

Sermon on the Feast Day of Saint Mary Magdalene

Taunya Dawson, July 2016

“Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?”

These beautiful lines capture the scene presented in today’s Gospel. Christ asks these questions to Saint Mary Magdalene, whose feast day we celebrate this evening.

Who was Saint Mary Magdalene? We **do** know that she was one of Jesus’s **inner circle** of followers. We also know from St Luke that she was healed, by Jesus, of seven evil spirits.

We do not know much about her background. There has been much speculation. Father Robert Crouse described her as, **“the example of a notable sinner who became a great saint”**.

What we **do** know about Mary Magdalene is her devotion to Christ. Again, there are all sorts of traditions and rumours about this relationship – but they are not Scriptural, perhaps because they really are not relevant. The Scriptures are not the supermarket tabloids.

Saint Mary Magdalene appears at three critical points in the story of Christ's crucifixion. She is present when Christ is nailed to the Cross, and she stays with him during his suffering. **Imagine** watching the barbaric execution of a close friend.

Later, when he is dead, Mary prepares Christ's body for burial. Her participation **in this ritual** – which would have been the task of the women, including Christ's own mother Mary – affirms her intimate position within the group. Even in a culture where this was an accepted task – **imagine** having to clean the wounds, and wash the damaged body.

And finally – in today's Gospel – it is Mary Magdalene who visits the tomb, on the morning of the third day. We may assume that she went there for the same reasons we all visit tombs – not in the hope of anything miraculous, but to stop and reflect on what **was**, or on what **might** have been.

And the tomb is empty. **Imagine** the sense of loss, heaped upon loss; the thought that the persecution of Christ in his life had continued into death; or that robbers had taken his body for whatever purpose. **Imagine** being left with nothing.

“Woman, why weepest thou?”

Mary weeps. The image of Mary Magdalene weeping at the empty tomb is perhaps rivalled only by the image of the *Pietà*; of Mother Mary holding the broken body of her son, taken down from the Cross.

And **we all** weep, when we forget our faith, and are left with the thought that everything has been taken from us. We weep, because – without our Christ – we have nothing left, when we lose everything else. We weep because, as William Butler Yeats wrote, “the world’s more full of weeping / Than you can understand.”

And so, when Mary sees the Risen Christ, despite the presence of two angels, her first assumption is **not** that a miracle has occurred! Mary at this moment does not see the empty tomb for what it is – resurrection and new life. She asks the angels – but gets **no** reply.

Then she sees Christ, but does not recognize him, and assumes that he is the gardener. She asks because – perhaps – he has some idea of where the body might have gone.

“Whom seekest thou?”

Saint Mary Magdalene is seeking the slain Christ, although she has found the Risen Christ – because, at that stage, *He is Risen Indeed*. And in that miraculous moment, when Christ calls her by her name – “Mary” – at that point, she responds and recognizes him as her Lord.

The Christ that she sees is not quite the same as the Jesus that she knew. He does not want her to touch him – however much she might want to – because “things have changed”. In those few days, **everything** had changed, for **all** of us.

And so it is that Mary Magdalene is the first person to be commissioned by Christ to deliver the good news - *He is Risen Indeed*. For this, as much as for anything else, Saint Mary Magdalene occupies a unique place, sometimes described as the “**apostle to the apostles**”.

It is fascinating that Christ chooses Mary Magdalene for this critical task. He did **not** choose Peter – the Rock upon which his Church would be built. He did **not** choose Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – the apostles who would chronicle his life through the Gospels. (It is a good thing he didn’t choose Thomas, as Thomas perhaps wouldn’t

have been convinced!) **But**, he chose Mary. In some ways, Mary also made that choice – at least according to John’s Gospel, she was the **first** one to visit the empty tomb.

But this is because everything **has** changed. Remember the words of Isaiah: “**I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?**” What better way to do a new thing than to choose someone from **outside** the traditional hierarchy to be the bearer of the good news? Mary’s role is a prophesy for Paul’s later words that there “**is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus**”.

We, also, come to the Garden, to seek the Risen Christ – and when we do **not** find him, we weep. But **when** we find him, we must feel just as Mary Magdalene did on that day; filled with the Holy Spirit.

Our Psalm today is all about how God has searched **us** out, and knows **us**. “**Thou arte about my path and about my bed, / And art acquainted with all my ways. / For lo, there is not a word in my tongue, / But thou, O Lord, knowest it altogether.**”

The miracle of the resurrection is that **we** can now **all** know God, just as Mary Magdalene did. May we, indeed, in the words of our Collect,

“all be witnesses to his resurrection, and always serve thee in the power of his endless life.”

Amen.