

Developing an Easter Spirituality with Guidance from Mary of Magdala May 9, 2019

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Introduction

1. Highlighting the importance of the Easter Season for a balanced, integrated paschal spirituality.
2. The intriguing role of Mary Magdalene (MM).
3. Some readings: *A Risen Christ in Eastertime* by Raymond Brown; *The Complete Gospels* ed. by Robert Miller (contains the Gospel of Mary).

I. The Challenge

- A. Combining the Lenten emphasis on penance with the Easter celebration of resurrection victory and joy.
- B. Putting the popular Easter liturgical celebration into practice in daily life.
- C. Expanding roles for women in the Church.
 1. Progress since Vatican II.
 2. More work to be done.

II. Mary of Magdala

- A. Scriptural References mentioned 12 times (more than anyone except Peter, James and John). She was from Magdala, a fishing town on western shore of the Sea of Galilee.
- B. During the public ministry of Jesus
 1. Jesus cured her of a serious illness (exorcised of seven demons) *cf* Mark 16:9 and Luke 8:1-3.
 2. One of the Galilean women who travelled with Jesus and provided material support for his ministry (Luke 8: 2-3), possibly suggesting she was fairly wealthy and independent (not identified by her relationship with any man).
 3. She and other women were present from a distance at the death of Jesus after the male disciples fled (Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:55-56; John 19:25 has her by the cross with Mary the mother of Jesus and her sister Mary the wife of Clopus).
 4. She, along with Mary the mother of Joses, saw where Jesus was buried (Mark 15:47).
- C. The Resurrection passages
 1. Mark says Mary and 2 others discover the empty tomb, a young man tells them to tell Peter and the other disciples that Jesus goes before them to Galilee but she flees and says nothing because she was afraid (Mark 16:1-8).
 2. Matthew, who relied on Mark, says MM and another Mary came early Sunday morning; an angel who rolled back the stone told her to tell the disciples Jesus was raised and goes ahead of them to Galilee. Half-overjoyed and half-fearful, she runs to tell the disciples but encounters Jesus who says Peace. She embraces his feet and

pays him homage and he tells her to carry the good news to his brothers, that they will see him in Galilee (28:1-10).

3. In Luke's Gospel, MM and other women came to the tomb early at dawn on Sunday to anoint the body and find the body missing; two men (angels?) say he has been raised as he had foretold; MM tells this to the eleven but they refuse to believe her (24:1-12).
4. In John's Gospel MM by herself comes to the tomb on Sunday while it is still dark, sees the stone moved, runs to tell Peter and the beloved disciple that the Lord's body has been taken from the tomb. Later in the story she is weeping beside the tomb, looks inside, two angels ask her why she is weeping and she says because the Lord's body has been taken away and she does not know where; just then she spots Jesus but thinks he is the gardener and asks where he has taken the body. At this point Jesus calls her by her name and she, recognizing him, responds "Rabbouni" meaning Teacher, Jesus says Do not cling to me, go tell my brothers. "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." MM goes to the disciples and tells them I have seen the Lord and repeats what he has said to her (John 20: 11-18).

D. Authenticity

1. Problem is Paul in the earliest list of people Jesus appeared to (Cephas, the Twelve and 500 brothers, James and Paul) does not mention MM (1Cor 15: 1-12), although he does recognize, prominent roles for women in Romans 16 for example, Junia as an apostle. Perhaps he used an earlier tradition in Antioch that excluded women as official public witnesses. Paul wrote 1 Cor in the middle 50s and Mark the earliest Gospel was written in 70 and John in middle 90s.
2. John Meier - *A Marginal Jew Vol 3* makes a compelling case that MM was cured by Jesus, travelled with him and was present at the cross. She functioned like a disciple in reality but was not called a disciple by evangelists. Meier's criteria are multiple attestations (Mark, Luke and John) and embarrassment (women travelling with Jesus).
3. Ray Brown in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* argues that there is a good chance that Jesus did first appear to MM and sent her to proclaim the good news to the disciples.

E. Interpretation of John 20

1. MM who comes to the tomb when it is dark is illumined by her encounter with the risen Lord (the light and darkness theme is common in John).
2. Her courage in staying by the cross (though she was in less danger than male disciples) is rewarded by Christ.
3. The Johanine community founded by the beloved disciple was open to the witness of women disciples like MM. John does not speak about the Twelve or the apostles but expresses a fundamental equality of all disciples.

