

“Mary Magdalene: Set Free to Witness”

Date: August 27, 2017

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Luke 8:1-3; Mark 16:1-14 Occasion: People of the Bible, series

Themes: Devotion, service, witness, demons

We're coming to the conclusion of our summer sermon series on people of the Bible. I hope you've enjoyed getting to know these different people. The woman we know as Mary Magdalene is one of the more intriguing characters we find in the New Testament.

She is named at least 12 times in the four gospels, more than most of the other apostles, yet we know very little about her life before she met Jesus. One thing we do know about her is her place of birth, for her name is derived from her hometown of Magdala, a town that in Jesus' day was located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

A brief note in two of the Gospels reveals another fascinating detail about Mary's early life: she had been possessed by seven demons before Jesus cast them out. We have no idea exactly when or how this occurred. And we're not even sure what the Bible means when it talks about demon possession.

Modern day scholars have analyzed several instances where the Bible talks about demon possession, and come to various conclusions. In at least one instance, scholars believe that the term *demon possession* was describing a person afflicted with what we now call *epilepsy*, causing the person to fall to the ground and move about in what looks like a fit. We know it as a seizure.

Ancient times did not have the medical knowledge we do today, and so they attributed evil spirits for the cause of many diseases we now know how to diagnose and treat. Did Mary have multiple illnesses which Jesus cured? We don't know for sure.

The Bible does tell us that Jesus cast out *seven* demons from Mary. Wow! She was an afflicted woman, whatever the nature of her demons. Her life was not her own. She was being ruled by forces beyond her control, and Jesus set her free. Jesus gave her a new lease on life.

As I've said, we don't know the particulars of how or when Jesus cast out the demons, but we do know the effects of the healing on her life. After Jesus healed Mary she became his devoted follower. A third-century theologian by the name of Hippolytus of Rome, would later go on to call her "the Apostle to the Apostles."

We know from the Gospel of Luke that Mary helped to support the ministry of Jesus out of her own pocket book. Luke 8, verses 2-3: "Mary, called Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herold's household, Susanna, and many others, women were helping to support them out of their own means."

Now, in Jesus' time it was unusual for a rabbi to have women disciples, but Jesus did. He changed people's lives; he treated *all* people with dignity and respect; and the gospel was presented to everyone. Mary was a devoted disciple all the rest of her life.

Mary's devotion led her to stay in Jerusalem while Jesus was being put to death. At the crucifixion most of the men disciples ran away in fear, but not Mary. She heard the clamor for Jesus' blood. She had witnessed the Roman whip tear the skin off his back. She had winced as the thorns sliced his brow, and she wept at the weight of the cross.

Mary was there. Mary was there out of devotion, and gratitude to Jesus for all he had done for her. She was there to hold her arm around the shoulder of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was there when his body

was taken down off of the cross. She was there to close his eyes. She was *there*.

Given Mary's devotion to Jesus, it's not surprising that she wants to be at his tomb as soon as the Sabbath was over. But Mary didn't know what we know. Mary did not go to the tomb expecting to find Jesus alive. Mary doesn't ponder, "*How* will he appear?"

Oh, He told the disciples he would rise again. But that was not on their minds. You'd think someone would remember his prophecy, but no one did. They had been there at the cross. They had seen him die. They had no expectations he would live again. It had never happened before; it wasn't in their realm of thinking.

So, early in the morning mist, the two Marys arise, take their spices and aloes, leave the house and walk up to the hillside. They anticipate a somber task. By now the body will be swollen. Jesus' face will be white. Death's odor will be pungent.

For Mary, it's too late for the incredible. The feet that had walked on water had been pierced. The hands that healed lepers had been spiked into Friday's cross. Mary had only come to place warm oils on a cold body, and bid farewell to the one man who had given reason to their hopes.

No, it isn't hope that leads the two Marys up the mountain to the tomb. It is *duty*. Naked devotion. They expect nothing in return, for what can a dead man offer? The two Marys are not climbing the mountain to receive but are going to the tomb to give. Period.

There is no motivation more noble. There are times when *we too* are called to love, expecting nothing in return. Times when we are called to give money to people who will never say 'thanks,' to forgive those who

won't forgive us, to come early and stay late when no one else notices. Service prompted by duty. This is the call of discipleship

Mary and Mary knew a task had to be done – Jesus' body had to be prepared for burial. Peter didn't offer to do it. Andrew didn't volunteer. The woman forgiven for adultery, the lepers healed of their disease, nowhere to be found. So, the two Mary's decide to do it.

I wonder if half-way there they sat down and reconsidered. "Why isn't someone else doing this? Why do we have to be the ones to do this?" Whether or not they were tempted to quit, I'm glad they stayed the course; for if they hadn't, it would have been tragic.

We know that God was watching them. Mary and Mary thought they were alone. They weren't. They thought their journey was unnoticed. They were wrong. God was watching them walk up the mountain. God was smiling at their hearts and thrilled at their devotion. And God had a surprise waiting for them.

When they get there, the stone is rolled away. Now, think about this, *why* was the stone moved? Do you think Jesus couldn't move it, too weak from the cross? Remember, he is the son of God. No, the stone was not rolled away for Jesus' sake, but for the women's sake – so that they could see inside the tomb.

When Mary enters the tomb, she discovers the body of Jesus is not there. Thoughts race through her mind. She runs to awaken Peter and John. They rush to see for themselves. She tries to keep up with them, but she can't.

Peter comes out of the tomb bewildered. John comes out believing, but Mary just sits in front of the tomb weeping. The two men go home and

leave her alone. But one surprise still awaits her. For as Mary sits there, something tells her she is not alone.

And Jesus reveals himself to her. Mary is given the privilege of being the first person to encounter the risen Christ. She is the first witness to the life-changing message that Christ has overcome death.

In the first century, the testimony of women was not considered valid in a courtroom. But Jesus chose Mary to be the first to witness to his resurrection. What an honor; what a privilege.

Mary had stayed the course. She loved Jesus, served him tirelessly and devoted her life to him, even when she believed he was dead. How could she do this, how could she love like this?

Well, Mary was as devoted to Jesus as any of the other disciples. Luke 8:1-2 tells us, “The Twelve were *with* him, and also Mary, called Magdalene.”

Mary was with Jesus. She watched him, talked to him, and let him influence her life. Her love for Christ did not come from herself, but from being with him, for he is the very essence of love.

So, if we want to love like Mary did, we have to spend time with Love himself. And Jesus will transform everything we do into acts of love – thankless acts of service with no strings attached... only joy.

Mary was set free to witness to love Himself. May it be so in each of our lives, also. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ten Women of the Bible*, by Max Lucado; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2016. Chapter 9, “Mary Magdalene, Encountering the God of Surprises, pp. 199-215.