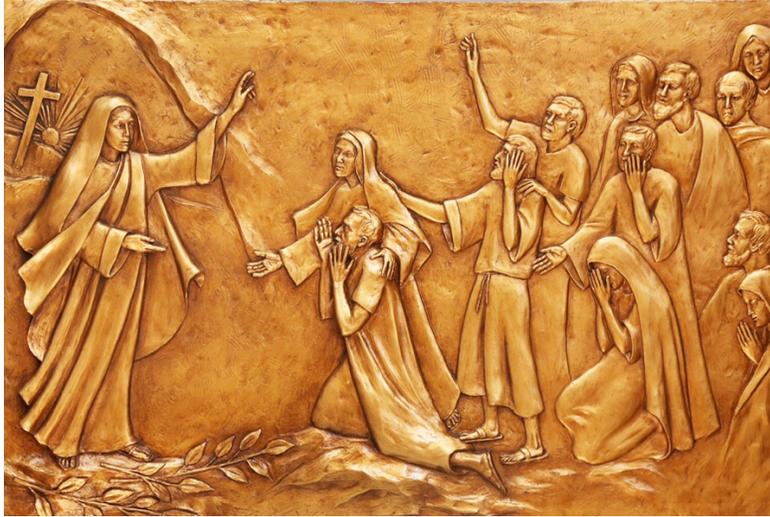


MAGDALENE'S RIGHTFUL PLACE



Unveiling, Blessing, and Dedication of “Saint Mary of Magdala Proclaims the Resurrection” Church of the Ascension, April 22, 2017

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In 1637 Puritan churches in the Massachusetts Bay Colony put Anne Hutchinson on trial, telling her, “You have stepped out of your place.” She had dared teaching not only groups of women but also men. In the eyes of her judges, what she had done was neither “tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex.”

In 1967 another woman stepped out of her place. Kathrine V. Switzer, who had registered as K.V. Switzer to run the Boston Marathon, joined the race. The director of the marathon, outraged that a woman had dared to run, darted onto the course and literally tried to shove her out of the race. Her boyfriend, however, threw him a body block, and Kathrine managed to get away from her attacker to become the first woman to finish the Boston Marathon (though her finish was disqualified and she was expelled from the Amateur Athletic Union). Last Monday on the 50th anniversary of her first Boston run, the 70-year-old Switzer returned to finish the Boston Marathon.

In the case of Mary Magdalene, whom we celebrate this evening, church officials figuratively pushed her off the scene John depicts in the twentieth chapter of his gospel and resituated her in the story of an unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7. Her place in Christianity, it seemed, was not as a disciple of the crucified and risen Jesus, sent to bear witness to the resurrection, but as a repentant prostitute. Over the ages, many legends and myths made the Magdalene a larger than life figure. Often imaged as a voluptuous woman, she evoked the dangers of female sexuality. The many variations of her mistaken identity as the penitent prostitute have so shaped the imagination that too few people regard her by her first title: apostle to the apostles. Tragically, the mistaken identity repressed women's leadership in the early communities of Jesus' Movement.

To restore Mary of Magdala to her rightful place, we need to begin with what the gospels say of her. Two texts are particularly important. The first is Luke 8:1-3 (cf. Mark 16:9):

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them* out of their resources.

This text requires us to place ourselves into the context of the world of antiquity, understanding that demons or, as Jesus often spoke of them, "unclean spirits," were simply a given of that era. This was language that sought to put words around the inexplicable, to find a way to talk about conditions that ravaged people's lives. The evangelists depict Jesus as a healer to whom people "possessed" by unclean spirits were drawn.

What was it that "possessed" Mary Magdalene? The gospels don't tell us, but Luke's detail about seven demons suggests a disturbance not easily dislodged, perhaps something like severe depression. We might imagine that the Magdalene's healing happened not in an instant but over time, maybe over months as Jesus worked with her, drawing from her whatever had kept her from living into her full humanity. I can't help but wonder what they might have talked about

as Jesus offered the Spirit's healing power. Her home town of Magdala, a small fishing village, wasn't far from Capernaum, a place central to Jesus' Galilean ministry. Ultimately, Mary seemed to experience an "inner seismic shift" (see Bruce Chilton, *Mary Magdalene: A Biography*) that freed her to journey among Jesus' disciples—likely becoming one who in turn healed others of unclean spirits. Hers was the discipleship of a wounded healer.

A second key text is from the Gospel of John (20:1-18), although the Easter Sunday lectionary strangely omits the encounter of Mary of Magdala with the Risen Jesus:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look* into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This wonderfully layered text offers many possibilities for reflection, so I will limit myself to just four.

- The gospel accounts all place Mary of Magdala at the crucifixion and resurrection.
- The Fourth Gospel depicts a mystical encounter between the Risen Nazarene and the Magdalene. She realizes he is not the gardener when he says her name.
- Mary, however, is not to cling to this encounter; Jesus has transcended the human grasp.

- The Risen Jesus sends her to bear witness to the other disciples. He makes her an apostle.

We need to reclaim the Mary Magdala of these two powerful texts. We need to let her step into her rightful place as the “Apostle to the Apostles,” as a leader in the early community of Jesus’ followers, as a wounded healer who bore witness to the power of the Spirit and was the first to proclaim the resurrection.

Why was it the church failed to pass on this Mary Magdalene? Why instead did it tell of a repentant prostitute and repress her role as apostle? To answer this question fully would take us far afield, but there is one text from the late second or third century that provides a fascinating hint, The Gospel of Mary. (This is among numerous gospels of the early church not included in the biblical canon.) In one scene, the author portrays the disciples as distressed by the departure of Jesus. Mary Magdalene offers consoling words, to which Peter responds by asking her to tell them “the words of the Savior that you remember.” She does this—but Peter takes umbrage. Would the “Savior have spoken with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?”

“Did he choose her over us?” Let us not romanticize the early church as we bemoan the challenges of our contemporary church!

I read the Gospel of Mary as mirroring controversies over leadership and authority in the early church. Given the patriarchal grip on cultures of antiquity, it is not surprising some (many? most?) men in the early church resisted women’s leadership. Jesus may have chosen the apostle Mary of Magdala to play a vital role in his community, but later generations found this too radical, too counter-cultural. So Mary of Magdala, Apostle to the Apostles, had to be put in her place, lest women be seen as equals in making known the Gospel. Refashioning Mary as a repentant prostitute kept women from stepping out of their place.

This evening we remember and reclaim Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles. We celebrate her as wounded healer, evangelist, and witness to the Risen One. And yet, sorrow tinges our remembrance, as the Magdalene's mistaken identity calls us to lament all that the church has lost over the ages by its repression of women's leadership—a repression that even today constricts the church and betrays the ministry of Jesus.

Tonight, however, is not a time to dwell on the misogyny that so afflicts our church. Just as we can't imagine a Boston or New York Marathon without women, so too may the day come that we can't imagine the church's apostles without women alongside men—or think of “apostolic succession” as including Mary Magdalene (and Junia as well; see Romans 16:7).

As you gaze at this sculpted relief now gracing the Ascension community, I invite you to receive the proclamation of St. Mary of Magdala, Apostle to the Apostles: God has raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead! God's Spirit brings new life, now as well as then!