

22 July 2018
Mary Magdalene

John 20;1-18

I come to you fresh from the consecration of our new bishop, on the feast of Mary Magdalene. When I was ordained priest in 1992, I was given this small icon of Mary Magdalene as a gift. The original was commissioned in 1990 for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco to commemorate the election of Barbara Harris, the first woman bishop in the Anglican communion. I saw it hanging in Grace Cathedral in 1996. The icon depicts Mary, dressed in red, holding an egg in her left hand, and pointing to it with her right. Her eyes look out at me, daring me to follow.

The Eastern tradition tells that after the Ascension she journeyed to the court of Tiberius Caesar because of her high social standing. After describing how poorly Pilate had administered justice at Jesus trial, she told Caesar that Jesus had risen from the dead. To help explain his resurrection she picked up an egg from the dinner table. Caesar responded that a human being could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand turn red. The egg turned red immediately, which is why red eggs have been exchanged at Easter for centuries in the Byzantine East.

I've always been attracted to Mary Magdalene. I suppose I thought of her as very real and in love with Jesus. Mary, the apostle to the apostles, wearing red, colour of -earthiness, blood, sexuality, a feisty woman, a woman healed by Jesus, a leader of the community, providing for Jesus and his ministry.

Whenever scripture speaks of the Galilean women who follow Jesus, Mary Magdalene heads the list. She is often named with several others indicating an inner circle of prominence similar to the apostolic leadership of Peter, James, and John. Tradition supports the leadership role, both in the new Testament and in the Gnostic Gospels. In several Gnostic Gospels she is betrayed as the spiritual companion of Jesus who alone understood the mysteries of his message and who interpreted these to others, including the male apostles, some of whom resented her status and the special love Jesus had for her. One can only wonder if the strength of this

tradition was in some way the basis for discrediting Mary and her historicity.¹

Buechner comments that

²it's at the end of the gospel that she comes into focus most clearly. She was one of the women who was there in the background when he was being crucified-she had more guts than most of them had-and she was also one of the ones who was there when they put what was left of him in the tomb. But the time that you see her best is on that first Sunday morning after his death.

John is the one who gives the greatest detail, and according to him it was still dark when she went to the tomb to discover that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance and that, inside, it was empty as a drum. She ran back to wherever the disciples were hiding out to tell them, and Peter and one of the others returned with her to check out her story. They found out that it was true and that there was nothing there except some pieces of cloth the body had been wrapped in. They left then, but Mary stayed on outside the tomb someplace and started to cry.

(Somehow, she could not give up. She was a persistent woman. She didn't expect to see Jesus, but this persistent woman couldn't pull herself away either.

Sometimes we give up on God too quickly. We pray a quick prayer asking God to help, and when we don't hear a positive answer in a day or two, we wonder why God ignored our prayer. Or we ask God to intervene in a situation and then we solve the problem ourselves or take it into our own hands. We move on too quickly when there's no immediate action. Mary Magdalene persisted. She waited. She

¹ p157 *Woman Word, A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter, women of the new Testament* by Miriam Therese Winter, Collins Dove, 1990

² (It is sometimes held that Mary Magdalene was the woman Luke tells about whom, to the righteous horror of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus let wash his feet and dry them with her hair despite her highly unsavory reputation, and about whom Jesus said, "I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven because she loved much" (Luke 7:47). It's a powerful story, and it would be nice to think that Mary Magdalene is the one it's about, but unfortunately there's no really good reason for doing so.

When Jesus was on the road with his disciples, he had a group of women with him whom he'd cast evil spirits out of once and who had not only joined up with him, but all chipped in to help meet expenses. One of them was Mary Magdalene, and in her case it was apparently not just one evil spirit that had been cast out but seven. Just what her problem had been, nobody says, but, helped along by the story in Luke, tradition has it that she'd been a whore. Maybe so. In any case, she seems to have teamed up with Jesus early in the game and to have stuck with him to the end. And beyond.)

stayed. She didn't let outward appearances deter her from what she was seeking. She wanted to see Jesus even though it looked impossible, so she stayed. Somehow she couldn't believe it and wouldn't leave him behind yet. Mary Magdalene was persistent.)³

Two angels came and asked her what she was crying about, and she said, "Because they have taken away my lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). She wasn't thinking in terms of anything miraculous, in other words; she was thinking simply that even in death they wouldn't let him be and somebody had stolen his body.

Then another person came up to her and asked the same questions. Why was she crying? What was she doing there? She decided it must be somebody in charge, like the gardener maybe, and she said if he was the one who had moved the body somewhere else, would he please tell her where it was so she could go there.

Instead of answering her, he spoke her name-Mary-and then she recognised who he was, and though from that instant forward the whole course of human history was changed in so many profound and complex ways that it's impossible to imagine how it would have been different otherwise, for Mary Magdalene the only thing that had changed was that, for reasons she was in no state to consider, her old friend and teacher and strong right arm was alive again.

"Rabboni!" she shouted and was about to throw her arms around him for sheer joy and astonishment when he stopped her.

"Noli me tangere," he said. "Touch me not. Don't hold on to me" (John 20:17), thus making her not only the first person in the world to have her heart stop beating for a second to find him alive again when she'd thought he was dead as a doornail, but the first person also to have her heart break a little to realise that he couldn't be touched anymore, wasn't there anymore as a hand to hold on to when the going got tough, a shoulder to weep on, because the life in him was no longer a life she could know by touching it, with her here and him there, but a life she could know only by living it: with her here-old tart and retread, old broken-heart and last, best friend-

³ <http://sherwoodfriends.org/sermons/2524/>

and with him here too, alive inside her life, to raise her up also out of the wreckage of all that was wrecked in her and dead. In the meanwhile, he had much to do and far to go, he said, and so did she, and the first thing she did was go back to the disciples to report. "I have seen the Lord," she said, and whatever dark doubts they might have had on the subject earlier, one look at her face was enough to melt them all away like morning mist.⁴

Today we celebrate Mary's feast day. This Mary of Magdala, Mary, the tower of strength.. Her life points to the one she loves, to Jesus. She like us is a witness to the resurrection, so, what are the implications for me, for us?

wholeheartedness comes to mind..

putting my whole self into it.. service, love, devotion..

What does that look like? Using the gifts we have been given to love, to serve the risen Jesus, at home in our hearts.

For me, it looks like meditation, prayer, worship, pastoral care, retreats and quiet days, building community.

For others it may look like volunteering at residential facilities, hospitals, cooking, praying, helping out at working bees, working with refugees, being on boards, teaching, being part of Rotary, CWA, CFA, SES..

How do you express your passion, how do you witness to Easter in your life?

What are you clinging to? Can you let go a little, allow God to dwell richly within you? Share your passion with others..going beyond the walls of this cathedral..

Susanna

A little reflection from Jan Richardson:
<https://vimeo.com/22350095>

⁴ ~originally published in *Peculiar Treasures* and later in *Beyond Words*
<http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/6/18/mary-magdalone>