

“Powerful Proclamation”

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Psalm 118.1-2, 14-20

John 20.1-18

April 17, 2022

In today’s Gospel reading Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and discovers that God almighty has defeated death. Mary and Peter and the beloved disciple find reason to rejoice and celebrate God. We see a glimpse of the deep connection between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and how that connection and her faith leads her to share in the exciting message that Christ has risen from the grave.

We begin this passage by hearing that on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary of Magdala went to the tomb. We are not given the reason, though we might speculate a few ideas. Sometimes after someone died in those days, people would go back each day to anoint the deceased with oils and spices, to preserve the body and decrease the smell.¹ Earlier in the Gospel of John, Nicodemus had already done this.² Whatever the reason, Mary has found that the stone covering the tomb has been rolled away and that Jesus is gone.

In a panic, Mary goes to Peter and the beloved disciple, also called “the other disciple” in this passage, to tell them. She’s worried and wants to let them know what happened. Maybe even out of disbelief, she wants someone else to see what she has seen. She goes to this beloved disciple, and Peter, the “rock,” and they begin sprinting toward the tomb. When they arrive, they see that what Mary has said is partially true – the stone is gone, but the disciples notice that the linens he had been wrapped in were still there.

If someone had moved the body, why would they have gone to the trouble of removing the linens?³ The author of John tells us that “the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” So, the disciples saw the linens, and believed – but the scripture does not exactly tell us what they believed. Because of the linens, we can guess that they did not believe what Mary said, thinking that their Lord had been taken and moved somewhere else. But how could they have believed that Jesus had risen, if they did not yet understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead?

The disciples left, and we are not told where they go or if they tell anyone right away what happened, but Mary stayed. She is deeply distraught by the entire situation and spent time weeping outside the tomb. After a while, two angels appeared, asking her why she was crying. She repeats to them what she had told the disciples, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” At that moment she turned, and we find out that Jesus is

¹ Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible*. (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 211.

² Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “John 20.1-18” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 377.

³ Gaventa, 379.

standing there before her, but for some reason she does not recognize him. He even speaks to her once, and she does not recognize his voice right away. He asks the same question that the angels asked, and she assumes that he is the gardener. She thinks that he has taken Jesus away, and in a pleading manner, she asks him to take her to her Lord – to take her where he has been laid. At that moment, Jesus spoke her name, “Mary,” and she immediately knew he was Jesus.

I love what ELCA pastor, Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber said about this passage in a sermon. She imagines Mary’s response expanded: “They’ve taken him away and I don’t know where he is.....

They’ve taken love away and I don’t know where it is...

They’ve taken kindness away and I don’t know where it is...

My own wholeness went away... and I don’t know where it is.”

She is seeking identity, understanding, meaning, love – all those things we all search for in our lives, and in that moment everything is crashing down.

Yet, as God calls us by name, Jesus calls her by name. Bolz-Weber also said,

“To Jesus she wasn’t that crazy lady like she was to everyone else. To him she was just Mary and when he said her name it sounded like a complete sentence....” She knew it was him.

What joy she must have felt! We experience so much emotion in this passage – the sorrow felt by Mary when she found the tomb empty, the urgency of the disciples as they ran, the confusion, perhaps, as they spotted the linens, the frustration of Mary as she kept repeating the same answer over and over, and the utter joy when she sees her Lord standing before her. We can see Mary’s deep devotion for Jesus and how meaningful her relationship with Jesus is to her.⁴ In fact, her faith is so deep that once she has realized that Christ has risen, she goes out and spreads the word that Jesus has been resurrected! “I have seen the Lord,” she said.

Mary was an important person not only to scripture, but to Jesus. For centuries people have claimed that we call her Mary Magdalene because it was assumed she came from the town of Magdala. Recently two scholars have suggested that it is actually a title of honor for her, which meant “tower” or “magnified.”⁵ Elizabeth Schrader and Joan Taylor have argued that the word Magdala was meant to display her importance in Aramaic.

