

“Mary Magdelne: From Sidelines to Spotlight”

Today we continue our series on “Unsung Heroes of the Faith.” It’s a look at some of the men and women recorded in Scripture who generally aren’t well-known and lifted up regularly as testimonies of God’s grace and power working out in their lives. They aren’t so different than you and me – people not in the headlines, who aren’t social media influencers...who are simply living lives in relative anonymity. And yet God knows them, is with them, and works through them in powerful ways. This morning we take a look at Mary Magdelene. **Read John 20:1-18.**

Pray. **So, who was Mary Magdelne?** Let’s start there. After all, there are several “Marys” in Scripture – six, in fact. Along with the name, Salome, Mary (“Miriam” in Hebrew) was the most popular Jewish woman’s name at this time. The popularity almost certainly traces back to Miriam, the sister of Moses, in the Old Testament, but it got an extra boost about a century and a half before Jesus from the Hasmonean dynasty. We won’t dive into the details of that this morning, but suffice it to say: there’s both a religious and patriotic nature to the name “Mary” in first Century Israel, making it exceedingly popular – with maybe even 20% of women being named “Mary” in this time.

Mary Magdelene is also known for being delivered from seven demons by Jesus. That is noted for us in Luke 8:2 and in Mark 16:9. So, she’s been freed from serious spiritual bondage. **Luke 8:1-3 also names her among several women who provided for Jesus “out of their own means.”** So, she was likely a woman of some financial means, whose life was completely transformed by that deliverance from her spiritual bondage. As a result, she lived a generous life from place of gratitude and discipleship to Jesus.

We also know from three of the gospels that she was present at the cross when Jesus was crucified, and two of them place her at his burial, watching where his body was laid. All four gospels agree that she came to the tomb and found

it empty – whether she was alone, or with a few other women varies slightly by account, but she's there either way. We'll come back to that in a moment.

So, Mary goes to the tomb and John tells us that she does this “while it was still dark.” John's gospel is filled with this “dark” and “light” language. He also notes that it's the “first day of the week.” That's Sunday. For the Jew, both then and now, the Sabbath is Saturday – day 7. With a few exceptions such as the 7th Day Adventist denomination, we Christians worship on the first day of the week because that's the day Jesus rose from the dead.

At first, Mary assumes that Jesus' body had been stolen. Grave robbery wasn't uncommon. In fact, Matthew 28:11-14 tells us that when the guards who were posted at the tomb reported to the Jewish religious leaders that it was empty, they paid the guards to say that Jesus' disciples had come during the night and stolen the body while the guards were sleeping. So grave robbery was common enough that that's the story they spread.

But the truth always wins out in the end, and that story never gained any traction. **The story that won the day, and is still told today, is the truth of the matter: Jesus was raised from the dead. And the first person to report this is Mary Magdalene.** All four gospels name her at the discovery of the empty tomb. John names Mary alone, while the other three gospels also name one or two additional women with Luke adding “and the other women” for good measure.

Some skeptics point to these differences in reporting as though they catch the gospel writers in a lie. But from a historian's perspective, the agreement between the accounts is actually quite remarkable. **All four Gospels say that women were the first ones to discover and report the empty tomb.** This is particularly noteworthy because if Jesus' resurrection were a fabricated story – like the grave robbery story the guards were paid to tell – we would not expect women to be cast in the role of discovering the empty tomb.

First of all, in their culture, the testimony of a woman carried little weight. There's some scholarly debate around how little a woman's testimony

was considered in the mid-30's A.D. in a court of law, but it was clearly diminished and restricted in what situations their testimony could be used.

Second of all, Mary – while named throughout the gospels and clearly a disciple of Jesus – was in the next circle out from the Twelve. She's not one of the central figures we'd expect to discover the empty tomb and be the first to proclaim that Jesus is alive. If the resurrection of Jesus was invented, the gospel writers would have been significantly more inclined to have guys discover it – like Peter, James, John, or any of the other disciples – and have them be the first to proclaim that the tomb is empty...not a woman who is more on the sidelines of the story.

Of course, **Mary's *first* response is not “he's been raised from the dead” but that “his body was stolen.”** Resurrection was not on anyone's radar screen. A couple days ago Gwen and Brooke joined a friend of ours on his boat for some early morning water skiing. I figured they'd be home by 9:00 or so. By 10 they still weren't home, so I checked my phone to see where they were, and they were on the other side of the lake, north of 520 a mile or so, at a dock in front of a private home. My first thought was, “Huh, Kevin – the owner of the boat – must know someone at that house and they stopped by to say hello” just as someone might stop briefly by your house while driving or walking by. That seemed like the obvious explanation.

As it turns out, the water ski rope got caught in the boat's propeller shaft out in the middle of the lake, and they had to shut down the engine. The wind and waves took them to this dock where my phone showed them to be at, before the tow boat was able to get to them and bring them back to Kirkland. The truth of what happened was nothing like my first guess. No one had “five hours on the lake” or “disabled boat” on their bingo card that morning. It's much the same with the resurrection of Jesus, as well: It was unexpected, and the logical explanation to her way of thinking, is “grave robbers.”