4. MM recognizes the risen Christ when he calls her by name. John's Gospel stresses personal encounters. Jesus said his sheep would recognize his voice when he calls them by name (John 10: 3-5).
 5. MM is seen as the Apostle to the Apostles because Jesus sends her to tell the other disciples. She was given this title in the 9th century biography by Rabanus Maurus. Peter Abelard (d 1141) said she merited the title and this notion became rather common in the 12th and 13th centuries and has been revived in our own time.
 6. Jesus telling her not to hold onto him suggests that she has to accept his new glorified state, that he is ascending to his Father, that she has to relate to him in a new way as the risen Lord.
- F. Turning Mary into a Prostitute
1. Luke records the story of an unnamed woman publicly known as a sinner who enters a dinner party hosted by Simon, a Pharisee, stands weeping at the feet of Jesus so her tears fall on his feet, she wipes them with her hair and kisses them and anoints them with perfumed oil; Jesus tells her to go in peace, her sins have been forgiven and that her faith has been her salvation (7: 36-50). In Mark (14: 3-9) and Matthew (26: 6-13) a woman (not identified as a sinner) anoints the head of Jesus with very expensive ointment; the disciples say this is a waste of money but Jesus defends it as a preparation for burial (MM went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus). In John's Gospel Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha anoints the feet of Jesus with expensive ointment and wipes them with her hair.
 2. Commentators began to identify the repentant public sinner in Luke with MM. They used the notion that Jesus cast seven demons out of her as a basis for her sinfulness when it really referred to a serious physical or psychological ailment.
 3. Pope Gregory the Great (540 – 604) – gave an Easter homily in 591 in Rome identifying the unnamed sinner in Luke with MM. He said the seven demons signify all the vices and that “it is clear brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts.” His point was to stress God's mercy toward sinners. MM has symbolized that throughout history.
 4. Contemporary popular culture has used the repentant prostitute theme: for example, in the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (later a movie), MM sings “I don't know how to love him. He's just a man and I have had so many men before... I want him so. I love him so” The Martin Scorsese 1988 movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which includes a dream of Jesus on the cross of a sexual encounter with MM, identified her as the woman accused of adultery (John 8: 3-11). *The DaVinci Code* (2003) novel by Dan Brown, later a movie, portrays Jesus and Mary as married with a daughter, and claims the Holy Grail is not a cup but MM herself.
 5. Eastern Christianity accepts her as a repentant sinner but emphasizes her role as a missionary. The Orthodox Church keeps alive the tradition of MM going to preach the Gospel in Rome and encountering the emperor Tiberias (14-33 AD) bringing him a red egg as a symbol of the Resurrection. She is seen as the one who originated the

custom of giving red colored eggs on Easter. She later went to Ephesus, where the Apostle John preached, and died there in old age.

G. The Gospel of Mary (*cf The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* by Karen King)

1. Gnosticism was a philosophy and esoteric movement active during the 2nd and 3rd centuries. It rejected much of biblical teaching; was dualistic, seeing our material world as the evil project of a malevolent God; salvation comes through inner enlightenment which provides special knowledge freeing one from this world. Gnostic Gospels of various types were known only by comments made by the Church Fathers (Irenaeus – d202) until peasants discovered some 50 writings in Nag Hamadi some 300 miles south of Cairo in 1945 which were published completely only in 1977. Many of those Gospels were originally written in the 2nd and 3rd century and have Gnostic tendencies. The Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, is especially valuable because it has many sayings similar to the Synoptics and 3 additional parables. Women represented by MM must be made male to enter the kingdom.
2. The Gospel of Mary (a Resurrection Dialogue) was originally written in Greek in the second century. A Coptic translation probably copied and bound in the late 4th century was discovered in the late – nineteenth century in northern Egypt and was published in 1955. Fragments of the original Greek were unearthed in archeological excavations in Egypt. The surviving manuscript is missing pages 1-6 and 11 to 14.
3. The storyline: the risen Christ is instructing his disciples on gaining spiritual enlightenment to overcome the sin of the world before commissioning them to go preach the gospel. MM tries to comfort and instruct the distressed disciples based on the deeper knowledge she had from Jesus. Peter and Andrew do not accept that Jesus preferred a woman to them. Peter does admit Jesus loved MM more than any other woman. Levi defends MM: “If the Savior considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her? For he knew her completely and loved her devotedly.”
4. Interpretation of the text: the Greek fragments presume MM played a leadership role in the early Church; her leadership is based on her special relationship to Jesus and her spiritual knowledge; the male leaders were threatened by her; she had defenders.

