

Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb

A reflection on John 20. Originally preached by Geoff Oates at 10.00am on 22nd July 2018

Jesus said to her, 'Mary'. She turned towards him and said in Hebrew, 'Rabboni'.

Mary Magdalene is one of a small number of Biblical characters that really catch our imaginations.

More than 200 English parish churches are dedicated to her. Oxford and Cambridge Universities name a prestigious college after her.

What do we know about her? Perhaps because the Gospels say so little about her, there is plenty of room for us to speculate, for better or worse!

Well, if you're a fan of Dan Brown's bestselling "Da Vinci" Code, Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife, and the mother of his children whose descendents went on to dominate 8th century European politics! Dan Brown wasn't the first person to get this idea. It's been popping up amongst fantasists and conspiracy theorists for centuries. It makes a good story, but it's pure fiction.

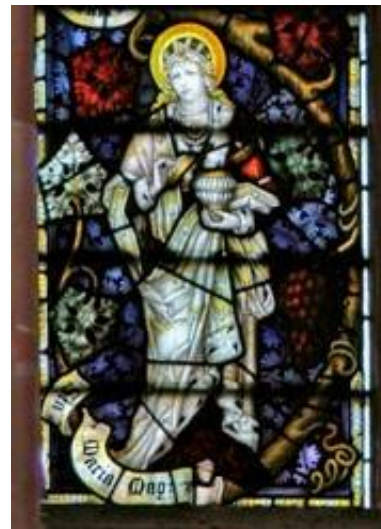
It was Pope Gregory the Great, in the 7th century, who did Mary Magdalene the greatest disservice. For some reason he managed to get her muddled up with the woman 'who lived a sinful life' in Luke Chapter 7 – the woman who poured perfume over Jesus feet and dried them with her hair. So he declared she must have been a prostitute. And you didn't argue with Popes in those days.

Sadly this went hand in hand with the Church's age-old preoccupation with sexual sin, especially female sexual sin over and above others, and over the centuries Mary Magdalene became, in the Roman Church at least, a kind of 'pin-up' repentant sinner. Pin-up sometimes in a rather literal sense, at least for the Renaissance artists who found that Mary gave them a great excuse to paint lavish pictures of a curvy young woman, who had obviously only just

repented as she hadn't had time to put her clothes back on yet. All in the name of piety, of course.

I'm happy to report that Pope Francis has recently had the courage to overrule his illustrious predecessor, and Mary Magdalene's reputation amongst Catholics has been restored.

The Eastern Orthodox and Protestant traditions never took much notice of it all anyway.



Perhaps we can excuse poor old Gregory's confusion, because one of the tricky things about the Gospel story is the sheer number of Marys. Just in John's account of the death and

resurrection of Jesus, we meet Mary his mother, Mary the wife of Cleopas and Mary Magdalene. Luke and Mark throw in Mary the Mother of James as well, and Matthew, running out of labels or imagination, and just adds 'the other Mary'. And of course, don't forget Mary the sister of Martha.....

The scholars do tell us that Mary was far and away the most common girl's name in 1st Century Palestine. Or rather, Miriam was. Mary, Maria, Marie, these are all our European versions of the name. Miriam, of course, was the sister of Moses. For pious Jewish families, Miriam was one of the few prominent and praiseworthy female figures from the old scriptures to name your daughter after.

So what does the Bible actually tell us about Mary Magdalene?

First, we know where she came from. Her name means 'Mary from Magdala', a small town on the shore of Lake Galilee. Luke tells us that she was one of a group of women that travelled with Jesus and the disciples, and who gave them financial support 'from their own means'. The scholars suggest that she was probably a widow, as they were the only women at that time who would have control of their own money – or the freedom to wander around for weeks on end following itinerant preachers.

So whilst they may be rather in the background in the Gospel story, as any Church treasurer will tell you, Mary and the other women were pretty central to the Mission. Nothing goes very far without a core of faithful, regular donors. Perhaps Mary Magdalen should be the patron saint of stewardship campaigns?

Luke also mentions, almost in parenthesis, that Jesus had driven seven demons from her. The incident is not described first hand in any of the Gospels, but we can assume that poor Mary has been a pretty mixed up kid before she encountered Jesus.

And that is all, apart from the passage from John's Gospel that tells of the first Easter morning. Here she moves from the background to centre stage. For St John reveals Mary Magdalene as the first mortal being to meet and recognise our risen Saviour.

When the women, and then Peter and John, discover the empty tomb, they run off again, in excitement, in confusion. To tell, to get help, somehow to respond in action to this amazing and disturbing event. Only Mary Magdalene stays in the garden.

It is not hope, but grief that binds her to the place. For her the empty tomb is just a painful disruption to the rites of mourning she had come to perform, the anointing and preparation of the body for final burial. Was even that to be denied her?

She stays and waits. She knows she is not ready to move on. In the deepest crisis of her life, she waits. And as Mary waits, so we

learn that Jesus has waited for her. It is in her very helplessness that Jesus can reach her. And she doesn't have to wait long. At first she seems not to recognise the man who appears behind her. Is there a broader truth there? When God comes to any of us in our hours of crisis, how often do we realise only later – perhaps years later – that the person who came to our aid was not after all a gardener, but Jesus himself?

'Jesus said to her, 'Mary'. That most common of names, and yet her name. Jesus did not die for the salvation of the world. He died, and rose, for Mary from Magdala. He died and rose for me. He died and rose for you.

And in a dialogue of just two words we find the whole truth of the Gospel.

'Mary', 'Rabboni'.

Through Christ, God calls us by name. In faith, we confess him as our Lord.

If we remember Mary Magdalene for nothing else, let us remember her for this. As the model for our salvation.

And as the first person to confess our risen Lord, we can acknowledge her as the very first Christian.