

Easter Sunday

Text: John 20:1-20 (NIV)

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ²So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” ³So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹²and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” ¹⁴At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵“Woman,” he said, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her. ¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Theme: When God Calls Your Name

John’s Gospel is full of interesting people who interacted with Jesus. During this past Lenten season, we have been looked at Nicodemus, the Samaritan Woman at the well, the man who was born blind, and Lazarus. The story of Jesus’ resurrection is centered on Mary Magdalene. Throughout the centuries people have been intrigued by her. Already in the early centuries, some of the heretical Gnostic Gospels began to depict her in a different light than the biblical accounts. In some of them, she was depicted as the leader of the early Christian Church.

The Roman Catholic Church began to see her in another light. In 591 Pope Gregory announced that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet, were the same woman. (It wasn’t until 1969 that the Catholic Church restored them to three separate individuals.) In western Christianity she has often been looked at as the contrast of the virgin Mary. She’s is often depicted with long red hair and revealing clothing, and carrying a jar of precious oils. By the 19th century she became known as a prostitute. These images were incorporated into modern films as “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “The Last Temptation of Christ.”

The Eastern Orthodox Christians never accepted the tainted version of Mary Magdalene. According to one legend, she appeared before the Emperor Tiberius in Rome. When she told him the story of the resurrection, he replied that a man could no more rise from the dead than an egg could turn red. Mary picked up an egg and it turned bright red. The icons often depict her holding an egg, and Orthodox Christians still color their Easter eggs red.

Mary Magdalene continues to be the center of much controversy today. In Dan Brown's *The Davinci Code* she is married to Jesus, and they move to France.

When I think of all of these stories about Mary Magdalene, I cannot help but think of what Paul wrote to Timothy, "*The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*" (1 Tim 4:3,4)

Many people have invented stories about Mary Magdalene to support their new teachings, but this is what the Gospels tell us about Mary. Luke 8 tells us that several women whom Jesus cured of evil spirits and diseases followed Jesus and supported Him out of their own means. In verse 2 Luke lists Mary Magdalene and says that the Lord cast seven demons from her. In Matthew 27:55,56 we read that Mary and a number of other women, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, watched the crucifixion from a distance. All of the Gospels report that Mary and the other women went to the tomb on Easter morning to anoint Jesus body with spices. John gives us this touching story of how Jesus called her name and her joy in seeing her resurrected Lord.

The story of Mary Magdalene is not a romantic love story or a story of feminist leadership. It is a story of faith, and how God turned her sadness into joy when Jesus called her name.

I. The Gospels speak of times of sadness for Mary.

We read of two specific instances. Jesus cast seven demons from her. The Bible never tells us how these demons tormented her. But we do know how they tormented other people. Some people had seizure-like symptoms. Others were paralyzed or couldn't talk. (Mt 4:24) It caused both them and their loved ones a lot of grief and sadness. Then Jesus cast out those demons. He freed her. She followed Him as her Savior. She supported His ministry. She watched Him heal other people. She listened intently to His teaching. She knew that He was her Savior.

Then He was arrested. The Gospels don't tell us where the women were when Jesus was arrested and tried, but they tell us where they were when He was crucified. They went to Calvary and watched, while all of the disciples except for John had fled. Then the women watched where His body was buried. On Easter morning the women went to the tomb while it was still dark to give Jesus' body a proper burial. You can imagine the horror as they watched Jesus suffer and die. You can imagine their grief as they went home from the grave. But the greatest shock was when they arrived at the tomb, and it was empty. Mary ran to the disciples to tell them, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him.*" Peter and John ran to the tomb and saw it, but they went back home. Mary stayed, and she wept. Two angels asked her, "*Woman, why are you*

crying?” She said, *“They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put Him.”* When she turned, Jesus was standing next to her. He also asked, *“Woman, why are you crying?”* In her grief she didn’t even recognize Jesus.

Every Christian goes through such times of sadness and grief. We might not have had seven demons, but the devil has attacked us with numerous temptations and griefs. We all have temptations that we struggle with. We sometimes struggle with weakness, sickness, and other afflictions. People tell us that we should find joy and peace in the Lord, but at such times we know exactly what the writer to the Hebrews meant when he wrote, *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.”* (Heb 12:11) There are many experiences in life, even for the Christian, which make us want to weep and mourn, even though as with Mary, Jesus is standing right next to us.

II. It is trust in that presence that eventually turns our sadness to joy.

God gave that joy to Mary. She was cleansed of 7 demons. She could not help but follow Jesus all the way to the cross. Even after He was buried, she still called Him, “My Lord.” That was a gift that she would never forget. But the greatest experience of her life was when Jesus called her name in the garden. She cried out, “Teacher.” She ran to tell the disciples that she had seen the Lord. She trusted in Jesus, and He never failed her. He gave her His help and salvation in ways that she would never forget for the rest of her life. When her life had gone to the deepest depths, she still clung to Jesus by faith. Jesus lifted her from the depths of despair and filled her with joy and peace.

God gives us that same peace. In Holy Baptism He washed away our sins, and raised us to a new life in Christ. Isaiah 43:1 reminds us, *“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.”* Christ knows our names. He has called to us faith in Him. There are those times in life when we are driven to the depths of despair, but Jesus is near, even when we don’t recognize Him. He will never leave us or forsake us. He is as close to us as He was to Mary was in the Garden. He assures us of that presence in His Supper. He is alive. He lives to bless us with His love.

But there will be the day when we will see the Lord face to face. We will go through the greatest grief of all as we pass through death. But then we will see Him, we will recognize Him, and He will call our names. That will be the most wonderful joy of all when we see Jesus in the glory of heaven, and He calls us to His presence. It will fill our hearts with a joy that will never end.

When you think of Mary Magdalene, forget all of the myths about her. Think about a woman of faith. Her example reminds us that we will have times of sadness, but in the end, the Lord’s resurrection and His salvation for us turn that sadness into joy. May God give each us of that same faith that Mary had in her Savior, that we will recognize Him when He calls our names.

Amen.

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