

McCabe United Methodist Church

Living to Tell the Story: Mary Magdalene

Sermon on John 20:1-18 (Easter Sunday weekend; 3/26 & 3/27/16)

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Note: The risen Lord gave Mary Magdalene the instruction to “Go and tell!”. As a preacher who happens to be a woman, this instruction from Jesus to Mary has been very powerful throughout my pastoral ministry. I offer this sermon in Mary’s voice, from Mary’s perspective, as I have imagined it. My hope and prayer is that you will find part of your own story in Mary’s story – and that you will live your life in a way that tells the joy and hop of the Easter Story ~ Pastor Jenny

God of death and resurrection, I pray these words are acceptable and pleasing to you. May this Easter story nestle-into the hearts and minds of all who hear it...and may we be inspired to live and share its joyful hope. Amen.

I went to the garden alone that morning.

It was so quiet. Hardly anyone was out walking the streets...it felt like I was the only one in the world as I headed to the tomb.

It was so quiet outside, but my mind was anything but quiet. My heart was aching and I felt a weariness in my soul like nothing I’d experienced before.

It seemed like I’d been crying for two solid days as I walked to the garden that morning – it felt like I’d cried all the tears I could cry and my body was tired... heavy. I could have stayed home for the rest of my life after the events leading up to that morning...but I had to go to the garden. I had to go to the tomb.

As I walked the streets of Jerusalem early that Sunday morning, I thought about the days before, late in the week...I thought about the places we’d been as we followed Jesus’ trial.

I walked by the Temple with all its courts...the places where the religious leaders had met with Jesus...and where they had decided to hand him over to Pilate.

I walked by Pilate's headquarters and the place where he'd brought Jesus out to be sentenced by the mob... I remembered what it had felt like being surrounded by the crowd, wailing as they yelled, "Crucify him!" "No!" I cried. But my protests had been swallowed up as others taunted Jesus and shouted their death wishes.

They didn't know. They didn't understand. They didn't get it.

Well...none of us really knew, I guess. None of us *really* understood him. None of us really got it. But we tried. And it hadn't always been like that – we hadn't always been surrounded by crowds of people willing him to die... He was often surrounded by crowds of people, but they weren't usually like that.

He was different. We all knew that.

Everyone knew he was different...but it was hard to figure out exactly what it was about him that *was* so different. He looked like an ordinary man – there was nothing special about his appearance...but there was just something there...

It was like there was a radiance surrounding him: no matter what was happening, no matter who he was talking with or even arguing with, it was like he was saturated with light. You couldn't see the light...it was just...there. And when you were with him, it was like you became a part of that light...

As I walked to the garden that Sunday morning, I thought about so many things. I tried to remember when I'd first met Jesus, when I'd first been invited to be one of his followers – but I couldn't remember.

In my head I knew that it had been sometime in the last year, or so...but it was like nothing before seemed to matter anymore. There was my life before I knew Jesus – and then, when I met him, the whole world was different and everything else just faded away.

It's strange, don't you think...how one person can do that to you? How one person can enter your world and turn everything upside-down...? But that's what he did – to me, to Peter, to John...to Judas...to the religious leaders...to everyone. He turned us upside-down and inside-out.

And he was young – we were all so young. I think for a while that's why the religious leaders ignored him, and why the Roman officials didn't seem too concerned. He was young. He was just a craze.

But he *wasn't* a craze. He was accepting. He invited men to become his students who hadn't been accepted by other rabbis. And he invited *women* to be his followers, too...women! Other rabbis wouldn't have even considered that. I felt so blessed...we *all* felt so blessed to be with him, to be a part of his life.

And the things he did and said!

There were the people he healed, the thousands he fed... He truly was all the things he said he was: “the bread of life,” “the light of the world,” “the good shepherd.”

Many of the religious leaders thought Jesus was possessed by demons...they just didn't get it...and they were scared of him – scared of what he said, scared of the things he did, scared of his power. It didn't make sense to them that God had blessed someone with such strength and grace.

Even the disciples didn't usually understand what Jesus taught...at least not right away...in fact, some of his first disciples only stayed with him for a short time: it got too hard...his words were too mysterious, too challenging. Yet, people kept following and Jesus kept inviting.

It was all so wonderful for a while...but then everything changed.

Things started to unravel and we couldn't fix it. And he *wouldn't* fix it.

As I walked to the garden that Sunday morning, I kept feeling the pain of the trial when Pilate had brought Jesus to his judgment seat outside...hearing everyone taunting him and shouting "Crucify him!"

But nothing was more awful, more painful, than when we were standing near the cross after Jesus had been crucified.

I was with Jesus' mother, his aunt Mary, and John, one of his beloved disciples. Most of the others had deserted us – they were scared.

We were scared, too...but we just couldn't leave him there, dying all alone. So we stood there, huddled together, clutching onto one another as the blood flowed from his wrists and ankles, and as his breathing became more and more labored.

When it was almost finished, he looked down at his mother, and then at John, and said to his mother, "Woman, this is your son now." Then to John he said, "This is your mother now."

It was so sad...but so beautiful. It was so...*him*.

That was how he was – always taking care of everyone, challenging us to take care of each other. And so of course he made sure his mother would be taken care of...of course he did.

Moments later he breathed for the last time...and it was finished.

The world had felt so full of light with him in it...and in that moment everything became empty and dark.

