



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Mary Magdalene

A sermon preached by the Rev. Zelda Kennedy

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It seems so appropriate that my first sermon at All Saints would be about Mary Magdalene. For you see, Mary Magdalene and I have had a long relationship. As a young person, it was Mary Magdalene who introduced me to a journey of faith, and as I matured in my faith journey, my relationship with Mary Magdalene deepened.

Mary Magdalene was independent, persistent, supportive and most of all, faithful to Jesus. And today's gospel lesson is a reflection of her character.

Just who was Mary Magdalene? How much do you really know about her?

Several writers have indicated that *“since medieval times, Mary Magdalene has been one of the most maligned women in the New Testament, largely because scholars of an earlier period chose to identify her as the un-named sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50, primarily because the first mention of her in Luke (8:2) closely follows the account of the sinful woman. Frank Mead in Who's Who of the Bible says, “Mary [Magdalene] was never a harlot; there is no evidence anywhere for that. At most, she was neurotic. And Jesus healed her.”*

In the four gospels (Matt 27:55,56; Mark 15:40, 47 and 16:1,9; Luke 8:2, 23:55,56 and 24:10; John 20) Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name fourteen times. In eight passages, her name heads the list. In one, her name follows the name of Mary, the Mother of Jesus and the other Mary. In five passages her name appears alone. The only woman whose name appears more times than that of Mary Magdalene is Mary, mother of Jesus.

Later, in the Garden, Jesus calls Mary Magdalene by name before she recognizes Him as her Savior - so what's in a name? Scholars have indicated that Mary Magdalene's name is derived from Magdala, the Greek form of Migdol or Watchtower. The town of Magdala, from which Mary Magdalene came, is identified today as Mej-del at the south of the Plain of Gennesarat, where the hills reach forth to the Lake of Galilee.

In Luke 8:3 and other scriptural references, it is implied that Mary Magdalene was one of Magdala's women of means, who gave her substance as well as herself to Jesus' ministry. She and other women supported Jesus and his disciples out of their own personal resources.

So, we know that Mary Magdalene was not the sinful woman alluded to in Luke. We know that she was from the town of Magdala and as a woman of means, influential for her

time, and we also know, based on the number of times her name appears in the Bible, she was important to Jesus and his ministry.

She is also important to us. In today's gospel, we find her going to the garden in the early morning to honor Jesus in a manner traditional for her time. She goes to anoint his body with spices. A description of that morning is written eloquently in the *Women of Destiny Bible*,

“She entered the garden planning to spend the morning doing one last favor for the One, who had given her so much, and instead of being able to honor Jesus by anointing him, she was honored by being allowed to witness His resurrection.”

John gives Mary Magdalene the privilege of Jesus' first appearance following His resurrection.

“Mary stood weeping outside of the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, 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. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Mary's response implies that someone has desecrated Jesus' tomb when she says, “They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.” When she said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there but did not know it was Jesus. Now this is significant. There are many who will say that she didn't recognize Him because of her grief. However, I believe Mary didn't immediately recognize Jesus because he was transformed. She mistakes him for the gardener and responds to his questions in a similar manner. “Sir, if you have carried Him away tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away. Jesus simply says, “Mary.” He calls her by name, “Mary.”

Hearing one's name is so important. I remember when I took courses at Hunter College in New York City; I'd registered for a course that I was unable to attend due to a job conflict. Well, the next year, I signed up for the same course and got the same professor. The evening the class met, I was walking into class as the professor was calling my name. (Now, I believe I'm very hard to miss.) He called my name and I answered, “Present”. Well, he obviously didn't believe me, so he called my name again. And I answered the same. Finally, he looked at me and said, “I called your name several times last year before I realized that you were dropped from the roster, and I fantasized about Zelda Miller. I was expecting a nice little Jewish girl.” Well, I responded that I was nice, and I wasn't little and I wasn't Jewish. The realization for my professor and me was that unless you know the one you are naming, there is no recognition.

Mary immediately recognized the person she trusted with her life, even though Jesus was transformed, because He knew her and she knew Him.

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb because she believed her journey with Jesus had ended. However, that's the beauty of this gospel. Mary's journey was just beginning.

Let's take a closer look at her journey. . .

