



“Uniquely Qualified”
***Second Impressions* Sermon Series: Mary Magdalene**
Scripture – John 20:1-18
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 21, 2019

Repentant Sinner. “Worldly” Woman. Lady of the Night. We have heard a lot of rumors about Mary Magdalene. She’s the biblical equivalent of the teenaged girl whose digits were scratched into a bathroom stall by a bitter ex-boyfriend. Of course, these rumors have no biblical basis. They’re basically the result of a campaign of misinformation that stretches back to the sixth century, when Pope Gregory the Great conflated Mary Magdalene with that unnamed woman who anoints Jesus’ feet — the one Luke refers to as, “a woman in the city, who was a sinner” (Luke 7:37).¹

I guess it made for a good story. Because the portrait of Mary as a woman of ill-repute has endured the test of time ... spilling out in the archetype of the “fallen woman” that shows up in novels like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Madame Bovary*; and our habit of calling charities that reclaim women from the streets “Magdalene Houses;” and — who could forget? — that song Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice placed on the lips of Mary in their rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*: “I don’t know how to love him ... He’s just a man. And I’ve had so many men before in very many ways.” Is that so?

Tradition has not been kind to Mary Magdalene. But, when we read the Gospels, we glimpse a different Mary. The “real” Mary. The Mary whom Jesus sees, just as she is, and calls by name. Mary Magdalene — the Mary who takes her name from her hometown, the city of Magdala on the shore of Galilee — this Mary features in all four Gospels. Luke introduces her as one of the women who travels throughout Galilee with Jesus and the disciples: “The twelve were with him,” Luke writes, “as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna ... and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:1b-3).

In all four Gospels, Mary Magdalene is among the women standing at the foot of the cross.² And — in Matthew, Mark and Luke — Mary is *one* of the women who arrives at Jesus’ tomb to find the stone rolled away.³ But here, in John’s resurrection account, it is Mary — and Mary, alone — who comes to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark.

¹ Brittany E. Wilson, “Mary Magdalene and Her Interpreters,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 531-535.

² See Mark 15:40-41; Matthew 27:55-56; Luke 23:49, 55-56; John 19:25.

³ See Mark 16:1; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1-10.

I have often wondered, “Why does the risen Christ come first to Mary Magdalene?” Jesus easily could have appeared to Peter and the “beloved” disciple, whom Mary fetches in the hopeful glow of pre-dawn when she finds the tomb empty. Why not choose Peter — the disciple who (for better or for worse) will become the spokesperson of the church? Or the one who was with him — “the [disciple] whom Jesus loved” — who, we are told, sees the empty tomb and believes. Why not surprise *them* as they take stock of the cast-off grave clothes; why not appear before *them* as they step from Jesus’ abandoned tomb? ... Before they run home and fall into bed — to drift to sleep with images of an empty garden cave fixed in their minds and wake again wondering if it was all just a dream?

But, instead, Jesus chooses Mary — the one who stands weeping outside the tomb after those other disciples have gone home. He comes to her while she is distraught that someone has taken away the body of her Lord — as grief at being denied the chance to anoint Jesus’ body piles onto grief that has been festering for three days, ever since her teacher was nailed to a tree. Jesus comes to her as she laments that the body of her Lord is missing, and — with it — all the things Jesus incarnated: love, compassion, grace. Jesus comes to her — he comes to *Mary* — and sends her to go and tell the others. Why?

I doubt it’s because Mary has taken the necessary courses in preaching, so that she can embellish the good news of Christ’s resurrection with an illustration, a joke, and a poem. I don’t think it’s because Jesus wants a *woman* to bear this unbelievable news; if so, he was really out of touch with the conventions of his day. I suppose it could have something to do with loyalty — that Mary stuck by Jesus to the end, after most of the disciples had fled. But that doesn’t really seem like Jesus to me — to keep score like that.

