

Eyewitness To Easter: Mary Magdalene

This morning we are looking at a follower of Jesus who in some sense appears more prominently in the Easter story than any of the others. Mary Magdalene. She was there. I believe she was present when Jesus stood before Pilate, present as he was whipped and beaten, as he stumbled under the weight of the cross, as he was nailed to the cross on Golgotha. The Bible tells us she was present at the cross, present at his burial, standing across from the tomb as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped his body with spices, laid him in the tomb and rolled the stone in place at the entrance. Mary Magdalene was there on that Sunday morning to see that the stone had been rolled away. She was the first to see and speak to the risen Lord, the first to tell others that Jesus was risen. Think of that, the first person to carry the good news of Jesus' resurrection is Mary Magdalene, this woman with a broken and troubled past. What do we really know about her? (From now on I'll refer to her simply as Mary. If I'm referring to one of the other women named Mary, I'll clarify that.)

We can start with the "disinformation" that is out there. Through the centuries a false narrative, a non-biblical narrative was started about her. It was attributed to an Easter homily by Pope Gregory 1 who identified Mary as the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume from an alabaster jar. The bible doesn't identify this woman and there is no reason to suspect it was Mary but from that time on, Mary Magdalene was identified as a prostitute.

In modern times some suggested she and Jesus had an affair. People tried to discredit Jesus when he was alive, accusing him of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners, but it's interesting no one ever accused him of impropriety with women. If he was having an affair with Mary, his enemies would have pointed that out. Then remember Dan Brown and the DaVinci Code? He along with some other wacky people claimed Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child. According to Brown, that child and the blood line of Jesus was the true "holy grail" hidden by the Catholic Church. It was all nonsense. Conspiracy theory junk. Even Tom Hanks starring in the movie couldn't make it convincing. None of that was biblical or true. So what do we know about Mary Magdalene from the bible?

Mary was a follower of Jesus. Luke tells us, **"Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out: Joanna the wife of Cuza, the**

manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means." Luke 8:1-3

While the men got all the media coverage, and specifically the Twelve (disciples) as Luke calls them, but you understand there were other disciples that followed Jesus and not all of them were men. Luke mentions these women in particular and we will talk more about them in three weeks. The point is, these women were committed followers of Jesus. Interestingly enough, it was the women who literally stayed with him to the end while the men scattered.

Mary actually is mentioned more often in the gospels than some of the Twelve. She plays a more prominent role at his crucifixion and resurrection. We don't know for sure but we suppose Mary was from the village of Magdala. Our first trip to Israel they had just begun doing some archeological digs in that area. Magdala is on the Northwest side of the Sea of Galilee, not far from Capernaum. They have found ruins of a synagogue, what appears to be a business of some kind, dwellings, and I heard recently they thought they had found a second synagogue. It's believable that with so many women named Mary, they could best identify her by her hometown.

Mary was not only a follower of Jesus, **Mary was a financial supporter of Jesus.** As Luke tells us, Mary and these other women were supporting Jesus and the ministry with their finances. They had been directly impacted by Jesus' miracles. Luke says they had been healed and delivered and were no doubt happy to give to support the ministry. Mary was a giver. "Out of their own means" suggests Mary and these other women had resources of their own.

Mary was in bondage until she met Jesus. Obviously, the most telling fact about Mary is found in Luke's commentary, "Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out." Mark's gospel confirms that detail as well in Mark 16:9. You can't exactly overlook that on the resume can you? "Now it says here you had seven demons...Let's talk about that."

Seven demons. We don't know why the specific number or its' significance. Someone suggested seven is the number of completion. It may have implied that Mary was under the complete control of demonic forces. Of course if seven meant completely controlled, what does that tell us about Legion?!! We don't know exactly how that demonic possession manifested itself in Mary, but I think we can safely say that prior to her encounter with Jesus and the deliverance he provided, Mary was a broken, messed up woman. Bound, addicted, we might have described her as wicked, troubled or treacherous, she might have been a fortune teller, we simply don't know. What we do know is one day she met Jesus and everything changed. Once

and for all, she was free, restored, in her right mind, whole. The bible says if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation, old things have passed away and all things become new. That would describe the Mary Magdalene we meet in the Scripture for sure. A new person.

Jesus said the one who is forgiven much, loves much. Mary had been forgiven much. All the years of bondage, brokenness and sin now gone, a distant memory. I imagine her life had been lonely. No one wants to be around demon possessed people, those driven to madness, but Jesus changed everything. Now she has friends. The love she had for Jesus, the one who valued her and gave her a new life, we see it in her devotion. The disciples scattered when Jesus was arrested, of the Twelve only John is mentioned being present at the cross, but Mary was there.

Mary was present at Jesus' crucifixion. She wasn't going to forsake Jesus, the one who had changed her forever. She owed him her life, her devotion, her everything. Matthew records, **"Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb."** Matthew 27:55-61 Mark and John also record that Mary and many of the other women were present at his crucifixion. John tells us that Mary the mother of Jesus was there and that Jesus made provision for his mother to be cared for by John. They stayed, standing, watching. When the guard ran a spear into Jesus' side and declared he was dead, it appears most everyone left, but Mary stayed. She watched as they prepared his body, buried Jesus and sealed the tomb.

