

"The Magdalene Way"

A sermon for Easter Sunday

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John 20.1-18

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Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

Common English Bible

Do not look to Mary the Magdalene for wisdom about keeping a pandemic-safe two metres' distance. She didn't have to! A good thing too. In that moment, she had to be close to Jesus, to touch him, to hold him. And then — notice — to step back, release her hold, and embrace more than she could have ever imagined.

Magdalene simply means "from Magdala." It was a fishing town by the Sea of Galilee, Mary's hometown. Mary — *Miriam* — was such a common name in those days, you needed to add something to tell them apart. *Miriam, Jesus's Mom. Miriam of Bethany* (Martha and Lazarus' sister). *Miriam — Mary — of Magdala, the Magdalene.*

Maybe better, *Mary the Apostle of the Resurrection*. An "apostle" is someone sent on a mission. Mary was the very first whom Jesus sent to tell the news: "He is risen!" It was through this woman preacher that Jesus got the word out.

We'd be smart to be like the Magdalene. So let's learn from this *First Apostle of Easter*.

II

For starters, a Magdalene has to be with Jesus, even when all seems lost.

Jump back a few days, to the foot of the Cross. Most of Jesus' disciples had fled. The Magdalene stayed. As Jesus was dying, she was as close to him as she could get. As he was entombed, she was there too.

Then, after the Sabbath, as early as she could, Mary rushed to Jesus' tomb. Other women disciples went with her.¹ Realize that she expected nothing more than the

¹ The Gospel accounts differ about how many women went to Jesus' tomb that morning. The Gospel of John only talks about Mary, yet even it hints at the others when in 20:2 Mary reports "we don't know where they've put him."

honour of serving Jesus one last time. They were going to finish the burial process that had been left incomplete in the terror and rush of crucifixion day.

Another time much earlier, Jesus had — as is his way — said something that bothered a lot of people. Many who were following him heard it, and left. A few stayed, however, including the Magdalene. *"Where else would we go?"* they said. *"Jesus, you have the words of eternal life."*²

Even on that morning, when Eternal Life lay dead, the Magdalene had to be with him.

Even when God baffles us, seems to let us down, or seems absent, a Magdalene realizes that without God there is nothing. So though he is dead, Mary has to be where Jesus is.

Are you a Magdalene?

III

People have said a lot about Mary. Learned theologians soon got to saying she was a sex worker. They were wrong. They'd confused her with another Mary.³ Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus' feet with perfume. They confused her with another woman who had earlier washed Jesus' feet with oil and her tears.⁴ That woman was a "sinner" by reputation. They mixed all three of them up in their minds, and we got Mary Magdalene as she is almost always imagined: a sex worker whom Jesus had saved from that sinful lifestyle.⁵ Of course, Jesus does give his time and saving presence to people of many sinful lifestyles, including us. He frees people from all sorts of bondage.

Here's what we do know about the Magdalene. She was a woman of some wealth, who with other wealthy women sponsored and supported Jesus.⁶ He had freed her, from seven demons it says. We might describe it differently these days, but some sort of evil presence had a power over her. Jesus set her free.

² John 6:68-69.

³ Mary of Bethany was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She features in 3 narratives: Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-46; John 12:1-9.

⁴ Luke 7:36-50.

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene#Legacy

⁶ *"Jesus travelled through the cities and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. The Twelve were with him, along with some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses. Among them were Mary Magdalene (from whom seven demons had been thrown out), Joanna (the wife of Herod's servant Chuza), Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources."* Luke 8:1-3.

A Magdalene knows how Jesus has saved them.

Are you a Magdalene?

IV

A Magdalene turns.

Picture those maybe-two seconds it took. We start in despair. Death wraps around us. Even his grave where they'd laid his brutalized body has been violated, emptied of the One who had emptied himself for us. To the gardener: "*Where have you put him!*" It's a question, but more an accusation.