No, I think it might have something to do with who Mary is. With her story. Her *real* story ... not the one Pope Gregory invented and Andrew Lloyd Weber dramatized. I think it might have to do with the fact that Mary Magdalene knows something about being freed from the tomb.

I wish I had made this connection myself. But the credit goes to Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber. She is the one who remembered that throwaway line from Luke’s Gospel — the detail that is merely an aside in Scripture, but that — I feel sure — was central to Mary’s story. Mary is the woman whom Jesus had freed from demons — from seven demons, to be precise. So, yea — I think she knew what it was like to be imprisoned by death. And she knew what it was like to be delivered to new life.

This is how Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it:

I think Mary was chosen because she was a woman from whom demons had fled. I think Mary was chosen because she knew what it was like for God to move; not when the lilies are already out in church and the lights are on — but while it was still dark. Because unlike when the men looked in and saw only laundry, when Mary Magdalene looked in the tomb, she saw angels.⁴

Mary Magdalene knows what it is like for God to move. She knows what it is like for God to move — not only in the brightness of a garden where Jesus now walks free, but in a stone-cold tomb sealed against the sun’s most persistent rays. Mary knows what it is like for God to move in the darkness, where despair roams wild and free, choking out hope and joy and even, sometimes, love.

Mary Magdalene knows. So Mary is not afraid of the dark — not the darkness of night nor the shroud of despair. Because she has dwelled there in that darkness herself. So, early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark — while the other women and the other disciples are still asleep — Mary comes to the tomb. And she lets

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “While It Was Still Dark: A Requiem for Rachel Held Evans,” posted on the Red Letter Christians website (<https://www.redletterchristians.org/while-it-was-still-dark-a-requiem-for-rachel-held-evans/>), emphasis original.

grief wash over her. But, soon enough, her sorrow turns to joy. Soon enough, Jesus comes to this woman who has *personally* endured torment and trial to show her once again that there is hope beyond despair, that there is healing beyond suffering, that there is life beyond death. Mary's own story is a testament to this truth. So, it seems, she is uniquely qualified to bear witness to the good news of resurrection.

Jesus comes to her while she is weeping in the garden. He comes to Mary and he sees her, just as she is. He sees her emotional scars. He sees her resilience. He sees her doubt. He sees her faithfulness. He sees ... Mary. And he calls her by name and tells her to go. He chooses her to go and tell the others a resurrection story. Mary Magdalene becomes the Apostle to the Apostles — the one sent to share the good news so that others may also go and share the good news. She is the first witness in a long tradition of witnesses — from the apostles who traversed the globe bearing a story of resurrection, to the saints of the early church who proclaimed the good news in word and in deed, to the evangelists who crossed stormy seas and planted churches throughout the Mid-Atlantic, to — well — us, who are still called to bear witness to the abundant life we know in Christ.

And, like Mary, we have something to say about resurrection. Because we, too, know what it's like to go to the tomb, while it is still dark. We have all wept salty tears after the death of a beloved or over a diagnosis that shatters the dreams we've dreamed. We have all wondered where the thing we so desperately seek has gone. Where has compassion gone? Where has friendship gone? Where has our sense of peace gone? Where has hope gone? And, maybe, these experiences are exactly what make us qualified to proclaim the good news — to proclaim that there is hope beyond despair, that there is healing beyond suffering, that there is life beyond death.

This has been true for a pastor named Scott Weimer, who is a member of — what he calls — “a community no one wants to be part of” ... a community of people who have lost loved ones to suicide.⁵ Scott and his wife lost their son, Justin, to suicide when he was just twenty-two years old. This was a young man who had been tormented by the demon of depression and — despite counseling and medication — could not find release from its grip on his mind.

After Justin's death, his father could barely function. “I was almost a dead man,” Scott Weimer said of the season of grief that followed — the countless nights when he found himself standing, figuratively, at a metaphorical tomb while it was still dark. The thing that pulled Scott from the bottomless pit of despair was his community — that community that no one wants to be part of, but that is uniquely qualified to speak hope into a hopeless situation because every member has dwelled in such darkness.