That's why Mary fails to recognize Jesus at first, when she talks with him in verse 15. In fact, she's already encountered a couple angels when she looked inside the tomb – which Scripture tells us was cut out of a rock,

essentially making it a small cave – and now she meets someone she assumes is caretaker of the garden.

Then comes the moment that everything changes for her. This whole passage, as far as Mary Magdalene is concerned, hangs on verse 16 when Jesus calls her by her name: “Mary.” **Suddenly, her eyes are opened to see the deeper reality of who is talking to her. This isn’t the gardener. This is Jesus, who knows and cares for her.** She responds in Aramaic – the common trade language of the day as we talked about quite a bit in the Daniel series that came before this one – and **John translates it for his readers: Rabboni. It sounds and looks similar to the Hebrew “rabbi.”** “Rabbi” is also similar to the English word “rabbit” but I promise there’s no connection. Rabboni means “teacher.” The Greek is “didaskalay”. It’s a common Greek word that is at the root of our word “didactic” which means to teach or instruct.

But what connects the dots for her and breaks through, is when Jesus calls her by her name, “Mary.” Up until this, she’s been looking with her physical eyes. **With Jesus calling her by name, she now “sees” deeper, spiritual truth: the reality that Jesus’ body wasn’t stolen by grave robbers, but that He is alive!** Resurrection has happened! And she is the first person to encounter him, as he calls her by name.

Then, after telling her to stop holding onto him – to “stop clinging” is a better reading of it rather than a total “don’t touch me” as though her touching him would defile him...Jesus then sends her out on a mission. Mary Magdalene, who has thus far been on the sidelines in the gospel narrative – yes, a key financial supporter of his ministry, but mostly in the background – she now is entrusted with a message to take back to the disciples.

In fact, in verse 17 Jesus calls them “brothers” – this is frequently noted by commentators that it’s the first time Jesus directly addresses his disciples using this language. We see similar language after the resurrection in Matthew 28. It’s a shift in language as Jesus sends Mary with this message, that he is “...ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

So, Mary goes with the message. She is called by name, she is entrusted with this message, and she obediently goes, sent by Jesus. **She becomes the first person to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus; to tell of his resurrection.** She goes from the sideline to the spotlight. Can you imagine her walking in on the disciples? John tells us in verse 10 that the Peter and John had already returned home. We know from the other gospel accounts and in the verses after today's passage that they also gathered together – they didn't just scatter. So, she goes to where they are. It doesn't take much imagination to imagine her walking in and every eye turns toward her.

Picture the scene: the Disciples are bewildered, grieving, and disoriented. Jesus is dead, their dreams are shattered, and now to add insult to injury: his body is missing. And in bursts Mary, undoubtedly beaming with joy, overflowing with enthusiasm – talking like she's a YouTube video playing on double speed. I mean, I can only imagine that the disciples might have been a bit caught off guard by her energy.

But John tells us what she said: "I have seen the Lord." Notice she goes from calling Jesus "teacher" just a couple verses earlier in the garden, to "Lord." She has encountered Jesus in a whole new way, and recognizes he is much more than just a teacher: he is Lord. He has authority over everything, including death itself. The grave can't hold him down. And then she told them everything Jesus said to her.

The rest, as they say, is history. And you and I are here because of her testimony to the disciples that Jesus is risen.

Certainly, his resurrection is good news. It's why we are here. But what makes it good is not just that he's alive, but that his resurrection means something personal for you and for me, through a relationship with Jesus. Back in John 10, Jesus uses a lengthy metaphor about sheep, sheep gates, and shepherds to describe who he is and his relationship with those he leads. In John 10:3 he says that the gatekeeper "calls his own sheep *by name* and leads them out." He knows Mary's name. Jesus goes on to describe himself as the gate, and then as the good shepherd saying, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." He

knows Mary and she knows him – not just as teacher, but as Lord. We see that here in the garden.

And: **Just as he did with Mary, Jesus knows your name** (your aches, your pains, your sorrows as well as your joys), **and he calls you by name.** And he takes the initiative: he comes to Mary...he comes to you. And like Mary, we respond by calling him Lord. He's the one with real authority in our lives. And then, as he did with Mary, and with the rest of the disciples as well, he also sends us out with a message. It's *his* message that he entrusts to us. Maybe you're the type of person who tends to stay on the sidelines like Mary did – you believe and trust Jesus, you follow him, you support his work, but maybe you're not as visible and out front as others. I think that describes a lot of Jesus' followers.

If that describes you (and if it doesn't!), hear this: You're in good company; and Jesus knows your name, calls you forth, and sends you on a mission and with a mission, as well. We're all on "Team Jesus" together, and with churches like ours, all over the globe, with the same simple message: "I have seen the Lord." We may not physically see him, like Mary did – but then again, physically seeing Jesus isn't really what mattered even for her. Mary saw him with her own eyes and still didn't recognize him until he called her by name. The seeing of him that matters is the deeper kind: seeing him as Lord, the resurrected one who calls and sends us.

So let God's work in Mary's life inspire you. Transformed and healed, called and sent, to bear witness to Jesus' resurrection and transformative work in your life...And we take that message out, so that others might join in on the rest of the story with Jesus, as well. Let's pray...Amen.