

Sermon for Easter Sunday, 4th April 2021: John 20:1-18; Acts 10:34-43

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

Occasionally, I have started planning a sermon and not been at all sure what I was going to say. Today, however, I have had the reverse problem of simply feeling there is just too much to say, and so many possible directions to go in.

This is partly because I absolutely love today's reading from John. It is just so vivid and full of extraordinary – and, it seems to me, clearly eyewitness – detail, which draws us straight into the action. It was still dark when Mary went to the tomb. “The disciple whom Jesus loved”, who I will call John as it is usually assumed that is who it is, overtakes Peter on the way to the tomb, but he lets Peter go in first. The cloth from Jesus' head is rolled up neatly and separately from the rest of the grave clothes. Mary remains at the tomb, weeping, when Peter and John leave. Despite everything Jesus had told them, none of them is sure what has happened. That last is an interesting point - why include something rather unflattering unless it is true? I could go on and on about John's genius as a writer, but for now I really want to talk about something – or rather, *someone* - else.

And that someone else is Mary Magdalene, because she was the first person to see the risen Christ. As I was planning what to say, I put Mary's name into a well-known online retailer's search facility, and that was quite an eye-opening experience -astonishing, but not entirely in a good way!

So I thought I would have a look and see what is actually known about Mary from the four gospels. The answer is surprisingly little, although it is more than we know about most of the disciples, and it is interesting how much we think we know for sure has actually come from tradition or interpretation.

Mary was one of a group of women “who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities” (in her case “seven demons had gone out”), and who then travelled with and provided for Jesus and the disciples. (Luke 8:2-3) The fact that she helped provide for them suggests she was well off - but we don't know that for sure.

The name Magdalene probably means Mary came from Magdala on the western shore of the sea of Galilee – but it might be a nickname given to her by

Jesus, like Simon Peter, as Magdala is also the Aramaic word for tower – and maybe Mary was a tower of strength for Jesus. That she was from Magdala is perhaps more likely, as the women join Jesus in Galilee – but we don't definitely know.

Mary witnessed the crucifixion – from a distance according to Matthew (27:56), Mark (15:40), and Luke (23:49), but near the cross in John (19:25), which is her first appearance in that gospel.

She sees where Jesus is buried (Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55) and sits outside the tomb (Matthew 27:61).

And then, on the first Easter Sunday she goes to the tomb - with other women in Matthew (28:1), Mark (16:1) and Luke (24:5,10), and apparently alone in John (20:1), although when she talks to Peter and John, she says “we do not know where they have laid him” (20:2). There are a variety of possible explanations for that, but they would send things off on a tangent! It is the events of that morning that make Mary Magdalene so significant, as she became the first person to see the risen Christ and then share the news of the resurrection.

Why though was it Mary, not Peter, not John, not one of the other disciples, who had that honour? That is what I would like to turn to now.

I don't think there is any doubt that Mary Magdalene was a woman of enormous courage. In John, we are told that Jesus' body had been wrapped with spices under the supervision of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (19:38-42), so Mary was not coming to the tomb for that purpose but probably simply to mourn. That in itself was a brave thing to do. I would imagine that there was a febrile, restless and tense atmosphere in Jerusalem; thousands of pilgrims were still there for Passover; both the Roman and Jewish authorities had been frightened by the events of the last week, and from Matthew (27:62-66) we know that the tomb was being guarded. It is hard to imagine that a lone woman (or indeed a group of women) visiting the tomb could expect a friendly welcome. As it was still dark – both literally as it was before dawn, but also figuratively as the light of the world had gone out at Christ's death - Mary probably felt even more vulnerable than she might otherwise have done. So to visit the tomb was brave.

Mary's courage is then heightened by her anger and her grief. I am sure that she was angered by what she believed was the theft of Jesus' body, whether

by grave robbers, or by the guard to prevent the tomb becoming a focus for pilgrimage and resistance. Her grief will have come from the same cause, and the fact that she no longer had a place to mourn her lord.

You might imagine that once she had told Peter and John what had happened, she would not return herself, having handed the problem over to them, or failing that, that she would have left the tomb with them. But she didn't, although by now I expect she was pretty afraid. She continues to demonstrate the loyalty and courage she showed when she stood by the cross; she did not desert Jesus then, and she would not do so now. And that courage remains an example to us. We have seen recently an astonishing instance of bravery from Sister Ann Rose, the nun who asked the police in Myanmar to kill her, instead of the young protestors on the streets. So inspiring was Sister Ann Rose that even two of the police knelt with her, their hands clasped as if in prayer. That is an extreme example, but courage remains a crucial part of Christian life and witness, and Mary's bravery was one reason that she was the first person to see Christ after the resurrection.

