

Mary Magdalene and the Disciples' Response to the Resurrection

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Luke 24:6-11

“Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

Ms Reynolds and I preached a series of sermons all during Lent on disciples and discipleship. If at the end of this service you would like to see our other sermons on Peter, Matthew, Andrew, Lydia, James and John, and Judas, take a look on the church's website. Today I direct your attention to the first witness of the resurrection: Mary Magdalene. Next Sunday Ms Reynolds will conclude our series with a sermon on that other significant witness to the resurrection, Thomas.

I try to imagine what it was like for Mary and the other women who went with her that morning. Of course, none of them went expecting to find Jesus alive. They did not yet understand the signs and teachings he had given them about what was to happen that morning. Interestingly Luke did not tell us their names until the end of the empty tomb account because he had already introduced them two times before in the previous chapter. These were women who had been with Jesus in Galilee from the earliest and most celebrated days of his work. They knew him, and he knew them. They went to the crucifixion and saw Jesus die.¹ This is an important bit of evidence because very early some skeptics sought to discredit the resurrection by saying someone like Simon of Cyrene—the North African who carried his cross—at the last minute was crucified instead of Jesus. Luke tells us the women saw Jesus dead on the cross and taken down. Moreover, he tells us the women went with Joseph of Arimathea and saw Jesus entombed.² Also significant, because people who knew him saw that he was put in that tomb and worried on Sunday morning about how they would remove the large stone rolled into the opening. These same women—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and ‘others’³—came with spices with which to embalm him three days later.

What do we know about this Mary Magdalene? As with many of the other early disciples, not much. Many of you may have read Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. Try not to let that fanciful novel color your views of Mary. It is probable that Mary's second name comes from the name of her hometown: Magdála, on the shore of Lake Geneseret, south of Capernaum. This was in the center of Jesus' earliest work so she must have been part of his movement almost from the beginning. The old view that she was a prostitute before meeting Jesus is not considered credible by today's New Testament scholars. Still, she seems to have been unmarried or widowed by the

¹ Luke 23:49.

² Luke 23:55.

³ Luke 24:10.

time she joined Jesus and his movement. At least her husband is never mentioned. She had financial means because Luke told us she was one of several women who provided for Jesus and his apostles “out of their resources.”⁴ Luke did tell us Jesus freed Mary from seven demons,⁵ which could mean a variety of things. It was obvious, however, that she felt an intense, personal gratitude to him for what he had done to help her.

The most famous account of Mary Magdalene is John’s story of the empty tomb. According to John Mary actually met the risen Jesus. She was alone after Peter and John had left and was crying. She still thought someone in a further indignity to Jesus had robbed the grave and taken his body away. Despite the early hour, she met a man in the garden. Assuming he was the groundskeeper, she asked him what he knew. Possibly she had not paid close attention to the man until that point. When he replied to her, he said her name. She knew immediately who it was⁶ and ‘turned’ to reach out to hug him. She became the initial witness to the resurrection: “*I have seen the Lord!*”⁷

Now let me walk you through the story in Luke a little more closely. When looking at the entire chapter, this gospel’s resurrection accounts, you notice the chapter is organized like an Easter worship service with communion!

- There was an announcement that Christ is risen, but with little immediate effect.
- There was instruction from Scripture and remembering what Jesus had told them followed by an encounter with the living Christ in the breaking of bread.
- Two disciples ran back to Jerusalem, probably to Thursday night’s upper room, and told what had happened and the risen Lord appeared again.
- With further instruction from Scripture, the disciples received Christ’s promise and were commissioned.”⁸

There are some interesting indications in the text that Mary Magdalene and her companions much more important in the inner circle of disciples than perhaps we have presumed. For example, when the women spoke to the two angelic figures at the tomb, the text implies that Christ had previously told the women that he would be betrayed, crucified and raised. This information means that these women were in the inner circle of disciples who knew such predictions.⁹ When the women ran back to tell about the empty tomb they told their story to the eleven and ‘to all the rest,’ meaning that the leadership of the movement was bigger than the male apostles.¹⁰ Wrote Prof. Craddock of this, “While Luke regards the apostles as a special group, he does not limit the special experiences with Christ and the Holy Spirit to them alone.”¹¹ Moreover, we note that unlike Mark’s and Matthew’s accounts where the women were commanded to run tell the male disciples the news, in Luke, “the women are not errand runners

⁴ Luke 8:3.

⁵ Luke 8:2.

⁶ John 20:16.

⁷ John 20:18.

⁸ Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*, (Louisville, KY, John Knox Press, 1990), 280.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁰ Luke 24:9.

¹¹ Craddock, *op cit.*

for (the male) disciples; they are disciples in their own right.”¹² They are witnesses of the news, “*Jesus is risen!*” There is also the other detail Luke gave us which puts the men in a less flattering light: “but these words seemed to [the other disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe [the women].”¹³

The church in our culture has increasingly seen faith as an individual matter. It was not so in the early church. In each of the resurrection stories you see small groups of disciples. They stick together—perhaps out of fear—but nonetheless together:

- The small group of women at the tomb.
- The two on road to Emmaus.
- The rest gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem.

Together their faith builds. Together they encounter the risen Lord. Together they discover he is still alive: by remembering his words, by breaking bread together, by working together in his name. We need to take instruction on this point. We encounter the risen Christ when we gather, two or three, in his name.¹⁴ We gather to remember his teaching and to break bread together and in that moment, we too experience the power of the resurrected One. Why do we neglect to meet, given that promise and reality? Together we remember the words and acts of Jesus and in remembrance he comes again into our presence.

Before I close, and we move to communion and the hope that our eyes too will be opened and we will recognize him, let me offer you an invitation. Whether you are a Mary Magdalene or Peter or Cleopas or Thomas, I ask you to think of yourself as a disciple of Jesus. You have your challenges and troubles, some successes and fears. You have many things to be grateful for but also questions and doubts about your purpose. Why not disciple yourself to the One who created you and knows you and has a purpose for you? We all seem inevitably to be becoming disciples of someone or some movement: athletics, hedonism, career, self, a cause.¹⁵ Why not Jesus, intentionally joining him and becoming his disciple? From long experience I know many come on Easter hoping the news is true but not quite sure what it means for you. You may be that person today, here, in this place and community. Let me tell you what it means. God himself is reaching out a hand to raise you up to new life. Take it and follow him. Christ is risen!

End

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¹² *Ibid.*, 283.

¹³ Luke 24:11.

¹⁴ Matthew 18:20.

¹⁵ Greenwald, Doug, Making Disciples Jesus Way. (Gaithersburg, MD, 2005), 30-31.