

"Encounters With Jesus" Mary Magdalene

It's early in the morning, Sunday, the first day of the week. The Gospel writer John describes what happened that morning at the tomb where Jesus' body was placed. "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" (John 20:1).

According to John's gospel, Mary Magdalene is the first one to go to the tomb. The other 3 gospels have slightly different details of that Easter morning, but in all 4 of the gospels, Mary Magdalene is among those first to reach the tomb.

Mary Magdalene. Who is she? Luke's gospel gives us some helpful information about Mary. "Soon afterward he (Jesus) went on through one town and village after another, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 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 ministered to them out of their own resources" (Luke 8:1-3).

We see here that she had been cured of demon possession. Seven demons had gone out of her. The "seven" suggests either the seriousness of her condition, or perhaps that it was long-lasting or recurring. We may ask, "How should we interpret demon possession?" Was it mental illness? Some physical ailment, like epilepsy or Tourette Syndrome? There's no evidence that this meant she was a prostitute, or that she had a badly blemished moral character. Or, were there actually demons inside her? However we interpret it, she was miraculously restored to wholeness!

It also says that she was part of a group of women who traveled with Jesus. Along with the 12 apostles, these women accompanied Jesus at times. Some had been healed by Jesus. They not only traveled with Jesus, they helped fund Jesus' ministry.

Mary Magdalene also was present at the crucifixion of Jesus. "Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and *Mary Magdalene*" (John 19:25).

She had come earlier to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. "The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments" (Luke 23:55-56). So, we can see that Mary Magdalene was a devoted follower of Jesus!

Let's go back to John's description of that first Easter morning. After going to the tomb while it was still dark, Mary finds that the stone covering the entrance has been rolled away, so she runs to tell Simon Peter and John (the gospel writer), "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:2). Peter and John respond by heading back to the tomb. John outruns Peter and gets to the tomb first. John peeks in, but doesn't go in. Peter arrives, goes right in, and sees the linen cloths that Jesus was wrapped in, but no corpse in them! John goes in and witnesses the same. It says they both *believed!* Then they go home.

But Mary Magdalene stays there, crying. As she bends over to look again inside the tomb she sees two angels there. They ask her, "Why are you crying?" She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13).

Then something amazing happens! Let John describe it. "When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' 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)" (John 20:14-16). This event is in that twilight zone, between this world and the next. *Jesus* appears to her, no longer dead! But she doesn't recognize Him! (Remember, it's probably dark yet, so that wouldn't help). It reminds me of when the Risen Christ appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they didn't recognize Him, even though He was walking along with them and talking to them. It was only when, later on, Jesus broke bread, that they were able to comprehend who it was!

Mary recognizes Him when He calls her name: "Mary". There is something powerful, and personal, when we hear Jesus call us by name! Jim...Sue...Jeff...Stacy.....Have you ever sensed Jesus calling you by name? Felt His love *for you*? Sensed His claim on your life? That's when salvation comes to us! When we move from having a *religion* to having a *relationship* with Jesus, the risen Savior and Lord of all creation!

I love how Jesus freed Mary Magdalene from a shattered, wasted life, and how she became a faithful friend and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ! And I think Mary's Easter morning encounter with Jesus can inspire us!

Mary believed when it was not easy to believe. All of the disciples, all of the family and friends of Jesus were devastated by His crucifixion. Most, if not all, of them who were convinced Jesus was the Messiah who would lead a revolt against Rome. Free the Jews from Roman oppression. Now He was dead. So much for that. But notice some things in this Easter narrative: verse 2, when Mary runs from the tomb to tell Peter and John that the body of Jesus was gone, she says, "They have taken **the Lord** out of the tomb." Not, they have taken *Jesus*. Not, they have taken *my friend*. But "the Lord". Verse 13, when the two angels at the tomb ask, "Why are you weeping?" she answers, "They have taken away **my Lord**." Mary was still convinced Jesus was Lord even though the bottom had fallen out of her life, and even though His death suggested He was no different than anyone else.

How about us? Can we still believe Jesus is Lord when life doesn't go our way? When clouds replace the sunshine that we knew? When there is very little evidence that God is good and is faithful to His promises? Can we still believe Jesus is Lord, and in control of all creation, when so much in the world is chaotic, and it seems that evil is far more powerful than love and goodness?

It's also not easy to believe in the climate of doubt and skepticism that marks out time and our

culture. It was much easier to believe when I was growing up than it has been ever since the 60' and 70's came along. Against all odds, Mary Magdalene still believed Jesus is Lord. Can we believe that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, but came back to life again, even though we can't prove it? Can we believe that we too, if we trust Him and follow Him, will rise again to a new life forever with Him in heaven?

This Easter morning narrative also shows that this was the second resurrection experience in which Mary was involved! Second? The first one was when Jesus freed Mary from the bondage she was in and gave her a new life! Romans 6:4 says, "Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

When we surrender our lives to Christ, we experience a new quality of life, a new relationship with God! The Bible has a number of ways of describing this change: It is being born again (John 3:3). Passing from death to life (John 5:24 1 John 3:14). Becoming a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Coming out of darkness and walking in the light (1 John 1:7).

