

“Magdalenic Faithfulness”

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A reflection for the 2nd Sunday of Easter

John 20.11-18

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But Mary stood right there, outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she knelt to look into the tomb and saw two angels sitting there, dressed in white, one at the head, the other at the foot of where Jesus' body had been laid. They said to her, *“Woman, why do you weep?”*

“They took my Master,” she said, *“and I don't know where they put him.”*

After she said this, she turned away and saw Jesus standing there. But she did not recognize him. Jesus spoke to her, *“Woman, why do you weep? Who are you looking for?”*

She, thinking that he was the gardener, said, *“Mister, if you took him, tell me where you put him so I can care for him.”*

Jesus said, *“Miriam.”*

She turned around and says in Hebrew, *“Rabboni!”* meaning “My teacher!”

Jesus said, *“Do not keep holding onto me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.’”*

Mary Magdalene went, telling the news to the disciples: *“I saw the Master!”* And she told them everything he said to her.

Adapted from The Message translation

Mary. “Magdalene” was not her last name. Those days, you were known by your connections. Mary was an extremely popular name. In the Gospels alone, we have:

- Mary wife of Joseph and mother of Jesus,
- Mary sister of Martha and Lazarus,¹
- Mary wife of Clopas,²
- and maybe some others.

Also this Mary, the Magdalene. Mary from Magdala. Magdala was a fishing village up in Galilee. Not, by the way, “Mary the Former Prostitute.” Nor “Mary, the Wife of Jesus.”

¹ Luke 10:38f, John 11

² John 19:25.

Those ideas popped up much later, as people misread the Bible and let loose their fertile imaginations.

Mary the Magdalene was one of Jesus' followers from the beginning. Jesus delivered her from "seven demons" it says; she had been a mess, and he saved her. She was among a group of women, we're told, who provided for Jesus "out of their resources."³ They financially backed Jesus and his work.⁴

Mary the Magdalene was among the few who stayed with him through his crucifixion. And — you heard it! — the first witness to him after his resurrection.

The faithful Magdalene can teach us.⁵

II

The faithful Magdalene remains with Jesus.

Once, Jesus said:

*Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. . . . I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. . . . Remain in my love.*⁶

Mary remained. She stayed, as the Vine was torn and broken, dead on a cross. Few others would; she did. When he was entombed, she was in the burial party. Few bothered; she did. The first day of the week, she came early, not wasting a second of sunlight. Then, amid all the confusion of the tomb found bare and his body not there, she pleaded, "Where have you put him?" The Magdalene has abiding, stick-with-Jesus faith.

For us, faithfully following Jesus might well include times when Jesus seems dead. Or, at least, missing in action. Still, the Magdalene teaches us to stay. We stay close, even when it seems a heavy stone and cold silence separate us from Jesus. We need him. So we stay.

The faithful Magdalene stays with Jesus.

³ Luke 8:1-3 reads, ". . . [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." (ESV)

⁴ See Lynn H. Cohick, Women in the World of the Earliest Christians (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), chapter 9 and especially pp. 316ff.

⁵ I'm borrowing the idea of "Magdalenic faith" from Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1140.

⁶ John 15:4-5,9b (Common English Bible). Other translations render *menō* ("remain") as "abide."

III

The faithful Magdalene recognizes Jesus' voice.

The New Testament was written in Greek, so she is always "Maria." (In English, that becomes "Mary.") Maria is Greek for "Miriam." That's her actual name, in Hebrew: "Miriam." In this Easter-morning episode, written in Greek, she is always "Maria." Except once, where the Gospel writer left it untranslated. When Jesus speaks her name, it's her Hebrew name: *Miriam*.

Another time, Jesus said:

*The sheep hear [the shepherd's] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. . . .*⁷

Jesus calls her by name. She knows her Shepherd's voice.

How do we learn his voice? We are not going to hear him as Mary heard, with ears. Still, we can get used to what he sounds like. How? By being with him, learning from him. How do we do this? The way the Holy Spirit has given us. Sitting with the Bible, especially Gospels of Jesus' life. Reading and listening and sharing, carefully and prayerfully.

