

Christ Church + Washington Parish | The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Feast of Mary Magdalene | July 22nd, 2018
John 20:1-2, 11-20

Alleluia. The Lord is Risen (Congregation responds by rote: The Lord is Risen Indeed, Alleluia)

Church nerds. It's an Easter reading, so I couldn't help myself.

Typically when we read this passage, the focus is on Jesus' resurrection, rightfully so. But today the passage is chosen for its depiction of the loyal disciple, later made saint, Mary Magdalene who we commemorate today. The gospels are unanimous on the presence and importance of Mary Magdalene. She was at the foot of the cross, the opening of the tomb, and the first that the resurrected Jesus appeared to in at least three out of four gospels. Wherever she's listed in Scripture, she's listed first. The gospel of Luke gives us the only background information on her - that she had been cured of 7 demons and was one of several women who were steady followers of Jesus. Now whatever those 7 demons were we don't know but 7 indicates that she was very, very sick with symptoms they didn't understand. She got her name likely from her hometown Magdala, a prosperous trade center near the sea of Galilee. Since there were so many Marys, she was probably known as Mary, the one from Magdala, who used to be super sick with those 7 demons til she was healed.

But she becomes famous in the Christian story for a completely different reason. She is an unflinching witness - to the suffering at the cross, the grief at the tomb, and the mystical resurrection. She is the only disciple at all 3 in 3 out of 4 gospel accounts. Her other companions are mainly women, the apostles, the 11 chosen men, the ones who will become the first leaders of the church - they are all hiding together in the upper room. But not Mary Magdalene. Faithful and fearless, she shows up, and she carries the news of the risen Lord to the apostles hiding in the upper room. She is the one they first hear that Jesus has risen from. She is the one who gets them to unlock the doors to the room, to their hearts, to the ministry before them. No wonder they called Mary Magdalene in the Eastern church - the apostle to the apostles.

Unfortunately the church in the long-term focused in on another aspect of Mary Magdalene. Less entranced by her presence at the cross, the tomb, and the first one to declare Jesus risen, the church in later years gets really focused on those 7 demons. It can be traced back to a sermon that Pope Gregory gave on Mary Magdalene when he conflates several other stories about unnamed women and teaches that she is actually a really bad sinner, and what were really bad sinners who were women - prostitutes. Men could sin in all kinds of ways; women's sins were assumed sexual. Thus began Mary Magdalene becoming synonymous with prostitute, redeemed sinner who is so thankful to Jesus for saving her that she follows him around loyally, which isn't a bad thing, but it's a far cry from unflinching witness at the cross, servant of Jesus even beyond death, preacher of the good news of the resurrection and apostle to the apostles.

She isn't the only one who falls victim to the misogynistic rewrite. Many of you grew up in religious traditions that said women could not be priests or pastors. Their reasoning often had to do with the leadership in the early Church. But women's leadership abounded in the early church. The women at the cross, the women at the tomb, and all the women who helped the church grow. In the passage that we read from Romans, Paul thanks a number of people for their help in the mission and ministry. 1/3rd of the people he names are women. He calls several of them out in particular for their great service to the church. I know I was taught in school that women were simply leaders because they were in charge of the home and the church met in homes. But actually these women were more than lending their homes. They were travelling on behalf on the ministry, they were financing the ministry, they were serving right alongside the men. Paul knew it, and so did everybody else, and there wasn't a lot of conflict about it. It actually wasn't particularly odd for the time. It isn't until the church becomes more institutionalized that the women's leadership was pushed out, which had to do with both cultural reasons and the old-tried-and-true way to consolidate power is to eliminate a portion of your competition.

Church is not the only place that de-values women and has historically pushed them to the side. The powerful choose how to tell the story - race, class, political persuasion, gender, all become influencers to what and whose story is told. But we live in the age of information. And we all have the power to find the stories that haven't been on center stage and to bring them to the forefront. Each of the women mentioned in the litany are stories worthy of knowing as part of core Christian history. This service came about because on Mother's Day two years ago the readings assigned for day were one of those John passages that referred to God as father probably fifteen times. It just happened that it lined up that way, but it was a powerful reminder that the dominant narrative in Scripture and the church privileges the male-dominant perspective. But we have the power to look at things differently; we have the power to decide to elevate stories that were long sidelined, we have the power to be attentive to voices we have been culturally trained to hear differently, we have the power to be aware of our implicit bias and to counter it intentionally. We have the power to use expansive language, not to the exclusion of the father imagery of God, but to the inclusion of broader imagery that lets us expand our vision of God. By expanding the stories and imagery we tell to include the ones passed over for whatever reason, allows us to hear the gospel in new and potentially relevant ways.

What do we hear and see in Mary Magdalene today? I think we witness an important moment in one of the most mature disciples' life. For the twelve apostles, the New Testament is a time of maturing and growth - we watch them seek understanding and volley for power in the Jesus movement. But we don't see that in Mary Magdalene. We see an already mature person of faith. One who doesn't turn away from tragedy or deny it or question it - one who walks through it. She accepts loss, grieves it as she stands at the cross and visits the grave. She stays present at a time when many of the disciples fled, physically and emotionally, but she stays. And when the risen Jesus appears, she accepts that too - she celebrates new life, grabs hold of it, and then lets it go. All in a span of 3 days. You can't do that unless you are a pretty spiritually mature person. You can't do that unless you have faith that God is with you and will see you through. You can't do that unless you trust that God works in ways you don't understand and not

even the greatest loss in the world can keep God from bringing new life from the grave. That confidence, that faith is a part of her in a way that it isn't yet with the 12 apostles. They'll get there, but they aren't there yet.

I wonder what happens to Mary Magdalene. To be honest, I don't think she was prominent in the early church, at least not more than a few years after Jesus death. She doesn't appear in the book of Acts, the story of the early church, even though the author of Acts included her prominently in the gospel of Luke. Paul never mentions her in his letters though he mentions plenty of other women and men in ministry. Some of the non-canonical gospels, those that didn't make it into the Bible, and were written in the 2nd and 3rd century, have her fighting with Peter and the other apostles and them resenting her special relationship with Jesus, but I'm guessing that is just a response to the same question I have - what happened to Mary Magdalene, unflinching witness, faithful servant, apostle to the apostles?

Maybe she went home. This wasn't a woman caught up in who is right or who is wrong; she's not a visionary; she wasn't trying to make a name for herself - building the early church probably wasn't a ministry she was all that interested in or called to. Which is okay, because there is always a need for those who are able to walk the road of loss and life alongside someone. And Mary could do that. She knew how to hold the faith that somehow God would show up in this, and until God did, she would be there. She is the patron saint of the family member sitting at a loved one's deathbed, waiting, holding a hand, wetting the lips. She is the patron saint of the hopeless situation, dreams buried, she still shows up and lights a candle. She is the patron saint of the joy when the ground shakes and something shifts and new life erupts. She is the patron saint of accepting life as it is and staying engaged in it whether it's grief or joy. She can carry it all because she knows what it is like to be close to God and to be far away, and she know that there is an invisible line connecting those two things if only one is willing to stand near and hold on until they feel the tug of presence.