The second chapter of Ephesians describes how we can be resurrected to a new quality of life by putting our faith in Christ: "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:1-6). Notice, we were "*dead* in our sins" (verse 1). We were by nature "*children of wrath, like everyone else*" (verse 3). It goes on to say God made us "*alive together with Christ*", and "*raised us up*" (verses 5-6).

When we think of resurrection, we most often think of being resurrected after we die physically – but a *spiritual* resurrection takes place when we come to Christ – our heart is changed, our life is changed! We who were dead in our sins can become alive in Christ!

Illust. There is a scene in *The Chosen* that I just love. It pictures Nicodemus, the Pharisee, and Mary Magdalene. Nicodemus tried to exorcise the demons in Mary Magdalene, but it didn't work. Now he sees Mary free, and sane, and whole, and wonders how, and who did it. Mary is reluctant to talk about it, but does. I love what *The Chosen* has Mary say: "He called me by name, 'Mary', and He said, 'I am His'.....here is the one thing I can tell you. I was one way, and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened to me in-between was Him."

Today is Easter Sunday, and we're here to celebrate the possibility of two resurrections! The new life we can have in Christ here and now, and our resurrection after death.

Danielle Strickland describes herself as a spiritual leader, justice advocate, communicator, and peacemaker. Her latest book is entitled "The Other Side of Hope" and it tells her own story.

Danielle shares about stealing her first car at the age of 12 and how her uncle started giving her vodka in her Sprite at the age of 11. She writes: “I wanted to be bad. I didn’t want the consequences of my actions, but I also didn’t really mind them that much. I became drug-addicted, cold-hearted, and completely out of control.

That brought me to a day in court for over twelve charges. I had stolen another car. I had led the police in a high-speed chase around the city. I was with my partner who I had been forbidden to see by court order. I had robbed a store and injured the owner in an escape. I had damaged property. I had drugs on me and was high as a kite. The court wanted to try me as an adult or sentence me to the maximum for a young person – three years in a maximum-security prison.

On the inside, it did not matter to me if I lived or died. I was not at all remorseful. As the court was deciding if we would be released or held, the plaintiff called forward the man whose car we had stolen. His name happened to be Mr. Rogers. And even though my friend and I were handcuffed and facing jail time, we could not stop laughing. I mean seriously – Mr. Rogers! My friend started singing “It’s a terrible day in the neighborhood.”

They remanded me to prison because they believed I was a threat to society. They were right. Soon, I was in a holding cell in the basement of City Hall in downtown Toronto. But then the guard let in a woman named Joyce Ellery, a member of my parent’s church. I rolled my eyes and cursed under my breath. I was not interested in the lecture or the invitation to change my ways. I couldn’t take the perpetual disappointment of my religious upbringing. Joyce entered my cell and handed me a lawyer’s card – which is the kind of practical Christianity that brings tears to my eyes. And then she did something I did not expect. She hugged me. She wrapped her warm arms around my cold-hearted, drug-infused, bristling body. And what she didn’t do spoke volumes. She didn’t lecture me. She didn’t scold me. She didn’t even advise me. She whispered in my ear while hugging my resistant teenage frame: “I love you.” That’s it. That’s all. That’s the whole thing. Then she nodded at the guard, who promptly opened the door for her to leave.

I was dumbfounded. But when that cell door closed, I heard the bang of finality. I was alone. I was stuck. I was lost. And then the most wonderful thing happened. Jesus showed up. Was it a vision? A feeling? I have no idea. Here is all I know: Jesus showed up. I felt him. I sensed him. I heard him. I experienced him. Jesus came with his arms open and wrapped me in his love. He whispered in my ear, “I love you.”

And all the fear and pain, and shame and guilt, and hardness and badness started to loosen and leave, and I felt loved. Unconditionally loved. It was like someone turned on a light inside of me and I could finally see that the place I was in was not good. That I didn’t belong there.

That encounter with Jesus did something that can never be undone. However, it did not make me magically better. Love made me alive, but it still left me human. I was still addicted to drugs. I was still in prison. I was still stuck in cycles of thinking and living that would be very difficult to break. I was still captive to a lot of pain buried deep inside that would take decades to uncover and bury. But I was alive, I could feel, I could see, and I had hope. I’m so thankful for Joyce.

And Jesus. And even Mr. Rogers. For that day truly was the most terrible, wonderful, beautiful day in the neighborhood."

Perhaps Danielle is like a modern Mary Magdalene, controlled by her own demons. But you say, I'm not like that. I'm not that bad. But don't we all have our own demons we fight? Our own weaknesses? Our own shortcomings and sins?

Jesus came to give us a new life - fresh starts, new beginnings. And a life in Him and a relationship with Him that will never end – not even after we die! That's the message of Easter! That's the Good News of the gospel!

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Community United Methodist Church
March 31, 2024

