

“And why Mary Magdalene
of all People?!”

Sermon for 30 April 2017

Texts: Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:1-18 & 1 Cor. 15:3-7

Why did the Risen Lord choose to appear to Mary Magdalene as the first person given all His more reputable and solid choices? We are going to explore two reasons this morning and they are: 1. she was the most apt person due to her fitness for that role and 2. she was chosen because she was the neediest person on the list.

She was the first disciple to actually “see” the risen Lord (Mark 16:9, John 20:11-18, Matthew 28:1). We note that she was not the first disciple to believe that Jesus was **risen from the dead**—that honor goes to the Apostle John. He reached the empty tomb first, outpacing Simon Peter (John 20:4-5) **Stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.** In verse eight, after Peter has gone into the tomb, John also **went in, and he saw and believed.** (v. 8). He was the earlier adopter and, perhaps, that fact disqualified John. *He would have been the sensible choice, I think, for us but God have another plan: Jesus would appear to the unbelieving Mary!* I want to be clear. Mary was believing in grave robbers *not resurrection*. She was mystified by the missing body because she was looking for the body of the dead Jesus. Now the wonder of Easter is that this “dead body of Jesus” no longer existed. Correct. The dead body of Jesus had by the power of the living God been raised from the dead, imbued with resurrection power—for which we use the word “glorified.”

Mary was, as of yet, ignorant of such things. She came early to the tomb to visit a corpse. When she got there, the stone was rolled away and the new tomb was totally empty of Jesus’ corpse. A shroud, linens strips, yes, but no physical remains! She felt horrified, after all the humiliation and abuse, grave robbers had come to desecrate the body *even after death the hatred just wouldn’t stop.* As I pondered this matter, Mary’s predicament, faced with such evidence, I thought, why Mary’s trip to the tomb rather resembles the approach of some Christians to the Bible. They view it as a book of dead words on the printed page, *not as a living Word . . . not as something active, engaging and alive!* Well, may the Word of God come to life for us things morning. May it address us and shake, shift and engage us—renewing, restoring and reforming us! Heb. 4:12 **For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it pierces even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight; everything is uncovered and exposed before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.** (Berean Study Bible)

Back to Mary. Perhaps. the resurrection appearances of Jesus were ordered, as recorded in Scripture, on a “need to know” basis (that is, not in historical order necessarily, but by some other necessity). Now this transitions us to the second of our two reasons for the choice of Mary as messenger of the resurrection. We see that neediness in her reasons for visiting the tomb. Remember, it was early, still dark and Mary was deep in her personal grieving. She desired little more than to sit in the stillness of a dawning day and process more of the distressing sights, sounds and event of the preceding week. She had seen Jesus welcomed and exalted as the King of Israel, only to see Him hurled down, falsely accused, illegally tried, condemned and executed—brutally, in inconceivably humiliating

ways. Happy and triumphant moments (the triumphal entry, the raising of Lazarus, the massive, adoring crowds) mixed with the ugly opposition (plans to murder Jesus and Lazarus, the fickle multitude and angry leaders). She had witnessed the sea of followers streaming into Jerusalem and the flood of new converts streaming forth! The plan tree plantation in the valley denuded by the enthusiastic crowds. Happy triumphant, exalting voices singing psalms and shouting hosanna's. She felt the electric tension . . . Jews from everywhere come to greet their king. The keepers of the peace, the Roman soldiers were anxious, overextended; they had never seen a demonstration this vast before . . . or this combustible. There was nothing they could do if this agitated crowd got out of control, took up arms. or rioted. They were in consultation with the Jewish leadership urging them to keep a lid on it! Warning them of dire consequences from Rome if this turned into yet another Jewish uprising. The Sadducean sect, the liberal and wealthy Jewish who ran the temple and selected the high priests were swamped with the logistical challenges of so many Jews wanting to sacrifice in Jerusalem, at the temple. It was like Black Friday sales to the nth degree! There was at least a billion dollars worth of business waiting to be consummated, if not several billion. Jesus had disrupted all that with His temple cleansing antics and the people probably resisted the return of currency exchanges to the courtyard area. When they demanded of Jesus by what authority He did these things He had put them on the spot, asking if John the Baptist's baptism was from heaven, or from man? The crowds believed that John the Baptist was a prophet sent from God. They had declined to answer and left the contest jeered by the crowds.

