

May 21, 2017 “Mary Magdalene” John 20:10—18

Mary Magdalene. That name simply means that she was named Mary and she was from the town of Magdala. One of the new sites we visited in March when we were in Israel for the second time, was the newly unearthed site of Magdala. We saw new buildings, including a worship center dedicated to the women of the New Testament. We saw ancient Mosaics. We saw a basement floor which was once part of the Roman Road system, important in our time because Jesus walked on this piece of the ancient road.

Matthew 15:39 tells us that Jesus went to the shores of Magdala (KJV), in our newer translations it is easy to miss because the translators use the name Magadan. The importance of Magdala in the Roman Empire is easily overlooked. It was a fish processing city. This is where Peter and the other fishermen who were part of the group we call the 12 disciples would have brought their harvests from the Sea of Galilee for sale. It was a town built on the Sea of Galilee to be close to that resource. In Magdala the fish (tilapia for the most part) were salted and then shipped all over the Roman Empire by those marvelous Roman Roads.

Here is a summary of what we know for sure about Mary Magdalene. This summary is based on Gospel references where she is actually named. Matthew tells us in chapter 27 of

2.

his account that she was one of the women who followed Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in order to know the location of the tomb where Jesus was buried. Mark 15 tells us she was at the crucifixion. She witnessed the moment of Jesus death. She heard the centurion say, "Surely this man was the Son of God." Luke 8:2 tells us she was one of a group of women healed by Jesus, and out of whom demons were cast...in her case seven demons. Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 and John 20 tell us she was one of the three women who went to the tomb Easter morning to anoint Jesus body with spices. They found the stone rolled away. They saw an angel. They were told Jesus was risen. They told the disciples as they were instructed to do by the angel.

John also tells us the episode I read to you this morning. It is singularly important for a number of reasons. John tells us that he and Peter ran to the tomb and saw that it was empty. They returned home. The other women including Jesus mother, have returned home. She was weeping inconsolably. She saw the angels in the tomb. They asked her why she was weeping. She specifically said, "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have put HIM." She turned around and found herself in the presence of our risen Lord. She did not recognize HIM. She pleaded for

3.

knowledge of where the body had been taken. It was when Jesus called her by name that she realized who HE was. She exclaimed in Aramaic, “Raboni!” In Hebrew the word would have been Rabi. Both titles mean teacher.

It is obvious from the words of Jesus that she seized hold of HIM. HE asked her to release HIM because HE had not yet returned to the Father. He instructs her to tell the disciples, and here for the first time Jesus calls them HIS brothers. He says, “tell them I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” And John said she did just that.

I said these details are important. In the first place we are told by John so that there can be no confusion on this reality, she is the first person to see the risen Lord. Before Cleopas and Luke, before the gathering of disciples in the upper room, before Peter, Mary Magdalene saw Jesus risen from the dead. In a world where women are not credible witnesses to men, and therefore their testimony can be dismissed....this is world altering.

Second detail. We have seen how the various Gospel writers each make it plain that when the disciples were told of the resurrection of Jesus, they say, they did not believe it. Mary Magdalene accepts the word that is given. She obeys the word that is given. She goes and tells the disciples that she has

4.

seen the Lord. And they dismiss her witness, or at very least do not accept it, buy it...you can use numbers of words, but it all comes down to this. Mary saw. Mary heard. Mary believed. And she acted faithfully. There are commentaries that refer to Mary Magdalene as the apostle to the disciples. If there are discrepancies in the accounts...a point I do not recognize by the way...this is clear: Mary Magdalene by the will of God was the first to see the risen Christ. And her response to HIS instructions, was obedient action.

Living as we do, in an age where our denomination ordains women to ministry and the ministry of eldership, I can only say as a man...it is humbling that it took more than 19 and a half centuries to get there. And it is even more humbling given the church's taking so long to recognize the leadership women could offer...that God found and finds other ways to raise up women of faith to ministry where the church is unable to bring itself to such recognition. At the same time we need to notice and underline how each of the Gospel writers found a way to include Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Salome in their telling of the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection while admitting their difficulty in believing that Jesus rose from the dead on that marvelous Sunday morning. Mary from Madgala is one of the reasons we recognize the

5.

leadership of women as we do in our time, and I insist on saying this in addition. The church continues to make it harder for women in ministry than it does for men.

And wouldn't you know it. In our time, writers of fiction continue to try and diminish the importance of Mary Magdalene as portrayed in the Gospel. And they do so by creating a fictional love story between Jesus and this woman that cannot be found in any way in the Scriptures or the facts of history.

Third detail. This singular witness about Mary Magdalene as a witness of the resurrection and the first witness...in completely in line with the role of women in the history of faith and faithfulness to God as we find it told in whole of Scripture. There are unique stories of faithful women in the Old Testament. God calls those whom HE will call to HIS service in HIS time. There are stories and references to women in leadership in the church in the balance of the New Testament beyond the Gospel accounts. Why? Because the Lord will call who HE chooses to call to serve and lead HIS people in unique circumstances and HIS time.

Jesus healed Mary Magdalene. He set her free of the evil spirits that had found a home in her life. In response she served Jesus in every way she had opportunity. Being a

6.

member of the crowd that followed HIM. Her vigil at the cross, which included standing with HIS mother as she suffered through the death of her first born. And of course, at the open tomb. She will always have a place in the Easter story...as a faithful, compassionate and committed witness.

Let us pray....

Lord Jesus we thank you for the story of Mary Magdalene. Her faith inspires us. Her concern, and the level of her concern, her courage, they humble us. Make her witness to us mighty in the power of your Spirit. In Jesus name we pray.
Amen