Mary was the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection. As you read the accounts from the gospels, you get varying points of view about the time line on that Sunday morning. John makes it sound as if only Mary went to the tomb early that morning. The other writers indicate she came with other women. Regardless, it appears she was the last to leave and among the first to arrive Sunday morning. As usual Mark simplifies it for us. **"When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he**

had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping.” Mark 16:9-10

John gives us a portrait of the devotion Mary had for Jesus. Mary saw the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. She ran back to tell Peter and John who immediately ran to the tomb. They too saw the stone rolled away, the body was gone, graveclothes neatly folded but they still didn't understand what it all meant. John and Peter leave and Mary arrives again, standing alone outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look again into the empty tomb and now saw two angels in white. I love that John says she looked again into the tomb. If you don't find Jesus the first time, keep looking! The angels asked why she was crying. She said, **“They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him.”** John records, **“At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ‘Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’ Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni! (which means Teacher). Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them,’ ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.” John 20:13-18**

I love this story. I'm moved by the level of Mary's devotion to Jesus. Think about what she says. “Tell me where you have put him and I will get him.” How can she bring the body back? A full grown man who now according to John's gospel, has an additional 75 pounds of spices wrapped about him, and Mary says, “I'll get him, I'll carry him, just tell me where he is.” Love won't give up. You see, love is what brought her to the tomb that morning. Let me wrap this up sharing a couple of lessons we can learn from Mary Magdalene.

Love never gives up. The Apostle Paul wrote, **“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13:13** Love is what brought Mary Magdalene to Jerusalem, following Jesus through that final week and those final hours. Imagine seeing Jesus whipped and beaten, crucified, hanging on a cross, his body pierced with a spear, watching the one who rescued you, who saved you, who gave your life back to you, dying this horrible death, right before your eyes. She followed him as far as she could go, to the grave.

She came back that Sunday morning, not because of faith, faith was gone when his lifeless body was taken down from the cross. Hope was gone when his dead body was wrapped in the burial cloth and sealed in a tomb. Hope and faith were lost, but not love. Love brought Mary to the tomb. Love doesn't stop when someone dies. And it wasn't just her love for Jesus, but the love Jesus had for Mary drew her there. Paul would later testify that because Jesus died and rose again and is at the right hand of the Father, then absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Love drew Mary to Jesus and brought her back to that tomb. His love reaches out to you, to us today. Oh, how he loves you and me. His love never gives up. It's good news for us and for our loved ones. Another lesson we learn from Mary...

You can always find a way to serve. Mary followed Jesus with a heart to serve. I've already mentioned she gave of her financial resources to support Jesus and the disciples and Matthew tells us she and the other women traveled from Galilee with Jesus and the disciples to care for their needs. We assume she and the other ladies prepared meals and helped with the logistics of a traveling group. She and the other women were there at the crucifixion, at the burial and on Easter morning they had come to the tomb with additional spices to place on his body. Mary was determined to serve Jesus, in his life or in his death. Whether it was giving money or bringing spices, she would serve Jesus. She gets the next opportunity to serve him when he appears to her and tells her to go tell the disciples that he is risen and has spoken with her. She becomes the first to announce the good news: I have seen the Lord! He is risen! Get this: Whatever your place or season in life, you can find a way to serve the Lord, to honor him. Don't stop, don't quit. Serve him by sharing the good news: Christ is risen! There is a place and a way for you to serve. Take it from Mary. The other thing we learn from Mary is...

Jesus delights in using the unlikely. Jesus uses unlikely places, like Bethlehem and Nazareth, unlikely things like riding on a donkey's colt that had never been ridden before, and most of all, he uses unlikely people, like Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector (think Mitch McConnell and Nancy Pelosi on the same team) like Mary Magdalene, and like many of us. Jesus chose to use Mary Magdalene. Demon possessed when he found her, broken and messed up, but in spite of her past, her history, Jesus chose her to be the first person he appears to after the resurrection. It's one of the ways we know the story of the resurrection is true, because if the disciples were making this up, they would never have chosen a woman, and certainly not a woman with a sketchy past, to be the first eyewitness. The witness of a woman

was of little value in Judaism at that time. It shows us how different Jesus' values were from that of the world. Once again, he elevates the status of women by making Mary the first evangelist, the first bearer of the good news of the resurrection.

What an extraordinary woman and what important lessons for us today. Your past doesn't determine your future nor does it determine your usefulness in the kingdom of God. Like Mary, you may be an unlikely candidate to be used by God, but he delights in choosing and calling the unlikely. You may have a nefarious past, but he can use you, in spite of your past. Don't stop making yourself available to him and for his service. Like Mary, find a way to serve him, find a way to give to Him in whatever the season or circumstance of your life. He still has a plan, a purpose and a place for you. He hasn't given up on you. Remember, love never gives up. His love is still calling you, drawing you. Listen and respond to his call. Mary didn't recognize Jesus at first, at the tomb, not until he spoke her name. Listen. Is he calling your name today? Can you feel his love drawing you to himself? If so, like Mary Magdalene, say yes to his plan, his purpose, his call.