

Mary Magdalene, Apostle
John 20:1-2, 11-18
July 21-22, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

She's referred to as "the other Mary" in our Hymn of the Day (ELW 419 *For All the Faithful Women*, v. 9). That makes Mary Magdalene sound like an afterthought, but she's really not. Other than Mary, the Mother of Our Lord, Mary Magdalene is the most important female figure in the New Testament. This is even though there's no mention of her after Easter morning, and she doesn't show up in the Book of Acts or any of the epistles either.

So what do you know or think you know about Mary Magdalene?

- She got her name from her hometown of Magdala (now called Migdal), on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.
- She was a disciple, a follower, of Jesus. (She was **not** a "camp follower," a la Union General Joseph Hooker from the Civil War.) She was one of the women who helped bankroll the itinerant rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, and his small following.
- Jesus cast "seven demons" out of Mary Magdalene, and she followed him devotedly ever after. St. Luke writes:
*The twelve were with [Jesus], as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: **Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,** and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (Luke 8.1b-3)*
We don't know what it means that Mary Magdalene was possessed by 7 demons, except that she was among the walking dead, deathly ill, and He made her well. She was broken and He made her whole. She was laid low and He raised her up. She was beside herself, not herself, perhaps incapable of loving herself or anyone else. Then Jesus came. She owed Him everything.
- Mary Magdalene was one of the few who were brave enough to watch the crucifixion (from a distance) when the others had hightailed it out of there, afraid for their lives. (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40 cf. Luke 23.49 *But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.*)
- Mary Magdalene was among the women who shadowed Joseph of Arimathea when he took Jesus' body down from the cross and laid it in the tomb, marking the spot so they could return to anoint His body. (*Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.* Matthew 27.61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23.55)

- All 4 Gospels say she was one of those at the tomb first thing Easter morning, prepared to bathe Jesus' battered body, then to anoint and wrap it. (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1,10; John 20:1)
- According to St. Mark and St. John, Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom our risen Lord appeared on Easter morning. (Mark 16.9 [longer ending]; John 20.11-18)
- She is called the Apostle to the Apostles because Jesus sent her to the 12 to share the Good News!

To say that much of the artwork of Mary Magdalene doesn't do her justice is really an understatement. When I was a child I had a book of the saints that scared me to death. It showed Mary Magdalene huddled in a corner surrounded by a pile of skulls. The book was from back in the dark ages, like the early 1960's, when Mary Magdalene's designation on the Roman Catholic church calendar was "penitent." There were lots of martyrs, many virgins, some teachers and founders of religious orders on that calendar, but only one penitent: Mary Magdalene.

Why? What was she supposedly **repenting** of, **lifelong**? Well, about 1400 years ago, just shy of 600 A.D., a pope, Gregory I ("Gregory the Great") preached a sermon series about Mary Magdalene, and he mistakenly identified her as a **prostitute**, the unnamed woman with a **bad** street reputation, who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, scandalizing the Pharisees who were there to witness that extreme act of devotion (cf. Luke 7:36-50). Over 1350 years later, in 1969, the Vatican refuted that false teaching but many people still believe that Mary Magdalene was a reformed street walker. She was not. She was the first witness of the resurrection!

Classic artwork often shows Mary with red eyes, since the Fourth Gospel says she was crying in the Garden on Easter morning, and since there was this **mistaken** notion that whatever her experience was of being possessed by 7 demons, it was so bad she never quite recovered from it, or never forgave herself for what she'd done "under the influence" of whatever it was. That is **so wrong**.... She was **healed** and **freed** by Jesus, not half-way but wholly! She lived a life of joyful

devotion to Him, not a life of endless sorrow for past suffering that was over or perhaps for past sin that was forgiven. Some of the artwork of Mary Magdalene is downright morose – we might even say sappy or *maudlin*, an English word that unfortunately derives from Magdalene. Maudlin was an old-time British pronunciation of Magdalene (like bedlam was an old-time British pronunciation of Bethlehem). It means endlessly weepy and I will never accept that as an accurate adjective for the woman Jesus met in the Garden on the first Easter!

So here's the thing: Mary Magdalene was a **celebrant**, not a **penitent**. First she celebrated her own healing and then she celebrated Jesus' resurrection! And yes, of course **she loved Jesus**, but not as she's depicted loving Him in *Jesus Christ Superstar* or in *The DaVinci Code*. Her love for Jesus was *agape*, a selfless love, not *eros*, a sexual love. **She** loved Jesus as **we** should love Jesus. She loved Jesus for saving her. Jesus has saved us, too. What other reason is there for us to be here today, except for our love of Jesus, our love of our Father in heaven, our love of the Holy Spirit?

I have certain relatives who, when they're passionate about something, will say, "For the love of God!" Well, Mary Magdalene lived her whole life for the love of God. She loved Jesus enough to leave her home and familiar surroundings and follow Him wherever He went, including to Jerusalem and down the Via Dolorosa, the Sorrowful Way, to Calvary. She loved Him enough to watch the nightmare of His crucifixion, then to shadow Joseph of Arimathea as he (and Nicodemus: John 19:39) removed Jesus' body from the cross and transported it to the tomb. She loved Him enough to want to wash His bloodied corpse clean, anoint it with fragrant lotion and wrap it in a fresh, spiced sheet for its long and last sleep. As one poet has said,

She, while Apostles shrank, could dangers brave,
Last at his cross and earliest at His grave.¹

Gregory the Great misidentified Mary Magdalene big-time, but he got something right when he preached:

“What great love Mary had for Christ; for although the disciples left the tomb, she remained. She was still seeking the one she had not found, and wept as she sought him; burning with the fire of love, she longed for him who she thought had been taken away. And so it happened that the woman who stayed behind to seek Christ was the only one to see him.”²

I wonder if Mary Magdalene guessed that her all-consuming love for her Lord was an ‘nth of His saving love for her....

In the 1st letter of John we’re reminded:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:10-11)

Thankfully in the iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church (stylized holy paintings), Mary Magdalene is not depicted as a hot mess, but as holding a red egg, symbolizing the resurrection of our Lord. She had danced once because Jesus rescued her from a living death and gave her abundant life. She danced once more in the Garden when the risen Lord called her by name, “Mary!”, showing her He lived again, no more to die! And so we now shall sing:

We praise the other Mary,
 who came at Easter dawn,
 and near the tomb did tarry,
 but found her Lord was gone.
 As joyfully she saw him
 in resurrection light,
 may we by faith behold him,
 the day who ends all night.

He is the One who heals us, too, of our sin and our sickness, the One who mends all which is broken, the One to whom we owe everything, the One who loves us better than we know.

Amen

¹Eaton Stannard Bennett, “Woman,” Part I, ll. 143-44.

²James Carroll, “Who Was Mary Magdalene?” *Smithsonian* (June 2006, 108-119), p. 110.

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