

Homily for Feast of Saint Mary of Magdala

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Scripture Readings

Galatians 3:26-28, 5:1, 13-14, 16a, 22-23a

Psalm 40

Gospel of John 20:11-23

Gospel attributed to Mary Magdalene the Apostle 9: 5-20; 18:13-17

Today we celebrate Mary as one of the great heroes in our tradition, a role model for all of us. Mary was the one who stood by faithfully—she was there with Jesus the whole time—throughout Jesus' life and ministry, throughout his torture and death and burial, keeping vigil at the tomb. Mary is the one who was always there for everything. We know from our own lives what a blessing it is to have those dear friends who are with us through good times and bad, a loyal presence of love in our lives. That's Mary—the faithful one.

Mary is also one of just a very few women from Jesus' time who we can look to for leadership and witness that is not from the male perspective. Mary was an important teacher and leader in the early Christian community two thousand years ago. Only in the past 40 years, we have learned a lot more about these early days of Christianity. Scripture scholars tell us that Mary was probably a wealthy, independent woman. She is called "Mary of Magdala" — identified by the town she was from. This was not conventional in biblical times, when women were usually identified by their relationship to a male. We don't know her as "Mary, the wife of *someone*." Her name itself gives us a clue that she was not bound by the typical patriarchy.

These early communities are talked about in non-canonical early Christian writings. These are the books that weren't included in the Bible — like the Gospel of Mary of Magdala that we heard today. Scholars study these surviving texts to uncover truths that have not been passed down to us — helping us embrace the fullness of the Christian message that is our heritage. For the first 300 years of Christianity, worship was held in people's homes, and women like Mary had central roles as leaders. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, worship moved away from the home and into public settings. This is when women's leadership was quashed because it violated the Roman social codes and because male leaders believed that women were created by God to be subordinate to men. That legacy of female oppression has burdened the church for 1700 years now.

Today as we celebrate Mary, we lift up a woman as teacher and hero, a heroine, a shero of our tradition. And we continue try to free ourselves of the gender oppression embedded in our Christian story. For me, this not unlike our current struggle with racism and white supremacy that are so deeply ingrained in our social systems. It takes hard work to free ourselves of centuries of bias and discrimination. Liberation from oppressive systems is not a quick or easy process — as we all experience in our own journeys. Freeing ourselves from oppression is lifelong work for all of us. And our tradition offers us some resources to help us move towards liberation for ourselves and for all beings.

In today's first reading, Paul reminds us that we are called to be free. This can be an especially important reminder for us as LGBTQI people. Despite the discrimination we may have personally faced in our lives,

despite the presence of homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism and all the many forms of oppression that burden us as individuals and as a society . . . we are called to be free. All people are called to be free. God yearns for our collective liberation.

Then the text says “Use your freedom to serve one another in love.” Free ourselves, then help others be free; a good summary of our job description. Paul also reminds us how to do it — what is at the core of our faith: Love your neighbor. That’s true freedom; love frees us all. And those gifts of the Spirit help strengthen us to live it. In God’s reign of love, differences of race and class and gender no longer exist. We are called to be free. We are called to embody love.

Mary, too, embraced her calling to live that love. The second reading is the classic Mary story we know best from Easter morning. Mary is consumed in her grief, hanging around the tomb. Maybe she had stayed there all night. Then she sees Jesus! She is confused at first because she knows he died, but she sees him and speaks to him. The disciples were all off hiding in fear. But faithful Mary stayed. She learned the truth and then ran to share it.

Then we have today’s Gospel: It’s not one we have heard very much because we don’t usually read from the non-canonical gospels at liturgy. Hearing a different version of the story can help us get a new angle on the story or better understand what we are to learn from it. This reading is a next step after Mary first ran from the tomb to share the good news. Jesus had come to see the disciples, but they are still bound by fear—truly afraid that they will be killed just as Jesus was.

We know what fear can feel like. We are also afraid at times—in times like we have today: Coronavirus. People aren’t wearing masks. Black Lives Matter. So many white people do not understand. Police violence in our cities. Is it safe to go to a peaceful demonstration? Do we have any national leaders who can guide us out of these crises? Is it even safe to have a friend over for dinner or go to the grocery store? There are so many things to be afraid of right now. It can be easy to get stuck in fear just like the disciples did.

In this Gospel reading, Mary shakes them out of it rather harshly — but first she embraces them. That part of the reading really stood out to me, maybe because in these times of the pandemic we are all hugging a lot less. We need to be embraced. But sometimes we also need to be shaken and reminded, the way Mary tells the fearful disciples. She is pretty direct here: Forget the sorrow. Forget the doubt. Forget your grief for a minute. This is a calling for us, and we need to pay attention. Mary is telling the disciples, and she is telling us. Jesus prepared us for this and we are ready to take it up. We have the grace. We have all that we need. **“WE ARE BEING CALLED TO BECOME FULLY HUMAN.”**

Fully human! Liberation! That means all of us. Raising up women leaders. Raising up all who are marginalized. Loving one another. Like Paul said: We are called to be free. Let’s follow Mary’s lead and take up that calling: The call to be fully human, the call to liberation, for ourselves and for all beings.