

the light shines in the darkness

a sermon preached on the
feast of mary magdalene

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by dr muriel porter

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

Let me begin this morning by sharing a story I heard the other day about a woman who took her little granddaughter into Cologne Cathedral. 'Look at all the saints', she said, pointing to the stained glass windows above them. 'What are saints', the little girl asked. 'They are the people that the light shines through', was the reply. The saints are people that the light of Christ shines through. That is why we break the rhythm of ordinary Sundays every so often to focus on a particular saint – to see the light of Christ shining through them.

Mary Magdalene is the saint through whom the light of Christ shines most powerfully for me, and I am sure for many other people – a woman so profoundly ill when she first met Jesus that Luke's Gospel says she suffered from 'seven demons',¹ who nevertheless became a key figure in his ministry and the first witness to his resurrection – the 'apostle to the apostles', no less. She was clearly a prominent leader in the early Church, and yet for centuries her reputation was trashed.

We do not know what Mary's 'seven demons' were, but scholars suggest she was probably suffering from a severe mental illness when she met Jesus. They also say that because she was named from the town she came from – Magdala, in Galilee – she was almost certainly a single woman and probably a businesswoman. It was quite rare for women to be identified by their location in this way, and shows that she had standing in her own right, a rarity in the patriarchal world of the first century.² Obviously she had independent means, as she was one of a group of women who supported the wandering band of disciples from their own resources.

Her significance among the disciples is clear from the accounts of the resurrection: all four Gospels name her as among the first witnesses to the raising of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and John also name her as a witness to the crucifixion, and she is the only one of Jesus' followers identified as a witness to his crucifixion, his burial, and his resurrection. All of this – and particularly John's Gospel, where she meets the Risen Lord in the Easter garden – indicates that she was recognised as an important leader, if not the most important leader, in the early Church.

But – she was a woman. And if women leaders in any walk of life usually have a hard time of it still today, it was unbelievably difficult in the first centuries of the Common Era, when women had no public role. As the Church struggled to become respectable, it did not do to have a woman recognised in such a powerful role. So it did not take very long for her to be discredited. And then as now, if you want to discredit a woman, the surest way to do so is to cast doubt on her sexual morality.

¹ Luke 8: 1-3

² Conversation with Professor Dorothy Lee

By the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great had effectively declared she had been a prostitute, when he identified her with the unnamed woman, a “woman of the city who was a sinner”, who anointed Jesus’ feet at a dinner in a Pharisee’s house.³ The ‘seven demons’ of which she was healed by Jesus were then claimed to be sexual sins. That identification as a reformed prostitute quickly saw her demoted from church leader to sexual curiosity, tempting artists to portray her as a sultry half-naked temptress. This image continued unabated until very recent times, when biblical scholarship finally restored her to her rightful place as none other than the ‘apostle to the apostles’. That name, of course, derives from the wonderful scene that is the subject of today’s Gospel reading.

Imagine that scene from Mary’s perspective. She had watched Jesus die a lingering, excruciating death. She was present at his burial. She would have been in no doubt that he was truly dead. Imagine her grief, this woman who had been healed by him of a terribly disabling illness. A woman who, in other Gospels that did not make it to the officially accepted scriptures we call the New Testament, was described as being so close to him throughout his ministry that she was portrayed as Jesus’ spiritual companion, the one who alone had understood the mysteries of his message, a woman for whom Jesus had a special love.

Imagine her anguish on the morning of the third day when she went to anoint her beloved friend’s body – to offer her last ministry of love – and found his tomb empty. It must have been an agonising experience after the terrors of the last few days. But she did not leave – no, the Gospel tells us that though the male disciples ran away, she stayed there, weeping. In her despair and heartbreak, she nevertheless stayed constant.

When she met the man she thought was the gardener, heard him speak her name and then realised it was Jesus risen from the dead, no wonder that she longed to throw her arms around him and hold him to her. Hold onto him forever! His response – ‘do not hold onto me’ – must have seemed so cruel. No, she was not to cling to the past, but to be sent instead to proclaim resurrection. To tell the disciples, and the world, that the garden of the grave had become the garden of the new creation, inaugurated by Christ’s victory over death. Wonderful, wonderful news indeed, but also surely terrifying, as a totally new and uncertain future opened up before her.

Soon, we will be invited to enter Mary’s story as we sing the offertory hymn, perhaps priest and hymn writer Elizabeth Smith’s most powerful composition. As I read the words, listen to Jesus speaking to Mary, entering her pain, her doubts and her fears, and offering her healing and wholeness:

How are you broken, beloved?
Where are you lost and in pain?
I am your hope and your healing,
I am your starting again.

What are you paying, beloved?
What does it cost to survive?
I am the whole of your ransom,
I am your coming alive.

³ Luke 7:37-38

Why are you weeping, beloved?
Whose is the body you seek?
I am your love and your laughter,
I am the gospel you speak.

Where are you going, beloved?
When did your travelling start?
I am your source and your ending,
I am the home of your heart.

And Mary responds, joyfully hearing him call her by name, and accepting her great commission to preach resurrection:

God of my joy and delighting,
Spirit on whom I depend,
Jesus, I'll come at your calling,
name you my lover and friend.

We are in pain here. Many of us feel bereft. We cannot be sure what the future holds. But despite our fears and anxieties, let's look to the light of Christ shining through Mary Magdalene, that light that no darkness can extinguish, and accept Christ's call to *us* to tell the world that Christ is risen.