

John 20: 1-18
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Easter Sunday

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1 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. 2 So 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." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and 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. 13 They 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." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus 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.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

No figure in the New Testament has been more misrepresented, more maligned, than Mary Magdalene. It goes back to the 6th century. Pope Gregory the Great suggested she was a prostitute in a sermon in the year 591, based on a confused conflation of her with two other NT women: the unnamed one who anointed Jesus feet, wiping them with her tear-soaked tresses and Mary of Bethany (Lazarus' sister), who also anointed his feet, weeping.

It's worth noting that the Eastern church never bought into this vision. But consistent with Roman Catholic thought, in the history of Western art Mary Magdalene is depicted as a woman of dubious morality. In gold-ground paintings of the early Renaissance, Magdalene is shown with the free flowing hair of a loose woman (she's blond, of course!), grieving at the foot of the cross, while Mother Mary and other women have their heads discreetly covered. Another genre of images from the 16th century on show her alone, weeping, penitent, usually in a hermit's cave, and with more than a little breast revealed.

There is no scriptural basis for this reputation, as recent biblical scholarship showed. But the Magdalene was barely rescued from one mistaken sexualized identity when she got another: in Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. (For the record, in the iconography of Western art, the long-haired androgynous person at the Last Supper, who leans toward Jesus is the Beloved Disciple, aka the young John the Evangelist.)

Instead of a prostitute, in Brown's story the Magdalene is Jesus' consort. Attractive as the idea may appear at first, it's an updated, equally-titilating version of the other. Both diminish Magdalene's stature and her prominent role in the founding of the church.

That role is abundantly clear in scripture.

The first time I went on a course in the Holy Land, our wise teacher, a Biblical scholar, repeatedly said, "Begin with the biblical text. Come back to it again and again."

Indeed, the scriptures clearly show Mary Magdalene's importance in the community of Jesus' followers. The Synoptics say she was a financial supporter of Jesus' ministries. Unusual in that day and age, clearly she was an independent woman.

Most important of all is her faithful witness to the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Mary Magdalene was the **only person** present at the empty tomb in all four gospels. John's account shows that she was particularly blessed among all of Jesus' disciples. As we just heard, her presence and love there carried her through terror and grief to a revelatory experience unique in gospel lore.

As the story begins Mary approaches the tomb alone in the darkness. She's still in the fog of shock from the horror of the Crucifixion. When she finds the sealing stone rolled away, she fears that Jesus' body has been taken, that he has suffered yet another indignity in death. Summoned by her, Peter and the Beloved Disciple peer into the empty tomb. Each draws his own conclusion about what he has seen and returns home.

Mary lingers at the tomb alone, in a vigil of grief.

Meister Eckhart wrote of this "A wonder that in such sore distress she was even able to weep. She stood there because she loves, she wept because she mourned."

Mary's despair and concern focused on what had become of Jesus' dead body. That is her pleading question to the angels inside the tomb, and finally (for the third time in this episode) to the man she sees outside the tomb, whom she mistakes for a gardener.

Only when he calls her name "Mary," does she recognize the Risen Christ. "Rabbi," she replies. He is her teacher. She is his disciple--the first disciple to witness the Resurrection and the only one privileged to do so alone.

"Do not hold onto me." Christ's words to Mary have always puzzled me. Suzanne Guthrie's meditation led me to see it's a response to her concern about where the body had gone.

Imagining the meaning in the phrase, Guthrie wrote: "Do not cling to the holy as you once knew the holy. You must learn to see and hear and perceive anew. Open your consciousness to awake to the dawn of something entirely transformed and transforming."

Mary has to let go of the man, the flesh and blood Jesus: her teacher, her companion. Only then can she grow into relationship with the Risen Christ: still known but no longer seen and felt. It will be different....and differently blessed. She will be transformed as he has been.

And she is, then and there: from a disciple (one who learns) to an apostle (one who is sent). Christ honors Mary with the charge to "go and tell" the others.

Mary becomes the **first** apostle, the apostle to the apostles, in fact.

Throughout the many centuries that Mary Magdalene was scandalously slandered, the truth of her pre-eminent place among Jesus' disciples was always there, in the text. Hidden in plain sight, now revealed, it is celebrated.

The gospels invite us to see ourselves in the words and actions of the disciples, who are archetypes of humanity. The seasons of the church lead us with them through the unfolding of Jesus' ministry, and finally to the agony of the Passion.

Three disciples came to the tomb in this account. Do you see yourself in the response of one or the other?

I can't pretend I'd have the courage and devotion of Mary. And though I would hope to "see and believe" like the beloved disciple, I suspect that Peter's impulsive, baffled coming and going is more my style. But God wasn't finished with Peter yet.

Nor is God finished with any one of us. We do not have just one shot, one chance to meet the living God. Every year we come back to the cross and the empty tomb as we are, as best we can: sometimes with doubt or questions, with confusion or confidence. We do so on this side of the Resurrection, knowing the witness of countless people to the presence of the Risen Christ. Mary Magdalene had no such preparation, no precursors. SHE was the witness.

As commentator Robert Hoch wrote "Mary...went to the tomb expecting to find a corpse. She is the one who invites the disciples, and perhaps us as well, to the empty tomb." He continues, quoting the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil,

"Affliction contains the truth about our condition. They alone will see God who prefer to recognize the truth and die, instead of living a long and happy existence in a state of illusion. One must want to go towards reality; then, when one thinks one has found a corpse, one meets an angel who says, 'He is risen.'"

Mary Magdalene's Easter story suggests that with faith, courage, and patience each of us may come to the moment when we hear the Risen Christ call us by name and invite us to "go and tell"--to bear witness to the love of God in turn, in our own way, in our own time.

Let it be so.