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## Catching Fire: Mary Magdalene

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church on July 24, 2022*

*John 20:11-18*

Today we celebrate the feast day of Mary Magdalene, one of only a handful of saints we honor on a Sunday morning at St. John's. Mary Magdalene has a unique role in our tradition in that all four gospels say she was the first person that the risen Jesus appeared to, before even the twelve male disciples. Three of the four gospels also name Mary Magdalene as present at the crucifixion, and two of them name her again as observantly watching where Jesus was buried. No other person is named in scripture as being so consistently present during Jesus' anguish, in his Passion. In the Eastern Orthodox church Mary Magdalene is honored as the "Apostle to the Apostles," the one whom Jesus sends to them to proclaim his resurrection.

But all of these are just facts, and it takes honing into the story to know why she is so important, still, to us. In today's reading from the Gospel of John we see Mary standing in the garden outside the tomb of Jesus where she, Peter and John have just discovered that Jesus' body is missing. Peter and John have already gone home, but Mary can't leave. Mary had been the first one there, the moment Jewish law permitted anyone to get near Jesus' body. And when even seeing angels in his tomb can't distract her from her grief and primary purpose to at least care for Jesus' body, she encounters the risen Jesus, whom she thinks is the gardener. "Tell me where you have taken him," she begs. And then, he

just says her name. “Mary.” And she whirls around, and in my mind’s eye I see her throwing her arms around him, because he gently has to say to her, “don’t cling to me.” The word for clinging in Greek, *hapto*, has two meanings—to adhere to and to kindle a flame. Interestingly, it is also the word often used to describe Jesus touching someone for healing. Mary Magdalene is the one who adheres to Jesus; and who has been so deeply touched and healed by him, his teaching, his life and their relationship with one another that she has caught fire.

Why does this matter to us?

We have been talking a great deal at St. John’s about healing. We have spoken about healing the earth. We have spoken about healing from a culture that centers European values as dominant and primary and that perpetuates systemic racism against BIPOC people. We have spoken about healing from that which is imperial within Christianity, those parts of Christianity that have perpetuated racism and abuse of the earth and LGBTQ persons. We even saw the name of Jesus used by some of the people who stormed the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, that terrible day in our nation’s history. In all this talk about what has been wrong, we may perhaps have lost sight of what is right, and good, and true, and beautiful in the story of Jesus. Perhaps some of us have wondered if we can remain Christian at all. But if we lose touch with what is beautiful and real and transformative for us in the story of Jesus, then we are no different than a secular nonprofit with a mediocre faith veneer on top.

Mary Magdalene can be one who helps us find our way back, just as she did for the twelve disciples. They, perhaps like some of us, had been ready to throw in the towel and go back to fishing. They thought there

was nothing left. In some ways this can feel like a marriage that you've been in for many years; that original spark has shifted and burned through the available fuel and gone out. Can you fall in love again with one you've lived with for ten years or sixty years?

Our Bishop Craig Loya preached at an ordination of priests in June,<sup>1</sup> and in that sermon he spoke about what is left after twenty centuries of Christianity. He said that if we had been ordained even just several decades ago, we would have been saddled with a lot of baggage, with a big, rich church that gave us a respectable, more or less easy life, and often even access to power. He said that the Spirit has been burning through that which is rotten, the injustices in the institution of church so that there isn't much left: all that is left—for any Christian, not just priests—is the poor, crucified and risen Jesus. Those who encounter Jesus don't do so at a distance, but from up close, weeping in a garden. They are the ones who long for God as if their heads were on fire, as a saying from my husband's yogic tradition goes. Those who long for God in this way do find God, but not by thinking a lot of interesting thoughts. They find God by encountering the poor, crucified and risen Jesus in the embodied lives of real people, mostly in the places people love and weep, hurt and laugh. Not as much in the libraries as in the bars, alleys, protests and hospitals. Well OK, you can meet Jesus in the library too, but he will probably be in the form of the homeless person sleeping in the corner armchair who wakes up and surprises you with an insight or with breaking your heart. In fact as Episcopal deacon Sara Miles says, if you want to meet God, sometimes you have to sit in the smoking section.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full text of his excellent sermon, see the Rt. Rev. Craig Loya, "A Sermon for the Ordination of Priests," preached June 18, 2022 at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Minneapolis, Minnesota, accessed July 24, 2022 at <https://episcopalmn.org/blog/bishop/sermon-ordination-priests>

Mary Magdalene lived in the smoking section, and so did Jesus, and that's where they met, and caught fire, and that fire is still burning all these centuries later. Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault writes about what we have learned about Mary Magdalene and about the original Jesus in some of the earliest Christian writings discovered in the last century, discovered by an Egyptian farmer near the town of Nag Hammadi. These writings describe Mary Magdalene as truly a disciple of Jesus, and one that seemed to have actually understood and integrated what Jesus was teaching. She was one whose life had transformed—so that she wasn't a kind of clingy, less-than-functional groupie, but a disciple of the highest order who had learned and could practice what Jesus was teaching. She perhaps was this way because she had suffered so much, so she had the great advantage of being willing to try literally anything instead of staying at arm's length and arguing about stuff.<sup>2</sup>

In Christian tradition, we have talked a lot about Jesus dying, alone and abandoned. But we have not given honor to one who was there all along, who never left, in fact our scriptures and tradition all insist that she was there: Mary Magdalene never left Jesus, not when he was crucified, or died, or was buried, or when he rose from the dead. She has been here all along, and she is still here, pointing to the one thing we cannot lose, have never lost: the poor, crucified and risen Jesus. This Jesus shows up in the lives of the Christians who inspired our Bishop Craig Loya—people like his Professor Marilyn McCord Adams from Yale University, who was one of the earliest proponents of full LGBTQ inclusion in the nation and in the church. She advocated for LGBTQ people not because she thought it

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<sup>2</sup> See Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Shambala Publications, 2010).

was a good idea but because she had sat at the bedside of so many gay men dying of AIDS. The poor, crucified and risen Jesus shows up in the life of people like the Japanese priest Hiram Hisanori Kano from western Nebraska, who on the day of Pearl Harbor was arrested as he was leaving his church, having celebrated the Eucharist just before, and spent several years in an internment camp where he was known for his contagious joy and compassion serving other Japanese, German POWs, and the US soldiers who kept them captive. These people caught fire because they were met and transformed by the poor, crucified and risen Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

No matter what our ideologies are, it is our hearts and attitudes and behavior that will convey whether there is anything left of the faith we celebrate here each Sunday and then try to live out Monday through Saturday. Mary Magdalene was clinging to Jesus—that word that means to adhere to, to touch for healing, and to catch fire. In the silence of our hearts, our hearts which are not the center of emotion but the organ of spiritual sight, we can be healed of blindness and see clearly again. In the silence of our hearts we can be honest about that which we so long for and also about that which we know is true, which is that the love and goodness of God in whose image we are made is the deepest reality there is. Let yourself become like Mary Magdalene in the garden, refusing to be quiet, refusing to go humbly away until you find what you are looking for: and then throw your arms around Jesus, be touched for healing, and catch fire. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop Loya talks about these two people in his June 2022 ordination sermon, *ibid.*