For Scott, it was the support of one friend in particular — the Reverend Chip Hardwick — that helped him return to the land of the living, so-to-speak. Chip had lost his stepmother — who was the only mother he'd known for most of his life — also to suicide. Right after she died, someone had told Chip “We are praying for you until you can pray for yourself again.” So that is what he told Scott after the death of his son. Chip texted Scott four or five times a week for a long time after Justin died; he wanted his friend to know he was loved, to know he was not alone in his grief.

Recognizing the pain of losing a loved one to suicide, Chip said, “Even though it will never be good, the God who redeems the cross can redeem my mom's [and Justin's] death[s] ... Being able to walk with God and other survivors of suicide is a small step in that redemption.” Chip had something to say about resurrection — not because he had unwavering faith, but because he, too, had stood outside the tomb, weeping as he wondered where joy and hope had gone. And because of his own experience of suffering, he was uniquely qualified to speak good news to a friend in the midst of torment and trial ... Not superficial good news, not the sunny sentiments of platitudes and sympathy cards. But the gritty good news of a God who moves even in the most persistent darkness.

⁵ Paul Seebeck and Donna Frischknecht Jackson, “The Suicide Epidemic,” in *Presbyterians Today* (June 20, 2019).

And when Scott eventually healed enough that he could believe once again that hope endures and love sustains — that death is not the end of the story — he, too, was able to share the good news with others. He formed a nonprofit intended to remove the stigma around mental illness, so that he can help people like his son, Justin. And, because he has dwelled in the darkness of despair, Scott is able to bear witness to a God who is moving even when — especially when — all seems lost.

We, too, know what it's like to walk through valleys shadowed by death and despair. Perhaps we have been held captive by the demons of anxiety or prejudice or fear; maybe we have taken a turn weeping outside the tomb over a loved one lost or a debilitating disease or a relationship that seems broken beyond repair. No matter what demons we have suffered, what torment we have endured, what pain we carry, Jesus sees us, just as we are. He sees our scars. He sees our resilience. He sees our doubt. He sees our faithfulness. He sees ... Us. And he calls us each by name, and shows us that there is hope beyond despair, that there is healing beyond suffering, that there is life beyond death. And, then, our Risen Lord sends us out — uniquely qualified because of who we are — to tell a resurrection story.

Prayers of the People ~ Dick Jolly

Loving God, who calls us to you from wherever we are, we come this morning seeking your presence and your grace. We come seeking your peace and your message for our lives. And, we come as did Eve, as did Mary the mother of Jesus, as did Mary Magdalene and so many others, with the knowledge that you will meet us in unexpected, surprising, and life-changing ways if we but pay attention. You will meet us in sickness and in health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow, when we are whole and when we are wounded. Remind us to listen for and to you, O God. Remind us that you are always there, including when we least expect it; but that hearing you and knowing you require something of us. Namely that to hear your word we must slow down, we must take time, and we must work to discern your truth and to weave it into our lives.

Thank you, gracious God, for the stories and the people of Scripture who show us how this is done. We are grateful that so many who have preceded us serve as beacons to the ongoing and never-ending ways we can find you and you can speak to us. Inspire us to learn from them and to apply their experience and wisdom in our day and our time. And thank you for the many other ways you reach out to us -- through music, through inspired preaching, and most of all, through your son Jesus Christ.

The world can lay heavy on us, O God, and yet you count on us to address the challenges and brokenness of the world. Thankfully, Jesus shows us the path to hope, to healing, to reconciliation, to meaning and to purpose. In His light help us to see that we are called to ease suffering, to speak out for justice, to steward the planet and its resources, and to be your messengers and your witnesses. As we face the call to do your work, remind us that you will give us the strength to act, if we dare to trust in you.

This we ask in the name of your Son who showed us the way, inspires us to follow Him, and taught us to pray...

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.