

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the Feast of Mary of Magdala
Celebrated by Our Community on Aug. 23, 2014

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Reflections on
Song of Songs 3:1-4; Lk 23:54-24:12; Gospel of Mary 5:1-9

Blessed are you that did not waver at the sight of me. That is what Jesus told Mary of Magdala in the post-resurrection vision reported by Mary herself to the gathered disciples, in *The Gospel of Mary*. Mary is the fearless one in this ancient, only recently recovered story. This Coptic (Egyptian) version was buried away and disappeared after the fifth or sixth century. Apparently Mary had become a dangerous memory to the early Christian churches.

We know what happened in the western church: Pope Gregory I, who died in 604 AD, preached about Mary as a repentant prostitute. He did this by confusing her with two other women: an anonymous repentant sinner who anointed Jesus's feet with her tears, and Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha and Lazarus), who anointed Jesus's head with oil. This conflation set in motion a totally distorted visual and literary tradition. All of this needs to be counteracted with new images, poems, and reflections (such as those we heard and saw today!)

Even her name, *Mary of Magdala*, suggests why this happened. She is not "Mary, wife of Clopas" (or another man), or "Mary Mother of James" (or someone else), or even "Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha," despite Pope Gregory's confusion. She is *Mary of Magdala*, Magdala being the name of a town. It's like saying Simon of Cyrene, or Joseph of Arimathea. In the ancient world, what could you do with a woman without a male protector? Well, if you can't send a woman home to her family, Gregory might have wondered, where can you appropriately put her? A convent, of course, or at least a her-

mit's cell, where she can live a life of penance and be a good example to others. That was a category Gregory could understand!

What we know of Jesus and the people around him comes to us filtered through the minds and memories of the church communities that gathered in his name. These churches sought to conform their lives to his example and teaching, and to spread his message in a way that their hearers could receive it. Part of this meant avoiding any whiff of scandal.

But the plain fact of the matter is that you can't tell the story of Jesus without the women, especially Mary of Magdala. Jesus had deep and abiding friendships with women. He let them sit at his feet and listen to him. He engaged in discussions with them, even sparring with them on occasion: the Canaanite woman's clever comeback, when he showed his reluctance to help her, won not only his respect, but also a cure for her daughter.

Jesus hung out with women, and his reputation suffered as a result. On numerous occasions the Pharisees, acting like the purity police, looked over the mixed-sex crowds around Jesus and sniffed that he associated with prostitutes and tax collectors. Who knows? Perhaps some of the women had been forced to sell their bodies, just as some of the men may have sought to make their way by becoming tax collectors. But Jesus viewed them all as individuals, welcoming their company and refusing to dismiss anyone with a label.

Some women, including Mary of Magdala, even traveled with Jesus. This did not mean

that they were camp followers (though I'm sure fault-finders would have assumed so), nor were they all petitioners. They were disciples in their own right, participants in his mission, providing for the group out of their own resources, as the evangelist Luke tells us.

Most important of all, you cannot tell the story of Jesus's death and burial, and the finding of the empty tomb, without the women because they were the ones who witnessed all of it. The male disciples had fled after Jesus's arrest in Gethsemane. Even Peter, who was brave enough to follow Jesus and his guards as far as Caiaphas's house, abandoned him there, after denying that he knew him. So it was the women who followed Jesus to the excruciating experience of Golgotha, seeking to keep him company and hoping to find some meaning in this awful event.

It was the women who watched as Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (and therefore *not* a disciple), had the body taken down from the cross and hastily buried, so as not to violate the Sabbath. So it was the women who knew where Jesus was buried, and it was *they* who returned as soon as possible – after a long night, a day of Sabbath, and another long night – hoping to complete the burial in a more dignified fashion. Thus it was *they* who were the first to hear the astonishing news that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

All four of our canonical gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – name Mary of Magdala as one of the women who came to the empty tomb. Mark, Matthew, and Luke have several women show up, where they receive a vision of angels telling them the news. But the gospel of John has a more personal account. Mary arrives alone at the tomb and finds it empty; there are no angels – John's version is on a purely human scale. Mary then runs to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple. The two men race to the tomb and

find it just as she had said. The Beloved Disciple (*not* Peter!) peers in and believes, and the two men leave. Mary has evidently followed behind. As she stands weeping at the empty tomb, she encounters a man she thinks is a gardener, until he calls her name and she recognizes Jesus. He then *sends* her, the first witness to his resurrection, to announce the good news to the others. This is what makes her “the apostle to the apostles.” (The word “Apostle” means “one who is sent.”)

