



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
Pasadena, California

If Women Had Written the Gospel

A sermon preached by The Right Reverend Barbara Harris,
Retired Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts,
at the 9:00 am service, Sunday, May 9, 2010

O God, the light of the minds which know you, the joy of the hearts which love you, the strength of the wills which try to serve you, grant us to know you so as to love you, to love you so as to serve you, in whose service is perfect freedom. And since you have called all of us to your service, make us worthy of that calling and empower us for that service. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Good morning Church! It is a joy to be with you in this Spirit-filled place, and I am just having a great time here with greater All Saints.

In our lesson from the Book of Acts this morning¹, we hear of the apostles preaching to the women who had come to the gathering along the river at Philippi. Several years ago I encountered a book entitled, *The Magdalene Gospel*, with the subtitle, *What If Women Had Written the Gospel?*² The author, Mary Ellen Ashcroft, a professor of English at Bethel College near Minneapolis, and a priest of the Church, has a penchant for women's stories. I have never met her, but she sent me the book as a gift by the hand of her son, whom I confirmed in one of the congregations in my diocese. Ashcroft enlivens the well known Gospel stories about the experience of Jesus through the voices of the women of his company. Luke refers to them as "certain women," and their news of the empty tomb as an idle tale – which perhaps is more of a nod in the direction of their novelty rather than their integrity. But at least their presence is acknowledged. This book always comes to mind for me during the season of Easter.

Visualize, if you will, these women, having left the foot of the Cross on Good Friday, gathered privately on the outskirts of Jerusalem, possibly at the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany, during what had to be the terrifying two nights and bitter day between Jesus' death and his resurrection. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Joanna and the other women recount their very personal stories of how Jesus changed their lives. It is an imaginative retelling of the Gospel narratives from the perspective of Jesus' women followers, some of whom are identified by name for the first time. Perhaps even more vivid than the spoken memories of healing and hope that give rise to their grief and tears, is the way in which they care for, and draw strength from, each other. Their sharing in this shadowed and whispered time together, we can imagine empowered them and emboldened them to risk even further danger than standing at the Cross by resolving to visit the tomb of a crucified person – particularly one who had been perceived as a political troublemaker.

Foremost among this group is Mary Magdalene, who in some accounts goes with "the other Mary" to the tomb. In the Gospel according to John, however, she would seem to be at the tomb alone, and alone encounters the risen Christ. This poignant portion of John's Gospel, citing the Magdalene as the first apostle of the resurrection, is the epilogue which closes Ashcroft's book. But it is African-American Emory University Professor Renita J. Weems, who in her book, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision*

of Women's Relationships in the Bible,³ puts the real flesh on the Magdalene, and provides some insight into the too easily glossed-over life of this much misunderstood, much maligned woman and the lives of others who participated fully in the ministry of Jesus. What brought her to this point in her life?

Because her name is often the first name mentioned in the midst of women's names in the Gospels, Mary Magdalene, according to Weems, might be assumed to have been a leader, if only among the women. Similarly, because there are no less than seven Marys in the Gospels, over time Mary Magdalene has often been confused with, and mistaken for, not only the profiles but the sins of many other women. There is, for example, little to substantiate that the sinner who anointed Jesus' feet with her hair and her tears was Mary of Magdala, but many people choose to conclude that it was she. More pointedly, Luke tells us that before she met Jesus she had been plagued with seven demons.

We do not know the specific nature of Mary Magdalene's illness; however, we do know that, once she was healed, she proved a loyal, articulate, persuasive and charismatic follower. Weems suggests it is not far-fetched to suppose that at least some of her illness was brought on by her inability to express herself fully. That could be attributed to the life she was forced to live as a woman in first century Palestine. Imagine, she notes, a gifted, intelligent, bright, charismatic woman living in a society which had no place for gifted, intelligent, bright, charismatic women. Like many women today, Mary's emotional and physical infirmities were probably symptomatic of the stresses and strains that came in the form of relationships and environments that were neither affirming nor encouraging – stresses that were, in fact, repressive and destructive.