There are two characteristics of Mary Magdalene that I want to highlight in today's gospel, and they are that Mary Magdalene was a person of faith who began a journey with Jesus that had a remarkable result.

Marcus Borg once wrote "to be on a journey is to be in movement. Moving from place to place, and there is change in such a life. A journey is a process that involves our whole being. It involves our feet as well as our minds and our heads. A journey involves following a path or way. To be on a journey is not to be involved in aimless wandering, though there may be times when it feels like that; people [like Mary Magdalene] have gone on this journey before that we are called to, and there is a trail, a path, a way [for us to follow]."

I've mentioned to you that I've known Mary Magdalene for some time. My journey with her began as a teenager. The adult members of our community, feeling that the young people had come of age, allowed us to perform the Easter pageant without their oversight, and encouraged us to be creative. Well, I can tell you that they regretted their decision. We decided to reverse the roles of some of the characters. The boys played the roles of women and the girls played the role of men. Jesus and Mary Magdalene remained in Character and I played the role of Mary Magdalene. I can still recall the words, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid Him." I also remember my response when Jesus called me by name. You see, I played Mary as the harlot and was all over Jesus. Needless to say, we didn't do the pageant the following year or the years after. I believe the adults of our community waited until we graduated before performing another pageant.

As I matured, I realized the error of my ways. Mary was a remarkable woman. As I stated earlier, she was independent, persistent, supportive and faithful. She entered the garden that morning in sorrow and left in joy. When Jesus called her name, He opened her eyes and she recognized the transformed Christ. Once her eyes were opened, she was given a job to do. And she does her job! She tells the story.

In the Life of Pi by Yann Martel, Pi relates the following:

Catholics have a reputation for severity, for judgment that comes down heavily. My experience with Father Martin was not at all like that. He was very kind. He served me tea and biscuits in a tea set that tinkled and rattled at every touch; he treated me like a grown-up; and he told me a story. Or rather, since Christians are so fond of capital letters, a Story.

And what a story. The first thing that drew me in was disbelief. What? Humanity sins but it's God's Son who pays the price? I tried to imagine Father saying to me, "Piscine, a lion slipped into the llama pen today and killed two llamas. Yesterday another one killed a black buck. Last week two of them ate the camel. The week before it was painted storks and gray herons. And who's to say for sure who snacked on our golden agouti? The situation has become intolerable. Something must be done. I have decided the only way the lions can atone for their sins is if I feed you to them."

"Yes, Father, that would be the right and logical thing to do. Give me a moment to wash up."

"Hallelujah, my son."

"Hallelujah, Father."

What a downright weird story. What peculiar psychology.

I asked for another story, one that I might find more satisfying. Surely this religion had more than one story in its bag – religions abound with stories. But Father Martin made me understand that the stories before it – and there were many – were simply prologue to the Christians. Their religion had one Story, and to it they came back again and again, over and over. It was story enough for them. (Yann Martel. *Life of Pi*)

That's why Mary Magdalene is so important to us and why we celebrate her life today. She tells the story and so must we, every opportunity we get and to every one who will listen.

Mary Magdalene was the first to see the resurrected Christ. In the rest of the 20th chapter of John, there are two other resurrection appearances. However, John places Mary Magdalene in high esteem as the first to encounter the resurrected Jesus, and then sends her out to tell the story.

I have one last story to share with you. Actually, this story began last Sunday, when one of our Lay Eucharistic Ministers asked me to take communion to one of our parishioners. He explained that he was unable to meet with a woman who was diabetic and looked to him for communion every week. I assured him that I would take her communion. However, I was not prepared for what I experienced. As I entered her room I noticed that she had one leg missing. I shared communion with her and we began to talk:

I asked her, "So, what happens next with your medical condition?"

She responded, "Well, I know that in two weeks the doctors will determine whether to amputate my leg above or below the knee. It is my hope that they will amputate below the knee."

My heart sank. I was unsure as to what to say to her. We talked more about the amputation, and I asked her about her faith.

She said, "As long as I have Jesus as my savior, I'm okay because that's what my life is about – knowing and sharing the love of Jesus."

You see, I went to minister to her and she ministered to me. She told me *the story*. And isn't that what we must all do? We must tell the story.

Amen