The other reason that she was the first witness is that when Peter and John leave, Mary nevertheless persists. She is determined to find out what happened whatever the potential cost or risk. Three times – first to Peter and John, then to the angels, and finally to Jesus himself – Mary says that Jesus' body has been taken. It is like the opposite of Peter's threefold denial that he knew Christ; Mary instead affirms her loyalty three times through her persistence, and calls Jesus "Lord" not only when she speaks to Peter and John but also when she talks to the angels, who it is possible she may not have recognised as such. Her reward for that loyalty was coming.

A theme that runs throughout John's gospel is that of looking for Jesus. Jesus' first words in John, at the beginning of his ministry, directed to Andrew and another, unnamed disciple of John the Baptist, are "What are you looking for?" (1:38). In Gethsemane, at the end of his time with the disciples, he twice asks the soldiers "Whom are you looking for?" (18:4,7). Now, at the resurrection, he asks Mary the same question (20:15). Mary is here connected to, indeed I would argue put on a par with, the disciples, and responds to Christ as Andrew and his friend do, calling him "Rabbi". John's gospel, from beginning to end, shows us that Jesus is what everyone is looking for, even if they do not realise it – but Mary certainly did.

Mary's persistence and resolve, then, mean that she looks for and finds Jesus. Her sorrow and anger turn to joy in that glorious moment when she recognises Jesus - as with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, that moment is postponed (Luke 24:15-16). And why does she eventually recognise him? Because he says her name. God is our shepherd who knows us all by name (another of John's themes, 10:3, 10:14); when he calls us, we must try to answer with the joy shown by Mary as she exclaims "Rabbouni!" (20:16) and recognises him as her teacher and lord, because he is still our teacher and lord, not just today but forever. Thus the light of the world had returned, and the darkness had passed.

Mary's courage and persistence both come from her faith, which she expresses so beautifully when she tells the angels that "they have taken away *my Lord*" (20:13). We all in our own faith have a personal relationship with Jesus, and this is what we see here with Mary. In the midst of the astonishing events unfolding around her, Mary still treasures that personal connection.

And so, what is the reward for Mary's bravery and determination? She is given a commission by Jesus, and not just any old commission. Mary has the honour of being the first person to share the most glorious news in all of history, that Christ has risen. She becomes, as Thomas Aquinas called her, the apostle to the apostles. The significance of this was acknowledged in the Roman Catholic church in 2016 when her saint's day, 22nd July, was elevated to a feast day, which makes her equal to most of the apostles (although, slightly ironically, not to Peter and John, for whom there are higher status celebrations).

It is extraordinary to think that, in the first century, when a woman was not deemed to be an adequate witness to anything, Jesus decided that the greatest thing that had ever happened should be seen and reported by a woman. We should also reflect that everything subsequently done by the apostles flows from Mary's mission; her testimony and her role were crucial.

It is the expansion of that mission from the Jews to the Gentiles which is the focus of the reading from Acts. The apostles take a long time to get the point about this – after all, in Matthew, for example, Jesus is explicit about his message being for the whole world (28:19) – and to us it may seem a bit odd that they don't get it. But I think we should not forget how earth shattering it was for them to realise that God was not just for Israel but for everyone. It is not surprising that the apostles took so long to accept this. Peter's speech to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household still feels revolutionary now –

“God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34). That is awesome and awe-inspiring, and also rather comforting. Jesus, as Peter said, is Lord of all; he does not favour anyone, and he is for everyone. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, we are all one in Christ (3:28). Jesus had certainly showed no partiality in the choice of Mary. Following on from Mary and the apostles, our mission today is to continue their work, and to spread that wonderful message, using all the courage and persistence that we have.

When Mary went to the tomb on that first Easter morning, her world was both literally and figuratively dark. When she left for the second time, her world – and indeed the whole world- was filled with light once again. From Mary’s first sharing of the news of the resurrection, the wonder of Christ’s defeat of death has spread all over the world. It is the greatest news there could ever be, and Jesus chose to reveal it to a woman full of courage and determination. If Magdalene was a nickname suggesting Mary was a tower of strength, it was an appropriate one. This Easter, let us all try to follow Mary’s example, and share the ultimate message of light and life.

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