We do not know what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene that gave her back her mind, what convinced her to abandon her demons and join his itinerant band of women and men who looked for new ways of living and being. Perhaps it was the words intended for the menstruating woman who touched the hem of his garment, "Your faith has made you whole," that gave her an indication of her own healing. Whatever it was, she was never the same again.

Nor were any of the others in this unusual circle of women who joined the company of Jesus – these women who had quit their homes to travel, unaccompanied by husbands or fathers, in the company of other men – these women who had given everything they had to support and affirm Jesus' ministry: their gifts, their talents, their time and their money. Mary, his mother; Miriam, known to us as a Mary Clovis; Mary and Martha of Bethany; and Rhoda and Lydia, heretofore nameless and identified only as "the bent over woman" and "the woman hemorrhaging for twelve years."

Nor were any of the men of his company the same again. Their lives had been turned upside down by the simple yet profound words, "Follow me." Nor, for that matter, are those of us who count ourselves in the company of Jesus the same, those of us who call ourselves "members of the body of Christ." We know that when we choose to follow Christ in the ways of justice and peace, indeed our fate and our future are in our hands and in the hands of the "author and finisher of our salvation."

But as we find Mary weeping outside the garden tomb, we find her stuck at a point beyond which many people today cannot or do not move. Despite her commitment, her loyalty and her great love for Jesus, we find her still mired in the dust of Calvary – stuck right there at the Cross, unable or unwilling to remember or to believe Jesus' own clear pronouncement that on the third day he would rise. We might well note three things about the scene outside the tomb described by the writer of the fourth Gospel – three things that are as applicable today in their own way as they were on that first Easter dawn.

First, it was because Mary was seeking a dead Christ that she could not find him, and many people keep making that same mistake today. The Christ they know lived in Palestine two thousand years ago, and they are impressed by what he did, by what he taught, and by what he suffered. Emotionally they take their stand at Calvary, and there they stay.

Secondly, for all of her searching about the tomb, it was not Mary Magdalene who discovered Christ, but Christ who found her. This is the way it usually happens. God is seeking us not only when we have lost God, but even when we are alienated from God and do not realize that God is missing from our lives. When our spiritual lives become meager and thin, as they sometimes do, we need to recall that love that will not let us go.

And thirdly, although Mary was seeking him with her whole being, she did not recognize Christ when she saw him. We don't need to fault her for this, for apparently the risen Christ was different in some ways from the Jesus she had known. She failed to recognize him, supposing him to be the gardener. So it often is in life with all of us. At times all we see is some needy and perhaps less-than-attractive soul, someone who does not appeal to us, someone who lacks the necessities of life and who claims our assistance, like so many of the people we see on the streets with their very calls for spare change. Preoccupied, annoyed, disdainful or fearful of involvement, we are tempted to ignore these unwelcome claims. And then we are caught up short as we recall the words, "As you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me."

In this year of 2010, let us consider how fortunate we are. From the vantage point of more than two thousand years, we who claim to have moved beyond the Garden, past Calvary, past the empty tomb, can by the daily living of our Baptismal covenant, with all of its implications for peace with justice and respecting the dignity of every human being, may help others to have meaningful encounters with the living God, the Christ who rose from the dead, that they too might be changed, that they too might find new ways of living and being, and have their lives of mourning turned into joy in the loving accepting fellowship of the Trinity – Creator, Liberator and Sustainer.

Amen.

Note: This transcript has not yet been proofread. There may be several typographical errors in it.

This sermon, along with Bishop Harris's three other presentations at All Saints the weekend of May 8 and 9, are available online at All Saints Church's Website, at www.allsaints-pas.org. Select "Sermons and Speakers" from the menu at the left of the page, then scroll down and select "Sermons on Video". Her three sermons will be listed; this sermon and the May 8 Confirmation Homily are available in audio only. (Her Rector's Forum is available by selecting "Video and text of the Rector's Forums and other talks.")

The following notes were not part of Bishop Harris's sermon, but have been added by the transcriber:

¹ Acts 16:9—15

² Mary Ellen Ashcroft, *The Magdalene Gospel* (Doubleday, 1995) 144 pages

³ Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (Publishing/Editing Network, 1988) 160 pages