

“Mary Magdalene: A Woman Out of Her Time”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 23, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 8: 1-3; 24: 1-12

Luke 8:1-3 (NRSV)

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Luke 24:1-12 (NRSV)

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body.

⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

A Word About the Word

Our summer sermon series focuses on people suggested from the congregation,
including historical, biblical and personal lives that have impacted the faith.

The inspiration for our sermon series

emerged from church members and friends
who participated in one of our Bible studies last spring.

One lovely Sunday morning we were sharing coffee and stories about our baptisms
in comparison with biblical narratives of being anointed.

I shared that Rev. Albert Pennybacker impacted my faith and understanding of baptism
when I heard him preach at University Christian Church in Fort Worth.

Pennybacker observed that at our baptisms

we are ordained to the Christian ministry.

Pennybacker proclaimed that everyone who is baptized emerges from the holy waters

called and anointed to serve the Risen Christ,
including men, women, and folks of all ages and stages.

A Disciple present in the morning Bible study here

picked up on Pennybacker's affirmation
of the power and promise of God's calling and anointing women to serve.

She then noted how rarely she has heard sermons from church pulpits

about women of faith in the Bible.

Let me tell you, suddenly I was all ears and got real quiet.

A couple weeks later our church staff put out the word

that throughout the summer months
our sermons would be on faith shapers and shifters
to be nominated by you, the congregation.

Your nominations were heartily received and are listed in the worship bulletin insert;

every name suggested is fabulous,
and a majority of the highlighted faith shapers are women.

I'm still all ears.

Now is the time, however, to speak the truth in love.

Mary Magdalene: A Woman Out of Her Time

In Luke 8 we learn that:

Soon afterwards [Jesus] went on through cities and villages,

proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

The twelve were with him,

*as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities:
Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,
and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza,
and Susanna, and many others,
who provided for them out of their resources.*

Three observations about these three lines of scripture.

First, as Jesus of Nazareth goes about cities and towns

preaching, teaching, healing, and exorcising demons,
He does not go alone.

He brings a group with Him.

This is not just any group.

The Bible often mentions Jesus encountering crowds and multitudes.

Crowds and multitudes grow and expand then evaporate just as quickly.

But not a group of followers.

These are Jesus' people.

They are His disciples, His students; one day they will become His apostles.

One day they will lay down their lives for their friends

just as Jesus does for them, and for us...

The group consists of people whom Jesus called by name to follow God.

He called them by name out of their everyday, work-a-day lives

to minister alongside Him,
to serve people in need,
to feed their neighbors both spiritually and physically.

The works Jesus did in the cities and towns

as He proclaimed and brought the Good News
was as much about what He did
as who was with Him along the way.

This is no small point.

He was teaching in the streets and synagogues, yes.

Yes, and.

And He was teaching specific people how to do what He did

so that they could do it as well.

In God's name, He modeled ministry so the group of followers

could and would and should minister, in God's name.

So first, Jesus brings a group with him to witness and become witness.

Second, the composition of the group is inclusive.

Jesus' ministry is co-ed.

This fact may have been offensive to people in that time.

The truth is that the group is inclusive of men and women.

“Jesus had only these requirements for joining his group:

belief in his teachings and a lifestyle of discipleship.

No one who followed and obeyed was excluded.

...Jesus set women free from the traditional, stereotypical roles.”[1]

And thus He set men free, as well.

Earlier in the narrative the men were identified when Jesus called them.

Here three of the women are named;

the remainder of the women are cited as “many others.”

How many is many?

Your guess is as good as any.

Here is something we do know:

“The particular news this little passage provides

*is the information that a group of women
followed Jesus constantly on His travelling
since the beginning of His public activity in the land of Galilee.”[2]*

“...they set out with Him,

*leaving home, family relations, their village, everyday life,
and stayed with Him, listening, speaking, travelling,
offering goods and services, living with him, in short,*

*and in the end followed Him to the cross,
where they, the only faithful witnesses,
were to see him die.”[3]*

They stayed near the cross while others cowered at a distance.

After Jesus died they prepared His body for burial.

And when He rose from the dead to life everlasting, He appeared first to them.

Regardless of how their testimony was received or believed,

it was these same women who went to tell the others the Good News:
"He is risen! Christ the Lord is risen indeed!"

Such is the fulfilled power and promise of Jesus' inclusive ministry of grace.

Biblical scholarship gives credence to the understanding

that when the gospels describe the presence
of disciples and Jesus' closest followers,
the group is inclusive of men and women alike,[4]
everyday folks giving thanks to God
and praising their Creator every day.

So first, Jesus brings a group with him to witness and become witnesses.

Second, the composition of the group is inclusive of men and women.

Third, Mary Magdalene is a disciple among disciples.

There are myths about Mary Magdalene that need to be debunked.

She was not a prostitute, nor an incidental character, nor a hanger-on, nor a side-attraction.

She was included in the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

as well as the Gospel of Peter

Contrary to poor exegetical research and teaching

found in Sunday School materials for the past several centuries,
she should not have been associated with stories
such as the breaking of the fragrant ointment on Jesus' feet.

Despite the author's sexist insistence in Luke and Acts

that Christ's messiahship was to be primarily revealed to the world through men,
in each of the other gospels Mary Magdalene's witness and testimony
is critical and crucial, as are additional women of faith.

