

“The Faces of the Cross 2) Mary Magdalene”

a sermon by

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Text: “Mary Magdalene went and said, ‘I have seen the Lord: and she told them that he had said these things to her’” (John 20:18).

One of the aspects of Holy Week that fascinates me is the array of faces that make up those last days of Jesus’ life. Some of these faces are well known: Jesus and Judas, Caiaphas and Pilate, Herod and Barabbas, Peter, James and John.

But there are other faces, less known, but important in their own way. On Monday I spoke of Simon of Cyrene, a pilgrim who was traveling from Northern Africa to Jerusalem, who was conscripted by the Roman soldiers to carry the cross of Jesus and who many believe became one of Jesus’ followers.

Another one of these lesser-known but important faces is a woman by the name of Mary Magdalene. Now, as I mentioned Monday, Mary Magdalene has received some “good press” over the past few months. In Dan Brown’s runaway bestseller, *The DaVinci Code*, a work of fiction that many have regarded as a historical work, Mary Magdalene is given an enormous role. According to Dan Brown, Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus. They had children, then after Jesus’ death, Mary Magdalene fled with her children to Southern France and the descendants of Jesus became a line of French Kings. Brown also argues in his novel that Mary Magdalene was the foremost disciple of Jesus and that the Church later covered up her prominent role as a part of the patriarchal hijacking of the church.

But Mary Magdalene’s star has also arisen in another part of the world. Elaine Pagels, who teaches at Princeton University, recently published a book, entitled *The Gnostic Gospels*, in which she recounts a strange event that took place in December of 1945 in the upper part of Egypt. On that day an Arab peasant made a remarkable discovery while digging for fertilizer in some ancient caves. He found a clay jar that contained a number of ancient manuscripts. These manuscripts are sometimes referred to as the Nag Hammadi manuscripts and contain a number of the so-called “Gnostic Gospels.” Apparently, they belonged to an ancient sect that existed near the time of Jesus. These so called Gospels include *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Philip*, and, yes, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. Now none of these Gospels are part of our New Testament and I think it is fair to say that they are not likely to make it into the canon any time soon. They paint a very different picture of Jesus: they speak of God as mother and father, they suggest that the resurrection of Jesus is to be interpreted symbolically and not literally.

I.

But what about Mary Magdalene? There are some things about her that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John make quite clear. We know that her name was Mary, although one of the confusions around her is that Mary was a common name. Mary was the name of the mother of Jesus. Mary was also the sister of Martha and the brother of Nazareth. There was also a woman named Mary, who was the mother of James and John. Sometimes these Marys are spoken of together and for that reason it is sometimes hard to separate one from the other.

We know too that she was from a small town near the Sea of Galilee named Magdala. Apparently, the town had a bad reputation and that reputation seemed to have rubbed off on Mary Magdalene.

The Gospels also tell us that Mary Magdalene was healed by Jesus. According to the Gospel of Luke (Luke 8:1-3), Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. A later Pope declared that she was a prostitute, but there is no evidence of this in the Gospels.

The Gospels are insistent that Mary Magdalene played a decisive role in the ministry of Jesus. She was with Jesus at the crucifixion, long after all the disciples had fled (Mark 15:40-41, 47; Matthew 27:55-56, 61; Luke 23: 49; 55-56; John 19:25). She was also one of the women who went to the tomb on that Easter morning and found the stone risen and Jesus raised from the

dead (Mark 16:1-6; Matthew 28:5-9; Luke 24:4-10). In John's Gospel Jesus tells her of his ascension and charges her to go and tell the disciples that he is not dead, but risen.

Concerning Mary Magdalene, there are two things about which the New Testament is certain.

II.

The first is that Mary Magdalene, like so many other of the women in the Gospels, shows us what it means to serve Jesus. There is a subtle but very important contrast in the gospels that divides the disciples from Mary Magdalene. Paul Achtemeier in his commentary on *Mark* points out that if there is any progression in the picture that Mark paints of the gospel, it is from bad to worse. "We have left everything," says Peter, "and followed you." And they had done that. But in the end it all came unraveled. Peter denied Jesus. Judas betrayed him. Peter, James, and John had all fallen asleep. One of the saddest verses in all the gospels is found in Mark 14:57 where we read, "They all forsook him and fled."

But there were those who did not forsake him. Mark tells us that there were three women present at the crucifixion: Mary, the mother of James and John; Salome; and Mary Magdalene. And on that Easter morning who was it that went out to that tomb to anoint the body of Jesus with spices: those three same women.

Somewhere along the way I think the church has become lost. All the debates about ordination of women, the ordination of homosexuals. We have treated ordination as if it were an entitlement when the New Testament makes it quite clear what ordination is about. It is about serving Jesus--period.

Sometime ago I came across a remarkable book, entitled *Life in the Death Camps*. It was written about those individuals who had survived concentration camps of Nazi Germany and the Gulags of Stalin's Soviet Union. The writer points out that the survivor was not the person who tried to save himself, but the person who willingly gave up his own rations and comfort for the sake of others. The survivors were the ones who mirrored the words of Jesus that, "the one who seeks to save his life will lose it, and the one willing to lose his life will save it."

III.

There is something else that Mary Magdalene represents in the New Testament. She is one of the first missionaries of the church. John's gospel tells us that when she came to the tomb on that Easter morning, she encountered the risen Lord. When she recognized him, he told her to go and to tell the disciples that he was about to ascend to his father in heaven. So Mary Magdalene went and said to them, "I have seen the Lord."

Is that not the great mystery of the resurrection? This past Monday night I watched the Peter Jennings special on ABC on *Jesus and Paul*. There is a lot of interest in Jesus today--between the Da Vinci Code, Mel Gibson's *Passion*, and all of the media attention. The question

is always: what was he like? The problem with that question is that it misses the point. Our problem is not that we cannot find him. It is that we cannot escape him. There is no tomb we can point to, no burial site.

That is the source of our uneasiness. Because he is risen, we do not know where we might find him. We are not safe with our beloved evil--for he will not cease forgiving us. We are not safe with our pride--for he insists on showing us his hands and feet. We are not safe with our selfishness--for he keeps merging with the poor and sick and dying.

Some of the Gnostic gospels indicate that Mary was the greatest of the Apostles and perhaps she was. She certainly taught us something about what it means to follow Jesus and how to proclaim the gospel even to fearful souls. Amen!