself as the Messiah!!!

- She says "I know the Messiah is coming..."<sup>5</sup>
- Jesus says: I am he (meaning the Messiah) ...then reiterates:
- the One who is speaking to you.

The Samaritan woman races back to town (in the heat of the day)

- "Come and see...he can't be the Messiah, can he?"

Just as Mary Magdalene is entrusted with news which changes the world:

- "Go to my brothers and tell them I am ascending...to my God and your God."

The Gospel tells us: *...Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her.*

Who announces to us today: I have seen the Lord?

- Maybe someone whose legal standing is compromised
- who is subject to systematic discrimination
- maybe those whose voices are silenced on a regular basis

Who is our Mary Magdalene?

Where has our Mary Magdalene encountered the Risen Christ?

And most importantly: What must we do if we believe her?

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<sup>5</sup> John 4:25-26

**Lessons:**

Judith 9:1, 11-14

Psalm 47:1-7

2 Corinthians 5:14-18

John 20:11-18