H. Mary in other Gnostic Gospels

1. *Dialogue of the Savior* originally written in Greek probably around 150 and fragment found at Nag Hamadi, is a dialogue about baptism between Jesus and his disciples including MM described as “a woman who had understood completely.”
2. *Sophia of Jesus Christ* - originally in Greek perhaps 3rd century, part of Nag Hamadi collection, including MM in a group of 12 men and seven women gathered after the resurrection by the risen Lord who says: “I have given you authority over all things as children of light” and sent them to preach the Gospel.

3. *Gospel of Philip* - written around 3rd century part of the Nag Hamadi collection; describes MM as a companion of Jesus who loved her more than all the disciples and often kissed her.
4. "*Pistis Sophia*" – A Gnostic text discovered in 1773; Jesus tells MM "Your heart is directed to the Kingdom of Heaven more than all your brothers." She has complete spiritual comprehension.

III. Mary more specifically

- A. Mary in Luke (*cf* Barbara Reid 2017 lecture at Boston College on "Mary Magdalene and the Women Disciples in the Gospel of Luke")
 1. Only Luke tells us MM along with a Galilean woman accompanied Jesus on his preaching tour, supporting him financially (8: 1-3).
 2. She accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem, stood at a distance when he died on the cross, saw where he was buried, came to the tomb at dawn on Sunday, was told by two men that Jesus was raised, repeated this to the Eleven who refused to believe her because it sounded like nonsense.
 3. Reid who previously emphasized that Luke suppressed women's voices and denied their role as witnesses to the resurrection (in contrast to John) which unfortunately prevailed throughout church history, now emphasized that Luke does give voice to Mary of Nazareth, Elizabeth and Anne (Ch 1 and 2) and presents MM as a rejected prophet like Jesus himself, and a faithful witness to the resurrection and as one who remembered the teaching of Jesus in Galilee that he must suffer and die and be raised, a "remembering" that calls for action which MM continued to do.
 4. Thus Luke's MM is a model for us, calling us to follow Christ, support his mission, proclaim the good news and to remain faithful even in the midst of rejection. In the Acts of the Apostles, 2nd volume of Luke's work, Peter and Paul and the main witnesses to Christ and his resurrection while women fall silent.
 5. Reid wants more women's voices heard today, having opportunities to preach at Eucharist as they are allowed to do at children's Masses (1973 Vatican directive still in effect). Pope Francis has good things to say about preaching but does not call for more opportunities for women to preach. This would happen if women could be ordained as priests.
- B. Mary as Model of Prophetic Witness (*cf* 2013 lecture at Boston College by Sandra Schneiders, "Encountering the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene as Prototype")
 1. Great interest in MM as leverage based on scripture for full equality for women in the church including ordination.
 2. In the NT there is a "Petrine function" of unifying leadership which can be exercised in varying degrees by all the baptized but is epitomized in Peter. There is also a "Magdalen function" of prophetic witness (experiencing the power of Christ's love and witnessing to it) exercised by all but epitomized and represented by MM.

