

MARY MAGDALENE Wednesday 22-07-2020. *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Song of Songs 3:1-4a; Psalm 63;

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then 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. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Today is an unusual day in the Church's calendar, because today we celebrate a woman. The only other woman given a major festival is Mary the mother of Jesus, whose day is August 15th.

Mary of Magdala is also one of the few women actually named in the gospels: there are women around, but many of them are not given names. She is called the Magdalene to distinguish her from all the other Marys, because it was a common name, just as Jesus was called Jesus of Nazareth.

Mary, we are told by Luke, was one of the women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: seven demons had gone out of her. She was one of the women who followed Jesus around Galilee, along with the male disciples, and provided for him. All four of the gospels name her as present at the crucifixion and at the tomb where Jesus was laid. She was the first to see the risen Jesus.

So what else do we know about this particular Mary? She is mentioned about a dozen times in the gospels, mostly in connection with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We know very little about her, but that hasn't stopped all kinds of rumours and myths and stories being told about her.

At some point in the history of the church, this Mary was confused with other women mentioned in the gospels, such as the woman who anointed Jesus while he was at table, or the woman caught in adultery. She has been depicted as a reformed prostitute, as Jesus's lover, and some have wondered whether she was actually the 'Beloved Disciple' John speaks of.

Her reputation has been distorted in a way that proves the old adage: that the truth never gets in the way of a good story. Doesn't it add to the power of the narrative if the first person to see the risen Lord Jesus was not only a mere woman, but a woman who had been forgiven all kinds of sinful behaviour?

Doesn't it add more pathos and enrich our evangelism if we can demonstrate that this woman, who was given the privilege of telling the apostles that Jesus was alive, had been a really nasty piece of work who was saved and converted and became a saint?

It might convince some, but that doesn't mean it's true. There is no evidence that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute or any other sort of dreadful sinner. She was exorcised of evil spirits or demons, but in New Testament times these were mostly associated with illness, not sin; people who were sick or crippled or had epilepsy were thought to be possessed by evil spirits.

The Gerasene or Gadarene demoniac, who Jesus delivered from demons, hurt himself and seemed to be insane, but there is no suggestion that he was wicked or evil.

So all we really know about this Mary is that Jesus had made her well and she was one of his band of followers as they travelled around Galilee. She was with the other brave women at the crucifixion: and she evidently loved Jesus because she was crying at the tomb.

When she recognised Jesus it was after supposing him to be the gardener. Perhaps she was crying so hard she couldn't see clearly: but then on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples didn't recognise Jesus either, so there was something different about his appearance.

Mary, in common with everyone else, believed that Jesus was dead, and she wanted to give him a decent burial. When he spoke her name she realised and believed, calling him 'my teacher' or 'my master'. Jesus replied, 'Do not hold on (or cling) to me', so it seems she flung her arms around him.

Much speculation has arisen from this, but I think the writer is letting us know that this resurrected Jesus is not the same as he was before; and he was not staying, he would be returning to God. The relationship he once had with his followers would be different as the Holy Spirit comes to stay with them and in them.

Jesus told Mary to go and tell his brothers, and she did. And that is the last we hear of her in the Bible.

Mary Magdalene must have been an important person to the early church to be remembered in this way, in all four of the canonical gospels. Most of the women we encounter in the gospels are not given names at all.

We know that the early Christian church, when the gospels were recorded, existed at a time when women were not seen as terribly important. A woman's identity was tied to that of her father or her husband, and a woman without either was likely to be destitute. The early Church Fathers as they interpreted scripture read it with patriarchal eyes, and the women of the Bible were portrayed as either pure and spotless or as wicked temptresses.

Mary Magdalene is named for the place she came from, not for a husband; so perhaps she didn't have a husband. She seems to have been free to wander around with the disciples and Jesus, which you would think was an unusual life for a woman. Maybe this is why suspicion about her grew.

I'd like us to reclaim Mary, to put aside all the speculation and see her as a woman who loved Jesus and followed him. She was the first to believe in the resurrection and the first to encounter the risen Jesus; and she was the first to tell the Good News to others.

Jesus made a point of choosing those who were not important or rich or famous or virtuous or even very religious; he reached out to ordinary men and women, people who were poor and sick and marginalised and ignored. He chose Mary Magdalene, which was in keeping with his practice of including the last and the least and turning the world's standards upside down.

As we honour Mary today, let us remember and honour all the other ordinary and extraordinary women and men whose names have been forgotten but whose faithful lives have made the world a better place.