

The First Sermon
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
April 17, 2022

John 20:1-18

It's Easter! And it's so good to see all of you. I remember that my late great-uncle Bernard would always respond to that statement with "it's good to be seen", which always made me smile.

But our scriptures give us a different story on Easter morning, don't they? On the Sunday morning after the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb at daybreak and sees... no one. Then she goes back to the disciples and two of them start a road race back to the tomb where they again see... no one.

Even though these are the apostles we're talking about, they're still guys. And what do most guys do when they are together and they encounter something they can't quite figure out, what do they do? They kind of stand around, get a puzzled look on their face, maybe scratch their beard a bit (beards were quite popular back then), and say something like "*Huh. Haven't seen that one before. Go figure. Don't know how that happened. Oh well, let's go home.*" Maybe that's a stereotype.

I imagine that Mary Magdalene must be beside herself. Here she made this big discovery, that the tomb is empty, and she goes and gets the Rock of the Church Peter, and the beloved Disciple, and this is what they do? Shrug and go home?

We're told that Mary weeps. When a child has a temper tantrum, they cry. When everything goes wrong and we've had a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day, we who call ourselves adults might even cry too. But weeping... that's a soul thing. Weeping is this profound, whole body sadness that takes over and sends us to our knees, particularly when we're grieving.

She stays at the tomb. The guys, they don't invite her to come with them, maybe they do, but probably they just wander off. Left there in her weeping. And Mary is stuck in the feeling that no one will help her find the one most important person in her life these last three years.

She won't leave, because she can't.

We can imagine her standing there, ready to drop to the ground, in deep, heaving sobs, her mind shut down and her heart truly broken. This is what lamentation is. Feel that for a moment. (pause).

We often think of Mary Magdalene as a minor figure in the story of Jesus and the twelve, because she is never counted in that number. But if we were to list all the times that named disciples appear in the gospels, we see that Mary is mentioned more than most of them. And in every Gospel, she is situated at the tomb on Easter morning.

What else do we know about Mary? We don't talk about Mary Magdalene all that much, do we? But we should. Because she holds the keys to our understanding of the Easter message, and how it is interpreted and spread in the world.

Mary was a common name, so we need to make sure we're not confusing her with other Marys, like the mother of Jesus or the mother of the Sons of Zebedee, or the wife of Clopas. She had first met Jesus very early in his public ministry when he cast 7 demons from her¹. Interestingly, she seems to not be attached to any man, therefore she is identified by geography as the Mary who came from Magdala, a small yet prosperous fishing city located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believe her to be a former prostitute. In the 6th century, Pope Gregory authoritatively pronounced that the sinful woman mentioned in the Gospel of Luke² was the same person as Mary Magdalene – although, that is not how the story was written so the Eastern Orthodox Church disagreed.

¹ Luke 8

² Luke 7:36-50

So when Andrew Lloyd Weber's wrote Jesus Christ Superstar and Mel Gibson's produced The Last Temptation of Christ, portraying her as a prostitute, they leaned into this falsehood. And then there was the very popular books by Dan Brown that posited she was married to Jesus. But these portrayals are not faithful to the text, and it's not Mary Magdalene.

In fact, there's much more evidence in scripture that Mary was something of an independent woman who served the Jesus movement by funding it. So I'm more inclined to believe that it's this Mary – this generous, empowered, disciple and patron - that looks incredulously on as the guys go home. And it is only when her mind is turned off and her grief renders her heart open that she is able to look inside the empty tomb.

There she sees a vision of two angels who try and help her figure out her grieving, saying "*Why are you weeping?*". When she says what has driven her to such an emotional state, and that she just wants to see the body of her beloved teacher, that's when she turns around and has another vision and the same question is asked, "*why are you weeping?*"

We too have dreams and visions. Dreams are those ethereal moments where we experience events, but eventually we wake up and know it's not real. Visions are more like flashes of insight when we are awake where we see things that we mistake for real.

We can wake up in the middle of the night from a nightmare, swearing that someone is in the house, and call the cops. Or we picture in our dreams someone that we lost and can hear their voice or see their features so sharply we'd believe they are with us in that very moment. Many of us have had these strange experiences but we might not talk about them so that we don't seem foolish or unhinged.

Maybe this is the kind of state in which Mary Magdalene recognizes that the voice of this man she presumed to be the gardener has called her by name... "*Mary!*" he says. Finally, she has eyes that can see, and ears that can hear, and knows that God is with her.

In the midst of our confusion, and the depths of our grief, that's when God is most with us.

And Jesus says to her, "*Go and tell.*" For he is not just going to heaven, but he is returning to whom? "*To my God and to your God*". To YOUR God. He tells her not to touch him, of course, because what is happening is bigger than just one person and she cannot be the one to hold him back. There is not just the resurrection for Jesus, but for everyone, and she is chosen as the first one to tell others about the Good News.

Mary, who faithfully waited and saw and heard on that day that death cannot have the last word.

And what happens next to Mary? Tradition holds that after Pentecost, the next thing she did was to travel to Rome. She was able to get an audience at court with the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar, which is another clue that she and her family were wealthy and important.

In those days, it was tradition to give a small gift to the emperor when being granted an audience, so Mary brought with her a hardboiled egg. As she told him about Pilate's killing of an innocent man, working through every painful detail of those hard days, she gave the egg to the emperor saying these words, "Christ is risen!"

Tiberius responded saying that no man could rise from the dead any easier than a white egg could turn red. And you can guess what happened next... the egg turned red.

And what does red symbolize in our tradition? (the Holy Spirit, that's right). Mary was the one to first carry the Holy Spirit to Rome, long before Peter and Paul and the early Christians arrived on the scene.

The first sermon to the Empire was delivered by Mary, the faithful one, the Holy Spirit filled one. I have an icon on my wall of her holding an egg to remind me of her witness. And all these years we Christians have been coloring eggs and giving the traditional Easter Greeting....

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Amen.