I find it intriguing that John gives a different slant, almost like a little corrective touch, to the resurrection story of Mark, Matthew and Luke. His account highlights the roles of Mary and the mysterious “Beloved Disciple,” the ones who show the greatest love. They are the most in tune with Jesus, and therefore are the first to understand what has happened.

In the newly found *Gospel of Mary* fragment we have regained access to another memory. It is as though, instead of poring through our own family archive, we have discovered something in the archives of some distant cousins—the Coptic church of ancient Egypt.

What does it tell us? Large chunks of the account are missing, so we do not know whether or not the original had indications of when and where this story takes place. It seems likely, though, that it corresponds to the scenes in both John's and Luke's gospels when Jesus appears to his gathered disciples later in the day of Easter Sunday. There are a number of interestingly different perspectives, however.

First, Mary is specifically named as being not only present at the gathering, but central. John's version doesn't give any indications about how many are there, but in Luke's version of the scene the group is fairly large: Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus have returned with their report of having seen Jesus, and they find “the disciples *and their companions*” gathered together.

er. So Mary very well could have been there, even though no one specific is named.

Secondly, though there is plenty of fear in the room in all these accounts, Mary alone, in the Coptic version, is not afraid. In John's account, the door is locked "for fear of the religious authorities." In Luke's story, Jesus appears right after Cleopas has made his report about seeing Jesus, but the group, nonetheless, is terrified at Jesus' appearance, because they think they are seeing a ghost. As you may remember, Jesus allays their fears by eating a piece of fish in their presence. I can't help wondering whether Jesus's words to Mary in today's reading, *Blessed are you that did not waver at the sight of me*, is meant to counteract this account of the ghost-fearing group in Luke's gospel!

This does raise an interesting question: How did the early followers of Jesus move from fear to empowerment? The gospels really don't tell us, since they end at this point, though Luke, at least, continues the story in his second volume, *The Book of Acts*, suggesting that it was the coming of the Holy Spirit on the fortieth day that made the difference.

In the Gospel of Mary we hear a different, more human, version of this difficult transition from fear to empowerment. It is Mary's voice, and hers alone, that speaks not of fear but of encouragement: *His grace will be entirely with you . . . for he has prepared us and made us into strong people*. "We are going to be all right," she proclaims, in effect. Note the "us"—we, all of us, male and female—are in this church and in this mission together.

Where did Mary's courage and conviction come from? Perhaps from her many months of observing Jesus on the road, participating in his mission, seeing how he was preparing

his followers, making them into "strong people."

Perhaps it came from her own history of deep suffering, and from having had "seven demons" expelled from her by Jesus. We do not know what those "demons" were. The "demons" Jesus expelled during his life were responsible for not only psychological problems, but also muteness, blindness, epilepsy, and even osteoporosis (the "bent-over" woman)! The number seven may indicate that her afflictions, before she met Jesus, were numerous and severe.

Perhaps most of all her extraordinary strength came from having accompanied Jesus to the depths, as she watched him die a slow and tormented death; from having lain awake through the long nights between Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning, seeking the one she loved, like the bride in our first reading from the Song of Songs—and then, against all reasonable hope, finding him once again. She had lived the Easter mystery more deeply and more immediately than anyone else, and she was transformed by it.

In the Gospel of Mary, Peter, that symbol of male leadership, recognizes the very special relationship that linked Mary to Jesus. He defers to her superior understanding, asking for her wisdom. This is true leadership! One could wish that the successors of Peter, and the institutional structures that surround (and hem in) our hierarchy, would do likewise; that they would open their eyes to the gifts of all, women and laity included, and ask them for the wisdom they can offer from their lived experience of Jesus.

This may not happen anytime soon, but in the meantime we can take comfort and courage from Mary of Magdala, who knew that we have been, and are being, *forged into strong people*, even if this happens over the course of a long, long night.