The stockyards were bulging at the seams and extra lamb-tenders had been hired to handle the emergency. It is no wonder that Jesus retired to Bethany at night for rest. The whole of Mount Zion was covered with tents, people and animals—there literally was no place to stay in the city. Families holding passover on the slopes because there were too many to get to the temple services. Oh, yes, and then there was the incident at Bethany, that took on the character of a provocation. Yes, the Sadducees did not believe in the after life, in resurrection, nor angles, or judgment day, nor heaven and hell. And here was a dead man walking their streets, living a normal life after four days in death—if such a life could ever be “normal.” The professional mourners had returned from the scene of the miracle saying, surely this is the Son of God, the Anointed One! But who could argue with the evidence? Such an open repudiation of false doctrine was both unsettling and disruptive. It was antagonistic and intimidating, too. Some called it a confrontation with death, others called it repudiation of the Sadducean leadership which included the chief priests, scribes and elders. The battle lines were draw, conspiracies to capture Jesus and secretly arrest Him were breathed about. And the Pharisees who had been waging a back action, excommuni-cating any Jews who professed to believe in Jesus from their synagogues. That stratagem proved ineffectual. It seemed to be true that **the whole world was going after Jesus!**

But Mary had more than mere current events to ponder and process. She was the woman out of whom seven demons had been exorcized. She was a woman possessed and the demonic stronghold around her seemed impregnable. Seven, the number of completeness, that was the count—it suggested disintegration, inescapability. The demonic had total control of her personality. She was the perfect storm of demonic possession and she was a tumultuous sea, a storm of violence, of self-harm and a threat of harm to others. Those who knew her thought her irredeemable. She was as helpless and hopeless as they come. It would not be beyond the pale of possibility to imagine her being driven into the

street as Jesus passed . . . a test case. What could Jesus do? Whether in such a hostile way, or by less extremity, she came face to face with Jesus. Nothing in her condition intimidated Him. He had compassion on her . . . and like the sea of Galilee, all that dark wildness was stilled at His **Peace . . . Be still . . . Come out of her.** And they did, and she was, before the face of all, totally transformed. *In her right mind, the torment past, free, she was her own person now.* Those who had known her as she was would stagger at the change in her.

She had been a petri dish for self-replicating harm, a lie-emitting, poisonous medium for the spreading of devilish contagions . . . a rapacious, devouring and insatiable personality. Not only did she have seven demons, it had gone so far that she had become indistinguishable from them. We may assume that the demonic hosts told her she was doomed, that there was no escape and that they kept her alive so that she could be further used and abused—anything to deface the image of God in her. Jesus, having mercy on her, turned her into a becalmed sea. A sudden, silence prevailed—the same sort of silence that had frightened the disciples in their sinking boat! **Who is this that speaks and even the waves obey Him?** He calmed her fears with His peace, replaced her spiritual disease with His health; commuting His confidence and hope to her. God relativized her condition, showing Himself to be greater in the Son than all the demons taken together . . . He reached down into her isolation, pulled back the wraps of terror which had cinched her in and drew her force to freedom! Jesus drew her out despite the screaming opposition of her satanic captors. Her former “lords” and “owners” whose bidding she was fired to do, repeatedly and mindlessly because they refused her any options, freedom, or choice except between various acts of self-degradation on her downward spiral to darkness and destruction, lost their property! She castoff their livery, and put on the habiliments of grace! Her enmity with God, or antagonism with His ways: hatred, abjection, obscene cursing went away finally, whether instantly or gradually we cannot say! But gratitude and spiritual dependency became the hallmark of her days. Where Jesus went, she went. Her radioactive toxicity was gone and those who wisely avoided her earlier began to associate with her more freely, more openly. No longer did they walk around her, steering away, not wanting to touch for fear of defilement, or personal harm, or even ruin. She depended entirely on Jesus’ physical and spiritual presence. What would she do with Him gone?