Doing this, I become attuned to the kind of things he says, the sort of things he talks about. I slowly learn to recognize when he is speaking with me now. When he is calling me to follow him, whatever situation I am in. If I've sat with him and learned him, I can recognize his word to me now.

The faithful Magdalene knows when Jesus is speaking to her.

IV

The faithful Magdalene holds Jesus . . . but not too much.

You heard Jesus admonish her. Is it for touching him?⁸ For holding him? This week, I learned that's not really the sense of the Greek words. It's not that she should keep from doing something. Rather, she must stop doing something she is already doing.⁹

So she is already holding him. Jesus let her. He was not a disembodied spirit she cannot touch. Jesus was resurrected to true physicality and full humanity. Of course she wanted to hold him. Of course he let her.

⁷ John 10:3b-5.

⁸ "Don't touch me" and similar phrasings are found in the Authorized Version (King James), the American Standard Version, and the NET Bible. "Do not hold me" is translation in the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the Common English Bible.

⁹ The verb is present-tense imperative. See the discussion in Bruner, 1152f, 1156.

But now it's time to stop.¹⁰ There is a time for holding Jesus. There is also a time for releasing. Faithfulness is not just "me and Jesus, holding tight forever." He has important work for us to do, important things to tell Mary and us.¹¹

The faithful Magdalene both holds Jesus and steps back to listen.

V

After she listens to Jesus, the faithful Magdalene goes and tells.

An apostle is someone who is sent to do something. Jesus' first apostles were the core of his disciple community. He sent them to carry his message to the world, to form Jesus-communities for the sake of the world. We call these communities, like ours, "apostolic."¹² For we are continuing what Jesus did through those first apostles. He sent them. Now, he sends us.

But first, he sends Mary. The Magdalene is the very first apostle, "the apostle to the apostles." Jesus sends her to tell what she has seen and heard. "*I have seen the Master!*" she said. *And she told them everything he had said to her.*"

This news she has to tell is nothing more than what happened to her. Also, it is nothing less than what happened to her. It is the simplest thing for her to say. We need no special training to tell what happened to us. Also, it's the most powerful thing she can say. Our experience is the one thing we can share like no one else can.

We're hearing this from a written document, "The Good News of Jesus according to John." There are others: Luke, Matthew, Mark. Each tells in their own way. There are strong similarities. Of course, they are telling about the same Jesus. They have differences too. Each had their own experiences of Jesus, and/or they had listened carefully to the experiences of others.

You can have your own experiences of Jesus. You can listen to the experiences of others — especially Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each of us will have our own take, with huge similarities — same Jesus — and the particular ways we each have experienced him in our lives.

But it all starts with Mary, the Magdalene. Hers is the first Gospel: *I have seen the Lord.*¹³

¹⁰ So the sense of the translation "Don't cling to me" is better; see the English Standard Version and the Message. Perhaps best is the New American Standard Bible's "Stop clinging to me."

¹¹ See Bruner, 1153.

¹² As in the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" (Nicene Creed).

¹³ "She is the first person privileged to say these words in the Gospel of John. If her announcement is true, then there is, indeed, a Gospel!" Bruner, 1155.

Imagine that moment after she heard Jesus say "*Miriam,*" as she was turning and realizing who he was. Everything changed. The cosmos shifted. Moments before, death was final, evil triumphant, all meaning was empty, and God gone. In the space of a skipped heartbeat, a gasped breath, God proved to be alive! Death's curse, lifted. Evil's relentless tide, turned. Hope was born again.

So remain with Jesus, as Mary did, even in those cold, hard times. Learn his voice, as Mary did by listening. Both hold him close and then step back to hear, as Mary did. Jesus sends you; go, as Mary did.

The faithfulness of the Magdalene: remaining, recognizing, holding, listening, going and telling . . . by the love and power of God's Spirit, may such Magdalenic faithfulness be ours. Amen.