

“Witness to Redemption”

Isaiah 25:6-9

John 20:1-18

Last week we talked about being one of those who stayed with Jesus during his horrific suffering, even as everyone else fled. I mentioned 3 in specific— the Apostle John, Mary mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene. This morning, on the day of resurrection, I want to focus in on the amazing and underplayed story of Mary Magdalene. Sit back and imagine this with me.

“As the sun dipped below the horizon on that fateful Friday, Golgotha stood in stark silhouette against the darkening sky. The small assembled crowd murmured, their eyes fixed on the three crosses on top of the hill. Mary Magdalene, her heart heavy with grief-- and sick to her stomach at what she had just witnessed---stood near the foot of the middle cross. She had followed Jesus faithfully, witnessing His miracles, hearing His teachings, and experiencing His boundless love. Now, as He hung there, bloodied and broken, she clung to her faith.

This woman, Mary Magdalene was not just a distant observer. She was close enough to see the agony etched on Jesus’ face, to hear His labored breaths. She could almost feel the earth tremble as He breathed His last. Even as her heart was full of grief, while others fled in fear, she remained—a witness to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. In that moment, she embodied the anguish felt by humanity, and Mary Magdalene became a living testament to the depth of Christ’s sacrifice.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the mother of James and Salome made their way to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. A large stone had been rolled across the entrance, sealing His fate—or so it seemed. She carried spices to anoint His body, her tears blurring her vision. But when she arrived, to her surprise she found the tomb was empty.

Panic surged within her. Had they taken Him away? Had she lost Him again? Her presence at the tomb bridges the gap between despair and hope, between death and life.

In her distress, Mary Magdalene encounters two angels sitting where Jesus had been laid. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” the messengers asked. “He is not here; He has risen!” The words echoed through her soul, instantly brightening the darkness.

In the quiet of the garden, she turned to find Jesus standing there, though she did not recognize him at first. She mistook Him for the gardener. “Sir,” she implored, “if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him.” Jesus spoke her name—just one word, “Mary.” The risen Christ stood before her, scars and all. And Mary recognized him, then immediately ran to tell the disciples, her voice breaking and her heart bursting with joy: “I have seen the Lord!” In doing so, Mary became the first to proclaim the resurrection. She was the first evangelist.”

Think about it! This was a magic moment in time when only one person in the entire world, one person walking planet Earth, knew the good news of “He’s alive!” This was the ultimate “breaking news” that would forever change the course of human history. For that brief, sacred instant, this one person was the whole Church. The entire Jesus story hinged on what that one person would do with this new found truth. Would she cherish it and keep it to herself? Or would she share it with others, effectively starting the church of Jesus Christ. We all know the rest of the story, don’t we? She ran to the others, as fast as she could crying, “HE IS ALIVE!” And we are still sharing her story today.

Mary Magdalene’s witness to the redemption transcends all time and cultures. Her presence at the empty tomb transformed her into an evangelist of resurrection joy. She reminds us that the risen Christ is not confined to an ancient tomb. He is risen! He walks among us, inviting us to share in His victory over death. Mary Magdalene’s witness challenges us to proclaim the good news with her same excitement and conviction.

She reminds us that our faith is not blind; it is rooted in personal experience. She witnessed the crucifixion firsthand, touched the empty tomb, and came face-to-face with the risen Christ. Her testimony embraces the hope that death does not have the final say, that redemption is possible, and that love conquers all.

This Mary, also known as Magdala, which means “Strong Tower” in Aramaic, was there when all the other disciples fled. She stood firm in her faith when all others doubted. And think about this: **All four gospels are unanimous** that Mary of Magdala was the primary witness to all three of these events – the Crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus. She stayed and suffered when others ran and wavered. This was all at a time when women were unvalued and, more than that, not to be trusted.

Mary Magdalene was a woman who, again according to all four gospels, traveled with Jesus as one of his followers. Her story is complex. She is mentioned by name at least a dozen times in the gospels, more than many of the disciples and more than any other woman in the gospels, other than Jesus's family.

Luke's gospel lists Mary Magdalene as one of the women who traveled with Jesus and helped support his ministry "out of their resources", indicating she was probably somewhat wealthy. That same passage also states that seven demons had been driven out of her, a statement which is repeated in Mark's gospel. **All four gospels identify her**, either alone or as a member of a larger group of women, as the first to witness the empty tomb and, either alone or as a member of a group, the first to witness Jesus's resurrection.

Despite her portrayal by many as a prostitute, Mary Magdalene is considered to be a saint by the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran denominations. Pope Francis even referred to her as the "Apostle of the apostles".

Many biblical scholars believe that Mary Magdalene has been mistakenly maligned throughout history. It is important to note that nowhere in any

of the four gospels is there any statement that implies Mary to be a repentant prostitute or in any way notable for a sinful way of life. It is believed that in the 6th century, Mary Magdalene was confused with Mary of Bethany, the "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke's gospel. This began a widespread belief that Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute or promiscuous woman. Through history, many more exaggerated tales of Mary Magdalene as a sinful woman emerged, building up the controversy. Many attempts have been made to clear her name, but the view of her as a former prostitute has continued in popular culture.

And it doesn't help that very little more is known about her life. Mary Magdalene left behind no known writings of her own. And though she was mentioned often in the gospels, she was never mentioned in any of Paul's letters, or other epistles.

But above all else, I think that Mary teaches us that when we hold fast to our faith, when we bear witness to the truth, we become part of the beautiful, unbreakable fabric that tells the story of redemption and hope.

And like the much-maligned Mary Magdalene, each one of us, no matter how insignificant or marginalized, has been entrusted with a truth that can change lives. We may find ourselves standing alone in the face of doubt, fear, and opposition, wondering if our faith will make a difference. We may feel like a solitary voice, but our words and actions have the power to bring change, to bring comfort, and to lead others to our Savior.

Mary Magdalene's story is a critical part of the fabric of Easter morning—a witness to suffering, to the empty tomb, and finally to the joy of the resurrection. As we celebrate this Easter, maybe it's time to embrace her legacy. May we echo her words: "I have seen the Lord!" For in that encounter lies our greatest joy—the risen Christ who invites us all into eternal life in a world hungry for hope.

Amen.