

## *Mary Magdalene*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor,

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*Song of Solomon 3.1-4a, Psalm 63; 2 Corinthians 5.14-21; John 20.1-18*

I am very happy today to be celebrating St Mary Magdalene and I do wish Barbara Matthews was here. Barbara died recently and she had been very involved in the struggle for the ordination of women. At one of our recent saints celebrations, when we have been considering what the saints can teach us about nurture, she said to me, "Rebecca, why aren't we doing more women saints? It's always the same men, over and over again." I replied that we were going to remember Mary Magdalene very soon and she should come along. It is sad then that she is not with us. Barbara was right of course, women saints are a little thin on the ground in terms of our remembrances although we are going to celebrate Mary the Mother of our Lord next month. I don't want to labour the gender issue but this is a rare opportunity to highlight the remarkable contribution that Mary Magdalene made as a witness to the message and ministry of Jesus. Which leads me to share a conversation I was part of a few years ago.

A was talking with some people involved in a discussion about the contribution of women to the church and what all the fuss was about whether they could teach men or not. Although there is a verse or two in the bible about this—along with all sorts of other strange verses I might add—it all seemed rather archaic to us and silly. Someone said it was like that Monty Python skit in the *Life of Brian*. Do you remember the bit where Reg the leader of the revolution and his conspirators are planning the overthrow of the Romans in Jerusalem? He says, 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' Whereupon the answers come thick and fast ... sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health. After hearing this litany he still says, yes but apart from all of that what have the Romans ever done for us?"

The question of the contribution of women to the early church runs something like this:

What have women got to do with leadership in the church?

Well it was a woman that was at Jesus birth, you know: without a women, no Jesus.

OK, but aside from the incarnation what have women to do with leadership in the church?

Well, it was the women who stayed with Jesus at the foot of the cross, right to the end. They showed amazing loyalty, courage and leadership by example.

OK, OK, well aside from the incarnation and the crucifixion what have women to do with ministry in the church?

Well, you know, it was a woman Jesus first appeared to when he had been raised from the dead. She was the one who took the message to the disciples. She was the first witness to that miraculous, world changing event.

OK, but apart from the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection, really, what contribution can they make in the church that will make any difference?

It is pretty obvious isn't it, at least it is to me, that women are a central part of the story of Jesus and what ministry is and can be. Mary Magdalene is of course the woman who recognizes Jesus

outside the tomb on Easter morning and goes and tells the other disciples. Four centuries later St Augustine called her the Apostle to the Apostles.

One of the difficulties in remembering Mary Magdalene is sorting out fact from fiction, New Testament account from tradition and conjecture. One of the best sellers of recent times was the *Da Vinci Code* that was then turned into a so-so movie starring Tom Hanks. The book may be a rollicking good read but as history it is 'rank nonsense' as one non-Christian reviewer said. In the book Mary Magdalene is said to have married Jesus and had a child by him. That Mary was the lover or wife of Jesus is just one of the myths about her. Maybe, just maybe, she was his close and intimate partner but no where at all in the New Testament, not even in the extra-canonical gospels or accounts, like the gospel of Thomas, Philip or Mary is this claim made.

Another tradition concerning Mary Magdalene, that has no basis in historical fact, says that, following the death and resurrection of Jesus, she used her position to gain an invitation to a banquet given by the Roman Emperor Tiberias; she met him, she held a plain egg in her hand and exclaimed, "Christ is risen!" The Emperor laughed, and said that Christ rising from the dead was as likely as the egg in her hand turning red while she held it. Before he finished speaking, the egg in her hand turned a bright red, and she continued proclaiming the Gospel to the entire imperial house. This is the basis of the symbol often found in Mary iconography, a red Easter egg. That's why we have a basket of red eggs with our icon of Mary. Another symbol is often perfume jar, which you can see in the picture as well. This is also a piece of historical revisionism. Over the centuries the woman who washed Jesus feet with her hair, dried them with her hair and anointed his head with oil was conflated with Mary Magdalene. However, again, there is no evidence that the two woman were one and the same or even that this woman was a prostitute. She is just named as a sinner. She could have been a thief for all we know but we seem to assume that when a woman is the sinner it is sexual morality that was the issue.

Unattached to husband, father or brother, the Magdalene stood out within Jesus' fellowship in a culture where women were expected to live under male protection. When Jesus said that prostitutes had a better chance of entering God's Kingdom than his opponents did (Matthew 21:31), some people came to the conclusion that Mary Magdalene fit the category.

Confusion about Mary Magdalene is complicated by the fact that there are so many key women called Mary in the gospel accounts. In the addition to Mary Magdalene there is also Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary of Bethany. Which is a good time to answer the question: Why are so many women named "Mary" in the Gospels?

The Aramaic name *Maryam* (Miriam in Hebrew) was popular among Jews in Palestine during the first century; being named after Moses' sister was auspicious. *Maryam* in Aramaic became Maria in the Greek Gospels, a short step to Mary in English. To distinguish one person with a common name from another, place names could be used. Magdalene is not her surname. It was where she came from.

I could go on and on about the myths and legends about Mary Magdalene. However, it is much more fruitful to look at what we have in black and white from the New Testament accounts. Those accounts reveal a stronger Mary Magdalene than the predominantly male projections that have reigned from the time of Jesus' critics to her sexualized portraits in New Age fantasies.

The three key things we know about Mary were that she is the only person the Gospels named as being exorcized by Jesus, freed of seven demons (Luke 8:2). She is one of the disciples who travelled with him during his itinerant ministry and along with others provided for him out of her

resources and she was the one he revealed himself to after the resurrection. She is the one who declares, 'I have seen the Lord'.

Mary then is a woman who has been healed by Jesus. Well before the crucifixion and resurrection she knows Jesus as her saviour. Imagine if you will what that must have been like to be healed of a debilitating, socially excluding disease? Jesus brought her into wholeness of life. She then became one of his trusted, loyal, dependable disciples. Her care and ministry to him, the giving of her time, energy and money, meant that his ministry could continue and of course bare the wonderful fruit we all share in today. For me, most importantly, she is the one who declares 'I have seen the Lord'. She is the first witness to the resurrection.

After Peter and the other disciple have inspected the empty tomb they go home. They have seen and believed the tomb is empty as Mary has told them but they now head back to warmth and safety. Mary of Magdala stays, she takes time to grieve and weep. It is Jesus that comes to her and asks: "why are you weeping and who are you looking for?"

Let me just stop and take us back to the beginning chapters of John's gospel. Do you remember what the very first words of Jesus were? He says them when he notices two people following him. He turns to them and says, 'What are you looking for?'. Now at the resurrection, to the first person to whom he reveals himself, he again asks a question. This time it is not about what or where. It is about 'whom'. When Mary reveals it is him she seeks, he reveals himself to her. "Mary" he says and she recognizes him.

All those myths and legends about Mary have a kernel of amazing truth. There is a profound and world changing relationship between Jesus and Mary but it is one that is forged in this moment. Mary is faithful, Mary seeks and Mary finds. Jesus is present, Jesus reaches out and Jesus trusts. Who Mary finds is the risen Lord who then trusts her to tell others he has risen. Without this relationship the early church, our church, would not be the same.

Like Mary we too can be faithful disciples. We can seek and find the Lord. We can faithfully witness to the power, grace, love, mercy, peace and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. Like Mary we can find ourselves in a relationship with the Christ that brings peace, hope and justice to the world.