

In the Garden Easter Morning

Scripture: John 20:1-18

20 Now on the first day of the week Mary Mag'dalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³ Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. ⁴ They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, ⁷ and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴ Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rab-bo'ni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ¹⁸ Mary Mag'dalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (RSV)

It always seemed somewhat unfair to me, that we had to go through several weeks of Lent, but only got to celebrate Easter one day. Even Christmas is supposed to have twelve days. Well, the truth is that we are still in the church

season called “Eastertide.” The Easter season lasts all the way to Pentecost, longer than Lent. Not just that, but every Sunday, truly, we celebrate Easter. That’s why we as Christians, Presbyterian Christians anyway, celebrate the Lord’s Day on Sunday, not the Sabbath. So, given the opportunity to speak with you today, I’d like to continue to talk about Easter. Easter is so important, it can use a few extra Sundays!

When we think of Easter, we usually celebrate the global significance of it all. In Jesus’s death and Resurrection, God has done something to show his life saving love to all humanity. Yet, Easter is also important to each of us individually too. Today I’d like to focus on that: Jesus’s life-saving love for each of us. I will do that by following the story of one particular person through to the end. And then, to the new beginning on that first Easter. That person is Mary Magdalene.

We first hear about Mary of Magdala in Luke’s gospel, Chapter 8. Magdala was a mostly Gentile town, just a few miles north of the new City of Tiberias. Tiberias was founded by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, to be his capitol. That was in 20 to 21A.D., a decade before Jesus’s ministry. Good Jews couldn’t live in Tiberias because the city was built over an old Jewish graveyard. That didn’t bother Herod or the Romans or the Greeks. But that meant the Jews had to live elsewhere. Magdala, a fishing town, was conveniently close. Here’s what Luke writes:

Luke 8 Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages [of Galilee], preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ²and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Mag’dalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Jo-an’na, the wife of Chu’za, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them^[a] out of their means.

So we see that among Jesus’s followers, his disciples, are several women. Mary of Magdala was one of these. Notice that they also gave Jesus and his apostles financial support. Joanna was the wife of an important official of Herod’s court. Mary Magdalene, like the others mentioned, must have been a woman of some wealth, to have given money to support Jesus and his ministry.

What Luke tells us about Mary, was that Jesus had healed her by casting out seven demons. Demon possession as described in the Bible is difficult to understand from our modern perspective. Luke was a physician, and he paid more attention to this matter than most. The mention of seven demons may be an indication of the severity of Mary's condition. Consider, for example the clearly insane man of Geresá, who was living among the tombs.

Luke 8: ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. (RSV)

On the other hand, the presence of several demons could imply a recurring condition. This may be the kind of thing we see with addiction today. However it was understood in Jesus's time, Mary must have had a very bad problem. We just can't know the details. What we do know is that, whatever that terrible burden was, Jesus lifted it from her shoulders.

Unfortunately, Mary Magdalene has been given a disreputable reputation in the Western church. We can trace this to Pope Gregory in 591 A.D. In a sermon, he confused Mary Magdalene with the woman who had sinned, and washed Jesus's feet with her tears, of Luke, Chapter 7. The Eastern church never made this mistake. Finally, in just 2016, Pope Francis recognized this error, and named Mary Magdalene as "Apostle to the Apostles," finally doing her justice. But the damage had been done. Artists and storytellers even to our day have associated Mary Magdalene with prostitution. That is not supported by what the Bible tells us.

Mary became a faithful disciple. How faithful? To the end, at the cross. John tells us,

19²⁵ ... Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

In Mark we read, ⁴⁷**Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body^[c] was laid.**

Mary, as you see, was faithful to the end. Indeed, after the Sabbath, she and other women returned that Sunday morning to do more, things they were unable to complete on Friday. Clearly Mary was with some of the other women. She uses "we" in mentioning that they, the women, did not know where Jesus's body was.

But here's something else remarkable. She "ran." How often do you recall women running in the Bible? The Greeks actually did have women's racing events around 500 B.C. But I found only three mentions of women running in the Bible. When Abraham's servant, looking for a wife for his son Isaac, found Rebekah, she ran to tell her mother. When Rebekah's sly son Jacob showed up and so impressed Rachel, she ran to tell her father. The Danite woman Manoah ran to tell her husband about the angel that had appeared to her, and had promised she would bear a son. That son was Sampson, of the legendary strength, long hair, and wild ways, more than a thousand years before Jesus. No mention of women running after that. Until Mary Magdalene at the tomb. She ran to tell Peter and what had happened.

