

*‘Do not cling to me’*  
a sermon preached on the  
*Feast of Mary Magdalene*  
19 July 2015  
at  
*st john’s*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
by *Dr Muriel Porter*

the lections: Song of Songs 3:1-4a; Psalm 63; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-21; John 20:1-18

It is no wonder that the early Church Fathers called Mary Magdalene the ‘Apostle to the Apostles’, and that her meeting with the Risen Jesus outside his empty tomb is the focus of her feast day.

In the account from John’s Gospel, she is acknowledged as the first witness of his resurrection, and the person deputed by him to preach his resurrection to the rest of the disciples. In my study at home I have an icon depicting her preaching the great good news of resurrection to the eleven male disciples. She stands tall and confident, dressed entirely in red – the iconographer’s colour to depict resurrection – while the men huddle together nervously as they listen to her. Their faces reflect sadness, hopelessness, and scepticism: after all, they have just days before seen their Lord betrayed, arrested, and crucified. As indeed had Mary herself. John tells us that she was one of the few who actually stayed at the foot of the cross as he suffered and died.

In today’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene is not just an apostle and leader, though she is certainly both. More, she is depicted in this resurrection scene in the garden as the new Eve. The scene is a cemetery garden, the place where the rich man Joseph of Arimathea had his own pre-prepared tomb, which he had given up for Jesus’ burial. But it is more than merely the tomb environment. John’s Gospel, of all the Gospels, must always be read on several levels. Yes, the literal level – the garden tomb – is perfectly historical. But the garden is also the *new* Garden of Eden.

At the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, in a poetic version of the beginnings of the human story, the setting is the Garden of Eden. And it was in that garden that God’s good creation turned sour – that violence and greed and hatred and pain marred the good that God had made.

As Jesus meets Mary Magdalene in this second garden, in the most astonishing, intimate and touching of all the post-resurrection appearances, it is clear that this garden symbolizes no less than the radical new creation God has inaugurated in raising the crucified Jesus to eternal life. St Paul speaks of the ‘new creation’ in this morning’s reading from his second letter to the Corinthians. Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener but in fact, Jesus is, indeed, the gardener!

This woman, who was once so sick that we are told that Jesus cleansed her of seven demons, or complex illnesses, becomes here no less than the “apostle to the apostles”. She is to be the first to proclaim the resurrection. A woman, as the key witness to the resurrection, in a culture where women could not be called as legal witnesses to anything! What a radical new creation this is indeed.

Here, in this garden, the author of John’s Gospel re-enacts the drama of the Garden of Eden, but with a very different outcome. In this story, Mary Magdalene is the new Eve, with Jesus the new Adam, as indeed St Paul described him. Here, in this Resurrection Garden, the human condition as fallen, sinful, and condemned to death, is completely overturned. The Risen Jesus has not only destroyed death, offering eternal life to all, but he has also, in this garden setting, inaugurated the new creation. It is symbolised by the new Eve, Mary Magdalene, not only being restored to the full

and equal humanity God always intended for women, but also being commissioned to preach the Good News of the new creation.

Understandably, Mary does not immediately realise that what is happening here is the culmination of the great story of our salvation, just as she initially fails to recognise him. Once she does recognise him, she expects that, with Jesus alive once more, everything will be as it was before. At first, it seems it will, as she hears him speak her name. She stretches out her arms to embrace him, only to be told that she must not hold onto him – she must not cling to him.

It seems so harsh, doesn't it? Those words must have felt like a rejection. But Jesus' resurrection meant that all was new again, including their relationship, which had obviously been very close. This was resurrection, not resuscitation, and life would not be the same again. Yes, those words were hard – 'do not cling to me' – but they were critical if Mary was herself to leave behind the past and enter her new role in the new creation.

'Do not cling to me'. We all want to cling to the familiar past. To long for old ways of being, old relationships, old memories even, that prevent us fully entering new life. The death of loved ones particularly, as in Mary Magdalene's case, can hold us back in the past if we are not careful. I have spent more than 50 years longing for my mother, who died when I was very young. Through those years, in my mind I was locked in a pre-adult relationship with her that still governed ways I thought and behaved even as I attained and then passed the age she was at her death – ways that I at last recognised would have changed significantly if she had instead lived to a ripe old age, allowing us to grow and change together as my adult daughter and I do now. I finally realised that the last thing my mother would have wanted was for me to go on clinging to my childish memory of her. That does not mean I do not continue to cherish my memories of her – but they must not confine me to the child I was when she died. 'Do not cling to me'.

In our spiritual lives, we can so easily cling to old ways of knowing Christ, old ways of worshipping, old ways of praying – ways we first learnt as children or when we first became Christians. We can be distressed and frightened by new religious scholarship, the immense changes happening in the Christian church in the modern age, new hymns, new prayer books, new understandings of the Good News and how it can be lived out in the contemporary world. 'Do not cling to me'. Move on. Enter the new creation.

For if we do not cling, the future, while terrifying, is pregnant with new life. The Risen Jesus told Mary not to cling but to go to the disciples and tell them that he was ascending not just to *his* Father, *his* God, but to *their* Father, *their* God. This is an intimacy beyond even her closeness to Jesus, and one that is available to us all in the new creation, because the new creation is not something that will come about only at the end of time; it is here and now.

Janet Morley, the contemporary English writer of prayers and collects, including the prayer book collect we have prayed this morning, has written a moving poem based on this morning's Gospel. I conclude with it.

It was unfinished.  
We stayed there, fixed, until the end,  
women waiting for the body that we loved;  
and then it was unfinished.  
There was no time to cherish, cleanse, anoint;  
no time to handle him with love,  
no farewell.

Since then, my hands have waited,  
aching to touch even his deadness,  
smoothe oil into bruises that no longer hurt,

offer his silent flesh my finished act of love.

I came early, as the darkness lifted,  
to find the grave ripped open and his body gone;  
container of my grief smashed, looted,  
leaving my hands still empty,  
I turned on the man who came:

‘They have taken away my Lord—where is his  
corpse?  
Where is the body that is mine to greet?  
He is not gone  
I am not ready yet, I am not finished—  
I cannot let him go.  
I am not whole.’

And then he spoke, no corpse,  
and breathed,  
and offered me my name.  
My hands rushed to grasp him;  
to hold and hug and grip his body close;  
to give myself again, to cling to him,  
and lose my self in love.  
‘Don’t touch me now.’

I stopped, and waited, my rejected passion  
hovering between us like some dying thing.  
I Mary, stood and grieved, and then departed.  
I have a gospel to proclaim.<sup>1</sup>

mporter@unimelb.edu.au

---

<sup>1</sup> Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, third edition (London: SPCK, 2005) p.108