Listen anew to the Word:

“The twelve were with [Jesus],

*as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities:
Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,
and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza,
and Susanna, and many others,
who provided for them out of their resources.”*

In the eyes of Jesus,

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna and many others
were a significant part of God’s group,
i.e., the beloved community, this emerging church, this faithful fellowship.

Mary was from the area known as Magdala, hence her name.

She was a grateful recipient of the healing power of God.

God through Jesus heals us in multiple ways,

including but not limited to healing from physical diseases and infirmities,
and the freeing from evil spirits or demons.[5]

Oftentimes in scriptures these two types of healings are placed together

(Luke 4: 40-41, 6: 17-18, and 8:2).

Witnesses have linked Jesus’ preaching with his capacity to heal.

In this instance,

only Mary is identified as a recipient of Jesus’ healing from seven demons.

Being freed from demons was the beginning of her healing;

being given a purpose, a sense of meaning, a role and responsibility to make a difference,

that is the continuation of her healing.

The tender mercies of God heal us and set us free,

free to be, you and me,
free to become a part of something great,
like changing the world one act of grace at a time.

Interestingly, we know from the Bible that whosoever wishes to be first must be last,

i.e., act humbly, unpretentiously, with an other-centered spirit.

However, while we are mentioning whose name comes first,

in Luke this detail is quite significant.

Peter is going to get a lot of airtime toward the end of the story.

So when Jesus took with Him three disciples to the mountaintop,

Peter's name was listed first.

The same is true at the raising of Jairus' daughter.

Only three disciples were selected to be present;

the first mentioned was...wait for it...Peter.

The order of Disciples names is given in accordance to their importance.

The same is true here in both of today's passages.

In Luke 8, the author presents Mary Magdalene,

then Joanna, Susanna, "*and many others.*"

In Luke 24, after the crucifixion,

when the women return from the empty tomb to proclaim the Good News,
Luke lists "*Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James,
and the other women with them...*"

"The privileged position of Mary Magdalene holds in relation to Jesus,

the witnessing role to which Christ calls her,

the choice by the Risen Christ to send her

to proclaim the glad tidings of the resurrection to the apostles,

thereby making her the mediatrix of His word,

all serve to make this woman

a figure of exceptional importance...” [6]

Mary Magdalene’s legacy is alive and well today.

Last week several of our church folks were in Indianapolis to join with thousands of Disciples in the Christian Church at the General Assembly.

We gathered to worship God, attend workshops, conduct church business, listen to excellent preaching,

including our own Henry Brewer-Calvert, and to elect a new General and Minister and President of the denomination.

As we left town the following article was posted in the Indianapolis Star.

And I quote:

Police shootings. A racial and income divide. The border wall. Fake news.[7]

Divisiveness and mistrust is alive and well in America today.

But what if there was a place where civility and respect were expected

— and everyone was welcome at the [Lord’s Table]?

An Indianapolis-based church founded on ecumenical unity and inclusiveness

*has elected what it says is the first [African American] female leader
of a mainstream Protestant denomination.*

For anyone familiar with the core values of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),

*the election this week of the Rev. Teresa Hord Owens
as General Minister and President shouldn't be a surprise.*

“It's important to take note of it,” Hord Owens said Wednesday,

as the church with about a half-million members

wrapped up its biennial convention in Downtown Indianapolis.

“Within our church, we do celebrate diversity.

The fact that we have the first African-American woman

*as a General Minister and President is a significant event
and we are certainly celebrating it.”*

She is the dean of the University of Chicago's Divinity School

and is the senior minister of a predominantly white congregation in Downers Grove, Ill.

Still, it's not shocking the Disciples of Christ took this step.

After all, the church was led for the past 12 years

by the Rev. Sharon E. Watkins, its first female head.

And it has had African-American members since the 1830s,

free men and women who joined soon after its founding.

A key tenet of the Disciples of Christ is embodied in its symbol:

a chalice with the Cross of St. Andrew.

The chalice represents the Lord's Supper and Disciples' belief

*that everyone is welcome to share in Communion
— without having to prove their faith.*

“Unity and neighborliness is key in an age of acrimony.

*Today, it seems there is a continued push to dividing people,
instead of bringing them together,” said Rev. Nathan Wilson.*

“The election of Terri Hord Owen

*s
is part and parcel*

of our historic commitment to the inclusion of all God's children.”

A Word About This Word

We are a part and parcel of a movement of God's people,

a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world,
a movement initiated by Jesus,

a movement sustained by Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many
others,
a movement continued here by you and me,
by we who have been set free, free to be.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] June Doster, To Speak or Not to Speak, Prisca Press, GA. Page 69.

[2] Carla Ricci, Mary Magdalene and Many Others, Fortress Press, 1994. Page 53.

[3] Ricci, Page 53.

[4] Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, Editors, The Women's Bible Commentary, Westminster Press, 1992. Pages 286-288. See also Ricci, Pages 51-110.

[5] Ricci, Page 124.

[6] Ricci, Page 129.

[7] "An Indy-based church of diversity elects first black woman to lead a major denomination"
INDIANAPOLIS STAR. Byline: [Dwight Adams](#). July 13, 2017. Updated July 14, 2017.