Mary was one of the works of the Devil that Christ had come to destroy. She was His captive led to freedom, His prisoner newly released from he prison house of sin. Yes, she became a follower and a devotee. She was indisputable proof of His power to save, redeem. de;over and heal. But with such a traumatic, terrifying past, she probably struggled with nightmares and sick dreams, disquieted sleep and a nagging fear that all this was too good to last . . . what it they came back? Surely they threatened to . . . riding in on memories of guilt and shame. Whispering how unworthy she was, how unloveable and unlovely. So, the breadth and depth of her loyalty was breached by strands of insecurity and the nagging plague of self-doubt and accusation. Forgiveness may be given, but trust in it is earned . . . tested and tried. All that mercy made her fiercely fearless . . . she would lead the procession to the tomb of Jesus on resurrection day! Grieving, yes, insecure, perhaps. Unbelieving, apparently. Just the right person for the witnessing task ahead. She would have to face down the disciples’ doubts, refusal to believe . . . *but knowing what she knew she would be the one to rout the doubt!* John may have been the first to believe, but she was the first to see Him. What a wonderful thing to have bragging rights to! When she

rose to meet, embrace and worship the Risen Lord, her material unbelief was let behind. A second deliverance!

When He said, **And, lo, I am with you to the end of the age**, Mary would have understood it best. She had received such privilege, such kindness as His tender lamb. She would turn to the church for her comforts now. Weaned of her dependency on His physical being, aware of His glorified and forever presence within her heart and within His church, she was a faithful servant. He said, **Stop clinging to Me** because He had work for her to do, **Go to My brothers and tell them I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to my God and Your God**. Go on, Mary, you are my chosen witness. We note He didn't say, **Tell the I have risen . . .** or, **Tell them I am alive**. No, Mary told them, **I have seen the Lord—and that He had said these things to her**. He is ascending? Why we must be all so earth-bound as she had been to need other than that! I guess we aren't supposed to fix our eyes on earth, on the incarnate Lord, the historical, human and manly Jesus . . . or to limit our gaze to what happened here to the neglect of what is about to happen, or to the neglect of His eternal being as God's own Son, His eternal Being. That Jesus is to occupy heaven with our Father God is what the disciples needed to hear. They needed some revelation!

Of course, they did not believe her! She seemed hysterical, extreme, fanatical . . . imagining things! Out of her mind with grief as they were. *It will take some time*. Someone says, "I've become a Christian." Wonderful, really great . . . but it may take some time. Some time to figure out it's really true, that it's being verified by the living fruit. Well, Mary didn't have to wait very long for back-up. We read next in John, that that very evening, Jesus materialized in the midst of them, in a room all locked up for fear of the Jewish authorities—police personnel looking for the body snatchers? Jesus appears and validates her testimony even as He ministers to the palpable anxiety in the room: **Peace be with you!** Then, He says it again, **Peace be with you!** It sounds as if a panic attack had morphed into a panic disorder despite Jesus' showing them **His hands and His side** (proof of identity, v. 20). Peace was needed between the women and the disciples, for one thing and among the disciples for another, especially given the sudden, severe and unsettling betrayal of Jesus by one of their own company! Who would fail next? What about command, or shared guilt, shame of their wholesale abandonment of Jesus? They all left Jesus to save their skins and He endured the cross alone. His great, awful and towering loneliness unrelieved by any human touch, or even words of consolation. How does anyone apologize for such a thing as that?!

This could take some time. And so we have these forty days of resurrection appearances, for revelational teaching and practical instructions on next steps, on church life and basic Christian doctrines (incarnation, the trinity, atonement, sacrificial dying, resurrection, the after life and our future glory). Plus wonders and signs! It was a Jesus Seminar on steroids! All this because the disciples, like Mary, were needy as well as hand-picked, weak and needing some strength. Oh, and did I mention the joy? Luke 24:41 **And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling**. Matthew 28:8 **So they departed quickly from the tomb, with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples**. Jesus' appearance in that hiding place doubtlessly following the sharing of their roadway testimony—their walk through the Bible with the Master! Those two were with the ten, Thomas being absent that first night! Everything in good order. First the expansion of their bible knowledge, their understanding of **all things pertaining to Himself in the Scriptures**

between the walking and talking and sharing and eating, I am not sure there were any idle minutes. So now we have some sense of the timing, the setting and the location of Jesus' first appearance to the disciples. That appearing would be the icing on the cake first served up by the Mary Magdalene (and according to Matthew, the other Mary—most likely the mother of James, Mark 15:40, 47 and/or the mother of James and Joseph in Matthew 27:56). Rumors would have been quelled, questions answered, the facts established, and a time table of occurrences sorted out.

What a splendid, even excellent first Lord's Day . . . a day well-spent together! Doubt and discouragement would have taken a drubbing. What a day of defeat for Satan? And who better to have announced it than Mary Magdalene herself?