

19th July 2020 – Chris’s Sermon

The Feast of Mary Magdalene

Today we gather to celebrate the feast of Mary Magdalene – who is recognised as one of the great saints of the early Church. We don’t really know a lot about Mary. But, we do know that she was a follower of the way – she was part of the inner group of followers travelling with Jesus, from place to place – she was committed to living a holy life, along with the other disciples. According to Luke’s Gospel (Lk 8: 2-3), Mary was tormented by 7 demons and then set free by the grace of God – an experience that brought her to Jesus and then inspired her to become a follower of the way.

As I’m sure you can appreciate, there has been considerable speculation concerning Mary – over the years. In a series of Easter sermons by pope Gregory (back in 591), Mary was described as the sinful woman who anointed the feet of Jesus at Bethany (Luke 7: 36-50). This description of Mary Magdalene led to the widespread belief that Mary was a prostitute or a promiscuous woman. (But, there is absolutely no evidence that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany are in fact the same person.)

But, the debate and the controversy surrounding Mary continued – for a thousand years – right up until reformation (when it was rejected by the protestant Churches). And in 1969 Mary was finally vindicated fully by Pope Paul the 6th – when all references to Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman were removed from the Roman calendar.

Today, we are free to acknowledge the grace and the faith of this remarkable woman, as she’s presented to us in scripture. All four Gospels describe Mary as the one who travelled with Jesus (one of his closest followers). Mary is presented as the one who was there – a witness to his crucifixion, a witness to his burial and resurrection. She is mentioned by name 12 times in the gospels – more times than most of the disciples. According to scripture, Mary was steadfast in her faith – she remained true to her calling – when others fell away.

Without a doubt, the most powerful story in scripture concerning Mary is the story of the resurrection. At the very heart of our Gospel reading, we hear a wonderful story about discovery. We hear a story about Mary’s search for meaning, while struggling with a terrible grief – a terrible sense of loss.

Following the death of Jesus, as the dawn breaks on the first day of the new week, Mary Magdalene walks to the tomb of Jesus. But, as she approaches the entrance of the tomb, she makes a life-changing discovery. The tomb is empty. Mary discovers that her teacher and friend has risen from the dead. She is greeted by an angel and then by the risen Christ, her Lord and master.

And, we see Mary’s faith rewarded and renewed. We see grief replaced by joy. We see desolation and despair replaced by new hope.

On that new and glorious day, Mary’s faith was renewed – this was the blessing that she received – we see her steadfast faith rewarded and renewed – with joy and wonder. And, of course, she then shares her joy and her wonder with the disciples. This is the continuation of a ministry that she started when she first met Jesus – when the grace of God touched her and set her free from those 7 demons. Mary was inspired again – to become a follower and share her faith – we see her calling reaffirmed and renewed, standing before the tomb of Jesus. (And then, she shared that joy with the disciples.)

And, the disciples raised up – raised to new hope and new life. We know that their faith was then renewed because they started to build the Church that we share today. They were reborn. This was the ministry that Mary shared with them – the same ministry that we are called to share – when we give thanks for the grace of God in our lives – a grace that has the power to lead us to a new place.

In some traditions, Mary Magdalene is even described as the apostle to the apostles – the one who feeds the faith of the faithful – she was the spark that lit a fire under the disciples. Like the seed that falls to the ground and dies in the earth, in order to be reborn, Mary was the one who reached out to the disciples when their faith was broken and buried in the ground with Christ. Mary fed that faith with her joy and hope – and she helped the disciples to rise again – rise up with Christ.

And, we see this same pattern repeat with all of the great saints of God's Church – past and present – we see this pattern repeat with all who follow the way. We see it with Peter and Matthew and Paul – we see it with all the great people of faith down through the centuries (those who feed the hungry and heal the sick – those who inspire faith in others, through their example). And I think we even see it here in our parish as well – with all who remain steadfast in their faith – those who fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith.

Mary Magdalene reminds us that resurrection is a gift from God that we receive when we allow God's love and will to be born in us (this was her experience – and it can be ours as well, if we are willing to share it). So, resurrection is food for the hungry and clothing for the naked and shelter for the homeless and care for the sick (all those good things) – but it's also the love that we share with those who feel unloved – it's the gift of healing and hope and acceptance and forgiveness - and inspiration as well.

Surely, these are the gifts that Mary shared with the disciples - and with us today.

In the words of our collect prayer:

Inspired by the faith of Mary Magdalene – witness to the resurrection, we pray that we too may experience the power of God's grace – we pray that we too may experience forgiveness and healing – we pray that we too may experience the power of Christ's risen life, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

The Lord be with you.