3. Argument for the comparison: both Peter and MM are typically represented as first in a group (Peter, James and John) and (MM and the Galilean women).
4. Jesus tries to teach Peter how to exercise leadership properly: washing feet, accepting the cross, warning him of his weakness, helping him see that his leadership position is not earned or a reward for greater spiritual insight. Jesus teaches all of his followers to wash feet, take the lowest place, renounce dominating power. So Peter does not monopolize but symbolizes the ministry of leadership.
5. MM is healed by Jesus: accompanies and supports him on his public ministry; is present at the cross, knows where he is buried, goes to the tomb early Sunday morning, reports her experience to the disciples. In short, MM, who experienced all aspects of the paschal mystery, gave witness to what she saw and heard of Jesus in his public ministry and as the risen Lord (a prophetic witness) which is the calling of all Christians. The leadership and prophetic roles, which can be experienced by men and women, are complementary (for example leaders should provide open space and encouragement to prophets and prophets should challenge leaders to be true servants and to avoid abuse of power).
6. Schneiders recalls the encounter of MM and the Risen Christ in the garden (the aesthetic dimension of the Magdalen function) MM disconsolate over the death of Jesus and the apparent removal of his body, catches sight of Jesus, but supposing he is the gardener, who says why are you weeping; She says if you moved the body tell me where; Jesus then addresses her by name "Mary" and recognizing him she says Rabbouni (a very familiar, loving word used nowhere else in the NT which is translated as "Teacher"). Jesus says do not cling to me but go tell my brothers. I am ascending to my God and your God; MM goes and tells the disciples "I have seen the Lord" and repeats what he said to her.
7. Schneiders reflects on the scene: "All the power of the uttered name on the lips of the lover, all the tension toward physical meeting that can never slake the desire for personal union nor be satisfied with what is given to the outward sense, all the mystery of the personal encounter in which touch is both mediator and boundary, gift and restraint, all the ache of reunion in which the surrender of the precious past is the only way into the mysterious future, are captured in that restraining Do not touch me." And "The reader who is able to readily enter into this scene, no matter how tentatively, because it does burn with the incandescence of the aesthetically dangerous, understands in some way his or her own longing for life in a new world, the world in which Jesus's God and Father is finally ours in which participation in the community of faith is the locus of enduring encounter with the Risen Lover." And "Mary Magdalene is not simply a figure of the past, and her encounter in the garden is not something that happened in the past. She lives. This encounter occurs every time the believer reaches toward her Lord and lover and know herself created anew by his speaking of her name."

- C. Mary Magdalen, the reformed prostitute as symbolic figure (*cf Who Was Mary Magdalene?* By James Carroll, *Smithsonian Magazine*, June, 2006)
1. She embodies Christian devotion defined as repentance. Her story has been used to discredit sexuality and disempower women.
 2. Her legend has "clear erotic overtones:" her history as a sex worker, the words of the risen Jesus, do not cling to me (John 20: 11-18) loved by Jesus more than any other women (Gnostic Gospel of Mary); married to Jesus (Dan Brown novel); identified as the woman getting married at Cana, and the woman taken in adultery; her love as an ex-prostitute for Jesus (*Jesus Christ Superstar*).
 3. MM symbolizes male fantasies of women, both as the pure Madonna and the temptress; also the tension between men and women and their roles in society and the Christ. Peter suggests in Gospel of Mary that Jesus would not choose MM over the male disciples.
 4. Men controlled women in the Church by reducing them to their sexuality as with MM. Sexuality itself was debased in this process.
 5. The strongest element in the sexualizing of MM was the male need to control women and maintain power.
- D. Karen King, NT professor at Harvard (NPR interview)
1. MM was a prominent leader of one wing of the only Christian movement that promoted women's leadership.
 2. She was a travelling disciple of Jesus and according to one tradition the first witness to the resurrection.
 3. In New Testament times women played leadership roles (*cf* Romans 16 when Paul greets women apostles and deacons), including leaders of house churches (Apphia in Philemon 1:2; Prisca in 1 Cor 16:19; Lydia in Acts 16:15; Nympha in Colossians 4:15).
 4. Gospel of Mary represents MM as "a prophetic visionary" who taught the male disciples.
 5. Outlines of women's theology: Jesus is seen as teacher and mediator men as the rules and judges; more emphasis on the risen Christ than crucified savior; there is direct access to God through the gift of the Spirit, the perfection of the Spirit is present now in the Christian community, the spiritually advanced serve as this without claiming hierarchical authority; an ethic of freedom is stressed over an ethics of order and control; women were not confined to domestic roles; spirituality includes working for justice.
 6. The erasure of women's roles: the female apostle Junia is given a male name Junias; MM is turned into a repentant sinner; Paul tells women to be silent in liturgical services.
 7. This attempt to erase women's experiences did not completely eliminate women's actual practice and importance in the tradition.
- E. Elizabeth Johnson 2015 lecture at Fordham