We all stood there for what seemed like hours...we just couldn't leave him by himself, hanging there on that awful cross. We waited until Joseph and Nicodemus came.

Joseph had come from Arimathea and he had gotten permission from Pilate to take Jesus' body down from the cross so that he could go bury him. So, Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus' body to the garden that's near Golgotha, where Jesus had been crucified.

They prepared his body with spices and burial cloths, and they buried him in a new tomb that was there in the garden. They rolled a heavy stone in front of the tomb to secure it...and it was done.

I couldn't even tell you what happened after that – what I did the rest of that day...what I did the next day...nothing seemed to matter.

It felt like I'd lost everything...like we had lost everything – me, Peter, John, the other disciples...the world.

We'd had something to live for – he had brought a hope into our lives we hadn't known before. He had given us a way of looking at the world that opened our eyes to new things...he had given us compassion, shown us what it looked like to truly care for one another.

More than that, being around him was like...I don't know...it was like I felt closer to God just being *with* him...like God had come down to earth and was...walking around with us. It sounds strange, I know, but that's how it felt.

And it all disappeared that horrible Friday. Then it was the Sabbath... and then I didn't know what to do with myself that Sunday. The only thing that made sense was to go sit in the garden, to go be with him near the tomb.

I know it was just his body and that he wasn't really there...but it was like I didn't want him to be alone. It was like I couldn't *not* be there with him... So I went.

It was so early and it was so dark – it was a bit disorienting. I didn't like being there so close to Golgotha by myself, but I just *had* to go to the garden that morning.

When I got there I went to the place in the garden where Jesus' tomb was...the stone had been rolled away from the tomb and I could see Jesus' body wasn't there.

The first thing that went through my mind was that some of his enemies had stolen his body, and I was suddenly afraid of who else might be in the garden. The world started spinning around me as I stumbled away, running as fast I could to go find Peter and John.

When I found them I blurted out, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb. We don't know where they have put him!”

Without stopping to think or plan, Peter and John ran away as fast as they could toward Golgotha and toward the garden. I wanted to warn them to be careful, but they were so fast, John leading the way as Peter followed close behind.

I ran after them and got to the garden in time to see John kneel down to look into the empty tomb. When Peter got there, he went into the tomb and looked around. John went in, too, and they were in there for a minute together. They told me they saw the burial cloths lying there...and then noticed that the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was rolled-up in another place.

They were so confused – it was all so confusing. As they left the tomb, they walked past me as if I weren't even there...like they were in a daze, not knowing what to think or say. And all I could do was cry. I just stood there crying outside the tomb. I was alone...again.

After a while I decided to look into the tomb myself...and what happened next is kind of a blur. When I looked into the tomb and looked at the place where Jesus' body had been lying, I saw two...*figures*...and there was light everywhere in the tomb.

“Why are you crying?” they asked me. I was so disoriented I didn't know what to do but answer: “They have taken away my Lord's body! I don't know where they have put him,” I cried.

Everything was all so confusing – nothing was making any sense and the world just kept spinning and spinning. As I backed away from the tomb, I turned around and saw a man – the gardener, I assumed.

Our eyes met and he said, “Why are you crying” – it was the same question the figures in the tomb had asked me. But then he continued: “Who are you looking for?” he asked me.

There was so much spinning...I felt like the ground was falling away from my feet...but there was something in his voice...

“Sir,” I said through sobs, “if you have taken his body away, please tell me, so I can go and get him.” We looked at each other for a moment and I began to walk away. I was at the end of my rope and I needed to get away from that garden.

But then I heard him speak again: “Mary!” he said, and the world suddenly stopped spinning. I felt as though I were on solid ground again. Could it be? Oh, my God, I thought. Oh God, please...

I turned around to face him again. And there he was. *Jesus*. My breath caught in my throat as I fell to his feet. I threw my arms around him: “Rabboni!” I cried. “My teacher!”

In that moment I was racked with tears of joy. I could have stayed there forever...in that garden...at his feet. It felt like Spring had come, like everything in the world was new – like it would never really be dark again.

Then he knelt down, looked at me and said, “Don't hold onto me! I have not yet gone to the Father.” There was so much love in his voice as he continued: “Tell my disciples that I am going to the one who is my Father and my God, as well as your Father and your God.”

My heart was so light as I ran out of the garden to find the disciples. And though Jesus had told me what I was supposed to tell them, when I found where they were, I couldn't help myself and I first exclaimed, “I have seen the Lord!”

I had seen him! He had called me by name... “*Mary*,” he had said...and I can't seem to get his voice out of my mind. “Mary!” he'd said. “*Mary!*”

When he calls your name it's like he knows you inside and out. Whatever you've done...whoever you've been...it's like he knows – and it doesn't matter... because when he's there with you it's like you are brand new, like you can start over.

That is love. It's grace.

He had told us, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. And by your love, everyone will know you are my disciples.”

As I left the garden that morning, I left alone...but it was like I knew he would be with me – always...and I wanted to share him with everyone. I wanted to share his love...to show the world what love looks like, what grace looks like...what acceptance looks like.

At the beginning of that week, crowds had shouted “Hosanna!” when Jesus rode through Jerusalem. Then, on Friday, they had shouted “Crucify!” But the only word that came to me as I left the garden that Sunday morning was “Alleluia.”

“I have seen the Lord!” I told the disciples. “I have seen the Lord!”

That's what I said. But what I was thinking was, “*Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*”