We, too, are called to that deep relationship with Christ. We can experience Jesus in our lives today. Through prayer, scripture, and community we experience Christ in our lives, and in our bodies. Part of the joy of the resurrection is that Christ continues on within us and that our deep connection with Christ compels us to want to go out, like Mary, and spread the good news.

⁴ Serene Jones, “John 20.1-18” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 376.

⁵ <https://religionnews.com/2022/01/07/was-mary-magdalene-really-from-magdala-two-scholars-reassess-the-evidence/>

When I was in Israel many years ago, I met a woman that had this deep relationship of faith and who expressed it in a way unlike anyone else I have known. Our tour group started at the top of the Mount of Olives and worked our way down into the walls of Jerusalem. On our way down, our tour guide pointed in passing to the Church of Mary Magdalene. It was a gorgeous building with golden leaves on the top. Our tour guide kept walking, saying we didn't have enough time to stop and go inside, but a group of four of us decided that we were not passing up this opportunity and left our tour group. As we walked in through the walls around the church, we glanced around, wondering about the history. Without our tour guide, we were unsure of what we were looking at, and wondering if maybe we didn't think this through all the way. Perhaps since we looked like lost tourists, a woman came bouncing up to us, cheerily greeting us and welcoming us to the church. Her name was Sister Catherine and she had moved from California to be a nun in this Russian Orthodox Church. She greeted us with a big smile and quickly ushered us into the church.

We were stunned and amazed by the beautiful paintings that covered the walls. Sister Catherine gave the history of the golden leaves on the top of the church and she began to share her faith journey with us, with a smile and laughter, and a welcoming spirit. Everything she said had an urgency to it, as if she was so excited to be telling us this story, and that if she didn't tell us she would absolutely burst.

After a while, she pointed to a painting that covered the majority of the wall facing the main door, and it was a picture of a woman holding an egg in front of a king. This painting is printed inside your bulletin this morning, as well. Sister Catherine told us this was Mary Magdalene, the "apostle to the apostles" and that Mary was one of the women at the tomb and that she was a strong woman that went out to share the good news of the resurrection of her Lord. Sister Catherine said that the picture above the communion table was of Mary Magdalene and the Emperor Tiberius. In the tradition it was believed that after Jesus had risen from the dead she went to the Emperor and had an egg in her hand because they were at a feast. She proclaimed to the Emperor, "He has risen! Jesus has risen!" After laughing, the Emperor said, "That's not true! Jesus could not have risen any more than the egg in your hand could turn red!" At that moment, the egg turned red. Sister Catherine explained that this was how we associated coloring eggs with Easter. After a few more moments of talking with Sister Catherine, we thanked her for her generosity and found our way back to our tour group.

Sister Catherine and Mary Magdalene were two people in my experience that truly radiated Christ's love, and I could feel the strength of her relationship with Christ. Sister Catherine reflected Christ through her eagerness to not only tell us her faith story, but to welcome us in and greet us. We are not all blessed with the gift of expressing our faith with words, but she also showed how to share Christ's love through her actions and her hospitality. Whether we choose to believe the story of Mary of Magdala and the egg, the essence of the story seems quite in line with what we hear about her in scripture – that she was so thrilled that Christ had been resurrected, she wanted to share that with everyone, and was bold enough, in this story, to tell the Emperor, who even laughed at her. Maybe you can think of someone who absolutely radiates Christ in what they say and do.

We, too, are called to share the good news – to be in this deep relationship with Christ and to proclaim Christ's resurrection. For when we are so connected to Christ, our lives simply reflect Christ in all that we do.

So on this Easter Sunday, as we celebrate the good news that Christ has risen, the story does not end here, but encourages us to go out from the tomb and to proclaim. So, let us seek to deepen our relationship with Christ, and to proclaim the good news, for Jesus Christ is risen – Alleluia! Amen.