Then, "*Miriam*"

The Good Shepherd, he knows his sheep, each of them. He calls each by their own personal name. The sheep hears, knows his voice, turns to him.⁷

The bend of history, all of our human awareness and understanding, each of our crushed hopes, all turn with her.⁸

For a little while longer, she is the only one who knows. The rest of the world, the remaining disciples, millions of beating hearts continue along their tried and untrue trajectories. A few go along merrily. Many, miserably.

None of the miserable nor the merry have any clue that the Magdalene is turning. Only she knows what's happening . . . until she gets the word out!

Miriam. Hear her name. And, in the spaces between the sounds, hear yours.

A Magdalene turns.

⁷ John 10:3-4.

⁸ Dale Bruner writes, ""In the one or two seconds this turn took, I imagine the world shifting ever so slightly on its axis and at about this turn's one-second midpoint trajectory, history, too, moved almost imperceptibly from B. C. to A. D. A second *before* this turn there is a woman in the deepest human despair in the agonizing presence of unconquerable death; a second *after* the beginning of this turn there is a woman in the deepest possible human elation — in the presence of the death-conquering Central Figure of history. The rush that must have come over this woman in her two-second turn is unimaginable. She is the first person, ever, to experience the personal presence of the Risen Lord. When she turned to him at this moment, human history took a turn to a responsible hope for the vincibility of death and, so, to the conquest of meaninglessness." Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1152.

V

Now we get to the "holding" part.

Many have taken it that Jesus says to her, "*Do not touch me!*"⁹ What he really says is, "*Stop holding on to me.*"¹⁰ You see, she has been holding onto him. She has grabbed hold of him. Of course she has! He has let her.

Now Jesus needs Mary to let go. He has something important to say to her, something vital for her to do, and she will need to leave him to it.

In a sense, Jesus might simply be saying to her, basically, "Mary, you don't have to hold onto me to keep me from getting away. I'm not going anywhere, not yet. We'll see plenty of each other in the days ahead." Which she and all the other disciples did.

In another sense, we can see Mary as wanting to hold on to Jesus as he has always been. Of course! That's all he has been. Now, though, he is different. He has died. He has risen. He is soon to return to the heavenly reality of God, and so be present everywhere with everyone.

She has to let go of what was, so she can embrace this new, even more-full-than-before reality of who Jesus is and what he is doing.

VI

Does this help us imagine what, we really hope, we're going to be heading into soon? When we can hold again, we are going to want to grab hold of everything as it was before. Of course. There are many good things to grab back hold of.

Might we also need to be able to let go of some things we want to hold onto? Not because there is anything wrong with them. Rather, because there will be new things Jesus will want us to embrace. Things we have been learning. Things he will be showing us. New practices. New ways of being his People together. New ways of living for Jesus and with Jesus within our neighbourhoods and world.

We're going to need each other to imagine this and figure it out. We're going to need

⁹ A week later, Jesus tells Thomas to touch his wounds. Why the difference between his commands to Mary and Thomas. Folks have come up many explanations. Some are reasonable, others fanciful, and still others are, frankly, extremely misogynist. See Raymond Brown's list of these in [The Gospel According to John \(XIII-XXI\)](#) (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 992f. However, since Jesus told Mary to stop holding on to him, there is no need to reconcile the two episodes at all.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the grammatical issues, see Brown, 992-3, 1011-1012, and Brunner 1152.

a lot patience, forbearance of each other, careful listening, and curious questioning. And plenty of prayer.

VII

I'm quite sure Jesus is not finishing up with us. Maybe he is saying to us — to each of us and to us together — *"Will you be a Magdalene?"*

A Magdalene . . . needing to be wherever Jesus is. Where is that? It think he will surprise.

A Magdalene . . . so grateful for all Jesus has done to save and deliver us.

A Magdalene . . . hearing him say our name, with such tenderness and invitation. Turning to Jesus in astonishment.

A Magdalene . . . holding him, and letting him go, so we can go with this pounding inside and bursting out: *"I have seen the Lord!"*

Mary of Magdala. She's a good teacher!

Will you be a Magdalene?