

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene is one of my favorite heroines in the Bible. But I didn't choose her for my saint today because of favoritism. I have to confess I chose Mary because I used this passage for my Greek exegesis paper last fall. I have a good reason for doubling up, though. This is the first time I've preached from a pulpit and having already studied Mary has helped relieve some of my anxieties.

What comes to mind for you with the mention of Mary Magdalene? Some of you may remember the most recent publicity surrounding Mary in the story and motion picture *The DaVinci Code* written by Dan Brown. Dan Brown's story is a web of intrigue, conspiracy and adventure. It revolves around the idea that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and had a child. The heroine Sophia Neveu turns out to be the descendant of that child. The Catholic Church wants to destroy Sophia and the Templar Knights (the ones who pledge to protect the lineage of Mary and Jesus) to end the rumors about an heir. In the *DaVinci Code* it was damaging to the church that there would even be

such an heir and they had spent centuries secretly looking for the heir in order to destroy it. Evidently, there was a fear in the church of losing authority or power concerning the stories about Jesus and Mary. Maybe they would make him less divine if they were true. If you remember, when the book and the movie hit the market, there was a lot of controversy about it. The present day church didn't appreciate the tale any more than the Church in the story did. The most interesting thing about the story is that it's not a new one. It has been circulating for centuries and resurfaces from time to time into the public consciousness, usually to the dismay of the church. There is no proof that Jesus and Mary were married, so I think that whether or not they were is not an issue. It's just an interesting story.

If the DaVinci Code doesn't come to mind for you at the mention of Mary Magdalene, then you may remember the rumor that she is a prostitute. She received this title in the sixth century when Pope Gregory I preached that Mary Magdalene was the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. This particular woman in Luke is introduced as a

sinner and is not named. And, of course if a woman is a sinner, she must be a prostitute. What other sin would a woman commit? Luke does name Mary Magdalene later among the women who followed Jesus. So, as meticulous as Luke is, it seems unlikely that he would not have named Mary as the woman who anointed Jesus, if it was her. Well, Mary Magdalene has received a lot of attention over the years as the prostitute. Artists depict her as a fallen woman by not covering her head. In most Christian art, Mary Magdalene is the only woman that doesn't have a head scarf. There are conspiracy theories that the church was trying to defame Mary for one reason or another. But I think that the best explanation for Mary's bad reputation is that it made it easier to explain who the unknown women in the New Testament were. Pope Gregory combined the woman who anointed Jesus, Mary of Bethany (Lazarus and Martha's sister) and the woman brought to Jesus to be stoned into the person of Mary Magdalene. Scholars now have little reason to agree with Pope Gregory, but the rumor persists.

Conspiracy theories, rumors of prostitution, Jesus' wife – all mythical publicity for Mary Magdalene. There is no scriptural proof for these myths but they have made and do make for great art and fantastic stories.

Now, let's look at what we do know from scripture about Mary Magdalene. First of all she is one of the few women named in the New Testament and she is identified by the place she came from. Magdala. Magdala is a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee North of Tiberius and little south of Capernaum. It stands to reason that she would come across Jesus, since he did most of his ministry in Galilee.

Second, there are lots of Marys in the New Testament and some are only identified as "the other Mary." Others are identified by the names of their sons or husbands. Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the mother of James the Less, Mary the wife of Clopas. By being identified with the town she is from seems to indicate that Mary Magdalene was unmarried and had no sons.

Third, she is introduced in Luke as a one of the women who followed Jesus along with the twelve disciples. She wasn't just a groupie, she was considered an intimate follower of Jesus, just like the men.

And finally, Jesus cured her of seven demons, and she is included in the ones who contributed to Jesus' ministry from her own resources.

Mary Magdalene is witness to the burial of Jesus in three of the four gospels, and she is present at the crucifixion and the resurrection in all four gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Mary is with at least one other woman when she comes to the tomb. Only in John is she by herself.

Which brings us to today's scripture. This is a familiar Easter story. Mary goes to the tomb to mourn Jesus' death and anoint the body. She finds it's not there and is frantic about finding it until Jesus reveals himself. He is alive!

Before the story gets to Mary at tomb though, she is walking to the tomb in the morning, while it is still dark, only to find that the tomb has been tampered with. Talk about creepy, can you

imagine? Walking to a graveyard – alone – in the early morning – while it's still dark – only to find that the grave you've come to visit is open? The scripture says she ran to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and I can't blame her. The two of them race to the tomb, inspect its contents and return home, leaving Mary at the tomb alone.

