

The First Witness

John 20:1-2, 10-18

A few years ago, a pastor was on a shuttle between his hotel and the airport, the only passenger. His driver was named Sharon, and over the course of their conversation, the pastor discovered that while she wasn't interested in church, she had been taken to Sunday School by an influential aunt. When the pastor asked her who her favorite person in the Bible was, she replied without hesitation, "Mary Magdalene!" Why? Because Mary Magdalene did not lead a pure life, and Jesus loved her and forgave her!

Even among those who aren't very biblically literate, Mary Magdalene holds an important part in their imaginations. Some of that is because she's become larger than life. She's the female lead in the musical *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. In *The Da Vinci Code*, among other works of fiction, she's described as the wife of Jesus, despite no evidence in the Bible to support that claim.

She's also made larger than life by those inside the church. Early on in church history, Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century identified her as the "woman sinner" who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Luke 7:37ff.). She's been mislabeled as a prostitute ever since. Her dubious past makes her attractive to those who feel outside of the church, and a model for how Jesus loves even them.

But while she was identified as a harlot fairly early in church history, there's really no proof in the Gospels for that belief. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. She was one of Jesus' most devoted followers from Galilee, and the only woman named in all four Easter Gospels. She came from the coastal town of Magdala, at the westernmost bulge of the Sea of Galilee, a fishing village then and the site of archaeological digs today. When she first met Jesus, she was afflicted with problems that Jesus cured in "casting seven demons" out of her (Luke 8:2). From that point on, she was one of the Galilean "ladies' auxiliary" that supported Jesus and His disciples in their itinerant ministry. Her love for Jesus came from recognizing what she'd been saved from, and her gratefulness for being saved from powers outside of her control never went away.

This Gospel lesson from the Easter account in the Gospel of John is Mary's shining moment. She's got a part in the other Easter accounts, too, as one of the group of women who make their way to do their duty and care for Jesus' body, but in John the spotlight is just on her. And her part is among the most important. She's the first one to the tomb. She's the first one to notice that something's wrong, and the tomb is empty. She's the first one to see the risen Jesus, and she's the one sent to tell the disciples what has happened. Mary Magdalene, then, became the first "apostle to the apostles" in telling the Eleven about the risen Christ.

We also see in her the human reaction to all Jesus had been through. While the disciples had abandoned Jesus, the women didn't. Mary was one of the women at the cross, who watched her hopes and dreams die with Jesus. She cared for Jesus enough that she was still willing to carry out the duties of preparing Jesus' body for burial, preparations delayed by the fact he died too close to the Sabbath. And after waking up far too early in the morning and being confronted with the surprise discovery of the empty tomb, after the disciples disbelieved her report of what she had seen, she remains near the tomb, weeping. She's the one who goes inside and speaks with the angels. She's the one who is the first to see the risen Jesus, yet she's blinded by her grief and unable to recognize Jesus when he appears to her. In her blurred vision, she thinks he's a gardener, but finally radiantly recognizes Him after he calls her by name.

That's not the end of their interaction. Because in her joy, she falls at Jesus' feet and wants to hold onto him and never let him go. Jesus, though, knows what's to come, and tells her not to cling to him. He's back, but he won't stay, at least in the way she thinks he will. Instead, he'll ascend to sit at the right hand of His Father. But he won't leave her alone again – the Holy Spirit will come on her and the rest of the disciples. The Holy Spirit will give them the courage given to Mary as she told them Jesus was risen from the dead, and everything had changed.

Why was Mary chosen to be the first to see the risen Jesus? Why was Mary chosen to be the apostle to the apostles? Was it because of her sordid past? Was it

because of her great faith? Was it because she just happened to be in the right place at the right time?

Mary was chosen not because of anything special about her. Instead, she was chosen because God likes to make things out of nothing. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

We learn from Mary that it doesn’t matter who we are, but whose we are. God chose to use Mary to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen so that it would be the message that was most important, not the messenger. We know that in Israel at the time of Jesus, women were considered unreliable witnesses. Scholars point to the fact that the women were the first witnesses, and that Mary Magdalene gets special recognition, as proof the resurrection wasn’t made up. If you were trying to make up a story that would be believable, you wouldn’t use a woman as the witness. Yet the Gospels do, and we’re richer for it.

We also learn from Mary how Jesus comforts us in our griefs. It’s impossible to know the torment she lived while afflicted by demons, but we see the results of her deliverance. She follows Jesus, uses her resources to support him, and remains loyal to him past the point of his other followers. Jesus comes to her personally to show death has been defeated, and she doesn’t need to mourn any more. He comes as an unexpected, joy-filled surprise to her, and changes her life yet again.

We continue to follow in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene. Like Mary, we will encounter the risen Lord in the midst of our griefs and when we least expect it. Like Mary, Jesus will call us by name, and we’ll recognize his presence. And then like Mary, we are sent out to tell others what we have seen and heard, of how we’ve been saved.

We remember Mary Magdalene today, as we remember others who have gone before us in the faith throughout the year, because of what their stories tell us. In Mary, we see Jesus’ power of the demonic forces of the world that threaten us. In her, we see the joyful response to being saved. In her, we see the struggle to remain faithful when others run away when the pressure builds up. In her, we see the grief of wondering how to go on when someone we deeply care about has died. And in her, we see the joy of knowing death doesn’t get the final word. We see her living loved and forgiven by Jesus. What a great way for us to live, too.

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