1. MM is remembered in Sequence for Easter Sunday, "Tell us, Mary, what you saw on the way. I saw the tomb of Christ living and the glory of his rising. Angels attesting, the clothes and the shroud. Christ my hope is arisen; he goes before you into Galilee."
 2. Feminist interpretations: tip of the iceberg; the meaning of absence; generic words like apostle taken inclusively; proscriptive texts are often descriptive.
 - a. Iceberg - It is remarkable in a patriarchal culture that MM is given such prominence. This suggest she was probably even more prominent than the Gospels report.
 - b. Absence - When she is absent in the Paul's list of witnesses this could well be because of bias that precluded women as official witnesses. In the feeding of the multitudes it says 5000 men were fed "not counting the women and children." We can presume that MM was at the Last Supper though not named. Also we have an indication she was present for Coming of the spirit on Pentecost since Luke tells us some women were present (Acts 1:14).
 - c. Inclusive - We can assume MM functioned as an apostle although the NT does not give her that title. She is properly called the "Apostle to the Apostles."
 - d. Descriptive – We can assume Mary functioned as a prophetic witness. The fact that Paul told women to be silent at public worship means some women were speaking publicly.
- F. Diminishing the role of MM
1. MJ Lagrange (1855-1938), an early leader of Catholic biblical renewal, says the appearance to MM was a reward for fidelity and prepared the way for the more important appearances to the apostles who were official witnesses.
 2. Some NT scholars contend that John 20 is dependent on 1 Cor 15:5-8 and MM role is relatively insignificant compared to the appearances to male disciples who become the founders of the Church. Paul's report is more reliable than the Gospel appearance narratives. John's Gospel put more emphasis on the superiority of the beloved disciple to Peter's than on the comparison between MM and Peter.

IV. Applications

- A. Officially:
 1. In June of 2016, Pope Francis raised the July 22 memorial of St. Mary Magdalen to a feast, like the Apostles and called her a "true and authentic evangelizer."
 2. An accompanying article called her "an evangelist who proclaimed the central joyous message of Easter" and said her feast calls all Christians to "reflect more deeply on the dignity of women, the new evangelization and the greatness of the mystery of divine mercy."
 3. The Gospel for the feast is John 20:1-2, 11-18 which includes MM's encounter with her risen Teacher and her report to the disciples "I have seen the Lord."
- B. Personally developing an Easter spirituality

1. The virtue of gratitude: MM experienced the healing power of Christ which prompts reflection on how we have been healed and strengthened by gifts from the risen Lord: patience to endure suffering; forgiveness of our sins; hope in dark times; blessings of health we take for granted.
2. Generous service: MM followed Jesus, shared in his ministry and supported his work, prompting us to participate more completely in the mission of Christ to spread the kingdom of justice and peace in the world: for example, donating more money to charity, tutoring disadvantaged kids, supporting the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, helping out at a food distribution center, supporting Bread for the World, joining Pax Christi to work for world peace, doing our part to protect the environment.
3. Accepting the Cross: MM who does not flee like virtually all the male disciples but is present as Jesus dies on the cross, encourages us to accept the inevitable crosses of life; the suffering of loved ones, the diminishment of age, frustration with the conflicts of family life, work that is tedious and fatiguing, political partisanship and gridlock.
4. Respecting the dead: MM goes early Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus, inviting us to reflect on how we can honor our deceased loved ones; honoring their memory, seeing them as members of the great Communion of Saints, praying for their assistance, trying to imitate their virtues.
5. Deepening our personal relationship with Christ: MM was close to Jesus during his public ministry and recognized the risen Christ when he called her by name. This suggests that we all hear the unique call of Christ and find our own way to grow spiritually. We may find that the practice of the great saints or the advice of monks or the courage of martyrs or the example of our saintly relatives and friends are not really helpful guides for our own journey. Growing spiritually is a unique process. Christ calls each of us by our name. There is a proper existential ethic that is more important than following general rules.
6. Proclaiming the good news: MM goes and tells the disciples that I have seen the Lord. She is the Apostle to the Apostles, the first to encounter the risen Christ. There is a proper Magdalene function of prophetic witnessing which she epitomizes but does not monopolize. We are all called to proclaim the joyful news of the way Christ has brightened and enriched our lives. As Pope Francis reminds us, we should not always act like we just came from a funeral. Parents can find ways to let their children know how their Christian faith has enriched their marriage and guided their efforts to be good parents. A similar dynamic can be operative in other relationships such as coaches and players, teachers and students, pastors and parishioners, grandparents and grandchildren. For the most part, we are more effective in sharing the joy of the resurrection through action, mood and demeanor than explicit words. We dare not speak glibly of Easter joy in the midst of great suffering and tragedy.

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