She is standing outside the tomb weeping. This isn't a quiet cry though. She is really letting it out – wailing – which is the custom of the time in Judea for mourning. She finally looks into the tomb and sees the angels who ask her "Woman, why are you weeping?" This is when we find out that she is more frustrated about the missing body because she says, "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him."

As she turns from looking into the tomb she sees a figure who asks her the same thing that the angels asked her. "Woman, why are you weeping?" She confuses this person with the gardener and asks where the body is. She is so consumed with finding the body, she can't focus. "Why are you weeping?" they asked her. "There isn't any reason to be mourning."

Now, it could concern us that she doesn't recognize Jesus, but I think there is a perfectly reasonable explanation. He may have changed in some way and looked different. Actually, he did change. After all, she thinks he's dead, and this person in front of her isn't dead.

It may have something to do with the light. She just turned from looking into the tomb – a dark tomb – and is now looking into the light. She may be temporarily blinded.

Perhaps the sun is rising behind him and she only sees a silhouette.

Maybe John is sending us back to Jesus' "I am the light of the world" speech in chapter 8.

Either way she doesn't recognize him by sight. But listen to the next thing that Jesus says to her – Mary. She recognizes him by sound of her name. The recognition of her name is another one of John's flashbacks. He wants us to remember that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The sheep recognize the good shepherd's voice and the good shepherd knows his sheep by name. After Jesus says her name the whole atmosphere of the story changes.

No more weeping, no more darkness, no more frustration.

Mary's response is immediate, and in surprise and delight she

reaches out to hug his neck. Wouldn't we do the same thing?

Reach out to hug someone we recognize and haven't seen for a while.

He stops her though and gives her a very important mission.

"Go tell my brothers, 'I am ascending to my Father and your

Father, to my God and your God.'" Go tell the disciples . . . the

most important word in this command is *go*.

When Abraham is called to follow God he is told – go. Go to the land I will show you . . . , When Moses is called to free the

Hebrew slaves in Egypt he is told – go. Go tell Pharaoh to let my people go. Isaiah is told – go. Go and say to the people

When Jesus gives the great commission, there it is again – go.

Go and make disciples of all nations. . . . Mary is told – go. Go tell the disciples . . .

Seems like God uses the word go to get people motivated.

God wants us to move – do something. God's mission involves

actions and we are meant to go whether we understand the instructions or not.

For me, when I was called to seminary, yes, you guessed it, I heard the word go. God didn't explain where I was going. God didn't draw a map. Like Abraham, I just got the command to go. It has been scary and uncertain. I moved my family to a new town where I knew few people, I entered the classroom for the first time in 10 years, some of my classmates are folks half my age and twice as smart, I hadn't applied myself for a long time. There were a lot of doubts. But I experienced the peace that passes all understanding. Peace that I found in the support of my family, peace that I found in the warmth of a wonderful place to worship and call home, the peace of the Holy Spirit – who has reassured me with the refrain "trust me." I wonder if Abraham or Mary felt uncertainty too and found peace in obedience.

I believe every Christian has a calling or gift as Paul calls it. A gift to be used to build up the church. Paul says, "Some are preachers, some are teachers, some have the gift of administration, some have the gift of prayer, others have the gift

of craftsmanship” and the list goes on. But everybody is called to go. Go visit the sick, go feed the hungry, go clothe the naked, go build a Madhouser hut, go help folks in New Orleans, go plan a community festival. Go.

Mary responds in complete obedience. She’s not like Moses or me asking, “Are you sure?” She doesn’t say, “Those guys aren’t going to listen to me.” She goes. I can imagine she didn’t walk either. So for the second time that morning she is running from the tomb. She announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” The first preaching of the gospel. Mary is an apostle, by definition a proclaimer of the good news. Her audience? – the disciples who become the apostles. She becomes the apostle to the apostles. She preached the gospel to the ones who preach the gospel.

Wow, what a day for Mary Magdalene – waking up mourning for Jesus, finding the empty tomb, raising the alarm that something’s wrong, hanging around to search for the body, and becoming the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus,

recognizing her Lord, then obeying the command to go and tell what she has seen.

Can you hear his voice? Are you listening? Do you hear – go – I have something for you to do?

Jesus is the good shepherd and he knows our names. Jesus has a personal mission for all of us.

Are you responding like Moses? With resistance? Are you willing to respond in faith like Abraham, or maybe in complete obedience like Mary Magdalene.

Listen, can you hear him?

To the glory of God. Amen

Go in peace, Listen for the Lord to call your name and obey.

And now,

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

The love of God,

And the communion of the Holy Spirit

Be with you now and forever more.

Amen