

RoG 2019 Words : July 21 Mary Magdalene

Reading John 20/1-18

Mary Magdalene is probably the best known and most popular sinner of the New Testament.

She is known as the prostitute who washed the feet of Jesus.

[SLIDE: art images]

Scripture reading.

Mary, the prostitute who repented and whose love for Jesus led him to forgive her.

Many contemporary movies show her in this light.

Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Timothy Rice's 1970's musical, *Jesus Christ - Superstar* depicts her as a prostitute platonically in love with Jesus, not having a sexual affair with him, but obsessed and baffled by him, not knowing how to love him.

[SLIDE: Song: I don't know how to love him...(2.18)]

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In Franco Zeffirellis' TV Movie made about the same time, *Jesus of Nazareth*,

Mary Magdalene is a fiery, intelligent woman who is a prostitute and puts the disbelieving male disciples to shame.

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In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the Magdalene is a tattooed prostitute to whom Jesus was attracted physically - his last temptation.

And so on with *Risen*, and the *Da Vinci Code*, a million sermons, and in particular the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church for centuries until it changed its mind in 1969. It has been absolutely standard to depict her as the repentant prostitute, harmonizing several gospel stories...

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Luke 7.36-50 (anonymous "sinner") and

Just then a woman of the village, the town harlot, ... came with a bottle of very expensive perfume and stood at his feet, weeping, raining tears on his feet. Letting down her hair, she dried his feet, kissed them, and anointed them with the perfume.

[SLIDE:]

John 8.1-11 (anonymous woman taken in adultery)

The religion scholars and Pharisees led in a woman who had been caught in an act of adultery. They stood her in plain sight of everyone and said, "Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the Law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?"

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with references to Mary Magdalene (Luke 8.1-3, Mark 15.40-41 etc.).

Luke 8.1-3: Mary, the one called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out

Mark 15.40-4: There were women watching (Jesus crucifixion) from a distance, among them Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and Joses, and Salome. When Jesus was in Galilee, these women followed and served him, and had come up with him to Jerusalem.

And so we have in this combining - Mary Magdalene the prostitute with an uncertain relationship with Jesus.

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There is no evidence in the Bible for any of these salacious views of Mary. It might make for a great story for preachers (mainly male I suspect) and movie moguls (also male) but it is simply not true.

The Mary from Magdala who was a disciple of Jesus, was not formerly a prostitute.

I should say that while the squeezing all these Marys into one has been standard in the Western church for 1700 years - the Eastern church that we in the West know so little about, but which a century ago made up 20% of the global Christian population, has never equated Mary Magdalene with Mary the prostitute.

Mary was the most popular name among Palestinian Jews of Jesus' time. There are at least six women named Mary in the New Testament. Tomorrow is *Mary Magdalene Day* in the Western Church calendar. A bit like a birthday given to you by the church when you don't know your birthdate.

So who is this woman? Mary who disappears from the New Testament as soon as we close the book of John.

Mary Magdalene as she's described. Probably meaning Mary who was born in Magdala.

With no family names, people were distinguished by where they were born or their relationship to someone else.

Mary Magdalene is named at least 12 times in the gospels.

We know she:-

Travelled with Jesus from the start of his ministry to the end. She left home and everything she had to follow Jesus.

She had seven demons cast out of her.

She supported Jesus' ministry financially as well as domestically.

She was a leader in the early church movement.

[SLIDE: Jesus and Mary at tomb]

She was given the title "Apostle to the Apostles" by the early church because she was the first person to see the risen Christ and the first to share this good news with the disciples. The disciples who all turned their back on Jesus; who ran away; who hid behind locked doors. It's Mary and the other women who remain present.

This Mary is the first person to encounter the risen Christ. She goes, with a couple of males to the tomb where Jesus was buried.

The men leave when they don't see anything (literally); Mary hangs around and in her grief and uncertainty, through her tears, meets the risen, back-to-life Jesus.

Jesus tells her to go and tell the others what she has experienced.

This Mary is the first witness, and the first person charged with telling this life-transforming message.

Pretty special for anyone, but especially for a woman on her own, in that culture.