Peter and John ran too – it was a footrace. John would have won the gold, but he hesitated at the finish line. Peter never hesitated. Mary would seem to have run back too, because she is there immediately afterward, as we see in the remaining verses in this passage.

Mary has seen the empty tomb. She had likely heard Jesus teach about being raised. But, she couldn't believe it. This man who had healed her, had given her a renewed life, after whatever those seven demons were doing, he seemed to be gone. She no longer had even a body over which she could weep, and anoint in burial. Even seeing the angels does not penetrate her grief. She does not recognize Jesus even as he appears to her. She cannot conceive that this could be him standing before her. She can't see what she cannot think is possible.

I'll pause here to ask a question: Why does Jesus appear to Mary? At that time, and that place? We are not given an answer, but let me suggest this: She was in desperate need. Jesus loved her, cared for her, and she again needed His help. Were there seven demons looking again for a home, preparing to return and drive her into misery? We don't know, but Jesus did know.

I recall a friend who would occasionally remark, "I wish Jesus would speak to me." Don't we all want that? Why don't we get that direct, unequivocal affirmation directly from God? I eventually concluded this: In the Bible, when someone hears directly from God, it's because of being in desperate need. Or, because God has something very unpleasant or dangerous that needs doing, like for Jonah."

My mother is a case in point. When she had come back from the Congo to go to college, her parents were preparing, after their year of furlough, to return to Africa. She wished that they would not go and leave her alone here. She felt lonely and hopeless. After all, the United States was a scary place, with gangsters, outlaws, and predatory men. In the Congo, there was nothing worse than leopards and pythons and crocodiles that would try to eat you. And spiders. Big spiders. America was much scarier than that to her. After her parents left on the train to go to New York to meet their ship, my mother returned to the apartment where she had been staying with them. In the dark, she threw herself down on the bed in despair, and wept.

God answered my mother's heart, and spoke to her. He told her that her mother would come down with a disease. She would be so sick that her parents would never be able to return to Africa; they would have to stay in America.

"Oh no, not that," my mother answered. "This is their life. It would break their hearts."

"Well, then, can you be happy with that?" God asked. My mother promised that she would try. Just then, a neighbor knocked on the door and introduced herself, and invited my mother to a party. My mother's life was changed by that event. She never lived in fear again. She was transformed into the active, enthusiastic and adventuresome mother who so blessed me, and many others.

God, Jesus, spoke to Mary in the garden that day, long ago, because Mary was in desperate need. Not because Jesus was in that act trying to pass a message to humanity as a whole, not because John would write the event into his gospel, but because God, through the person of Jesus, loved Mary. Yes, we are blessed by this. We read it, and in this story we can be assured that God, and Jesus, love each and every one of us too. As individuals, not just part of a mass of unnamed humanity. Jesus would go on to appear to others as well. We can read in Luke about the two men on the road to Emmaus, in despair over what had happened to Jesus. Jesus appeared to them. They ran, not walked, back to Jerusalem, several miles distant. Jesus appeared to others as well. In the case of Paul, on the road to Damascus, Jesus had something difficult and dangerous for him to do.

Mary immediately began to spread the Good News, literally, the Gospel. John doesn't report her running to do this, but I can imagine it. Unfortunately, this is the last we hear of Mary Magdalene in our Bible. A Greek tradition has her dying in Ephesus, with her relics preserved in Constantinople. That would make sense. The Gospel of John, his epistles, and the Revelation, are believed to have been written from or near Ephesus. That is where the apostle John is traditionally thought to have gone, taking Mary, Jesus's mother. Perhaps Mary Magdalene went there as well, and reminded John of these details that we now have in his gospel. A different tradition has her going to France. As my grandfather would say, "The page is torn off there." We just don't know.

What I take away from this story, of Jesus appearing to Mary, is that God likewise cares for each and every one of us. Just as Jesus comforted Mary in her anguish that first day of the week, transforming grief into joy. That's what God, Jesus, want for each of us.

God loves YOU, you a particular person, and wants you ultimately to be gathered to him. This source of life is identified as "living water" by Jesus in John chapter 4, when He speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well. In the Revelation, Jesus extends an invitation to that water, to "whosoever" would take it. Yes, "whosoever" is an archaic word, used by the King James version. But I like it here. It means, "Any individual who." Each and every one of us. You probably remember the word from John 3:16. That is how God loves, each and every one of us. Here's what John records at the end of the Revelation:

I, Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star. And the Spirit and the bride [the new Jerusalem] say, Come. And let him who heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22:16,17 KJV)

We celebrate Easter every Sunday, rejoicing that God has given to us, all who truly want it, the water of life as a gift. Amen.