If you ever thought that women don't have a significant place in the New Testament, or are only granted secondary roles by God, (or men), read this story again. It's in John 20.

Against the cultural norms of the day, a woman on her own, with no theological insights or training, encounters God directly and experiences what no one else had – the risen Christ.

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Before we move on I need to repeat, There is no evidence in the Bible that Mary Magdalene who was the first person to meet the resurrected Christ, was a former prostitute, the woman who washed Jesus feet with expensive oil and her tears, or was the woman caught in the act of adultery. None.

I like this story about Mary at the grave because it's so ordinary (in an extraordinary way!) She was simply doing what she felt she had to do as a human being - grieving deeply the loss of her friend, mentor and teacher, she had come to anoint Jesus' broken and bloody body with spices as a sign of her love and devotion.

This cornerstone story of the gospel; this story on which the credibility of the rest of the Story hangs, isn't framed by fireworks and flashing lights; it doesn't feature the headlining disciples; even the appearance of the angels is low key, and Jesus doesn't indulge in any more teaching or story telling or miracles.

He just speaks gently to Mary, calling her by name. Making his presence known in that moment when he names her.

When we talked about this story at Rhythms of Grace last year, in the "pushback and comments" time Graeme Finlay told us that in all the gospel references that translate her name as Mary she is described by the Greek translation of her name: Maria.

But here, and here only - when Jesus addresses her directly - does he use her ancient Hebrew name: Miriam. Her true name.

This is the crux of the story for me - meeting the extraordinary Jesus in the ordinariness of life. Allowing the unexpected to be seen and not rushed past.

I want to be attentive and still enough that I can hear Jesus calling me by name, by who I really am, reminding me of the Story that needs to be central in my life. Reminding me that the stories I so often let rule my thinking and heart and motives and desires are lesser stories that can't satisfy long term, and need to be constantly put in their place as just that.

Mary Magdalene reminds me that today can be a day when I, and you listen for our name being called and we respond to what God is wanting us to re-imagine and become. A day when we realign our self with what God is doing in our world. A day when we move forward on the pilgrimage toward becoming who God made us to be.

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Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute and neither was she Jesus' lover, wife or seductress.

Mary had heard a lot of Jesus teaching, she was part of the inner circle, but she was given no special insight into this event.

The story of the day was that Jesus had been killed. He was dead. She didn't believe differently. She had no special faith.

She was just going on with her life when she encountered the risen Christ.

Like Mary, we follow a God who is made known to us in the ordinary, quiet moments of our tears and uncertainties, and who, like Mary, sends us into the worlds we inhabit to talk about what we have seen and experienced.

It's not rocket science. It's very simple. The problem is that there are competing stories. Stories competing for our hearts and desires.

As followers of Jesus today, you and I are on a pilgrimage that involves us making choices about what BIG Story we will follow in our lives. Choosing to follow Jesus is only the first chapter in that story. Maybe just the Introduction. And each day we are faced with choices that make up smaller stories - paragraphs perhaps - in the chapters that make up this Big Story we have chosen to be part of.

The Big Story that is the story of God isn't the only book on the shelf. There are other stories we can choose to be part of or not – the story of consumerism, the story of self-seeking, or of fame or wealth, or of doing our own thing.

Unlike the other disciples who were hiding out at home, were in retreat, Mary was out in the world, the market place, despite her uncertainties,

and in her encounter with Jesus her life was re-centred. The story of God became her story again. Her life was re-aligned and Jesus sent her out to tell others what had happened to her. To tell her version of God's story.

Let today be a day when you and I listen for our name being called and we respond to what God is wanting us to re-imagine and become. A day when we realign our self with what God is doing in our world.

[SLIDE: Silence]

Me to lead Communion.

Jenny asked me to lead Communion this morning as she didn't feel comfortable doing so today, which is absolutely fine.

I want to say that from my perspective there are no theological reasons for anyone to not take or lead Communion - except for not acknowledging you are broken and in need of the healing, forgiving, grace and power of Jesus Christ. Mary Magdalene reminds us of that.

Certainly not for reason of gender or inexperience.