

April 30, 2006

“Mary Magdalene: The True Story”
John 20:1-18

FCF: Trading in the solid hope of the gospel for cheap allurements

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because of the work of Christ seen in the lives of those gone before us,
(anchor) we can take heart.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Here are some high dollar auction figures. The stuffed body of Toto the dog, who starred alongside Judy Garland in “The Wizard of Oz,” sold for \$3,680. A film prop, the statuette used in “The Maltese Falcon,” sold for \$398,500. The white polyester suit worn by John Travolta in “Saturday Night Fever” was sold for \$145,000. What a bargain.

What a waste. Collectors so fixated on the flashiness of their prize that they lose sight of what’s valuable. Trading in treasure for trinkets. Much like the novel claims by purported experts floating about today on the reliability of the Gospels. Eyes dazzled by new theories and finds that are said to provide such enlightenment when the real jewels have been right in front of us all the while. And so treasure gets traded for trinkets.

Much in particular is being said of Mary Magdalene. And that’s who we’re going to look at today – the true story of her life. The rationale is twofold – as a reflection back upon Easter and as a prelude to our upcoming classes on The Da Vinci Code.

SCRIPTURE READING: John 20:1-18

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

“There’s something about Mary.” I suppose we could start with that. She is a historical figure upon whose story much fiction has gathered. Some say the Bible was put together by Constantine, a pagan Roman emperor and that the Gospels were edited to support the claims of later Christians. “*Jesus is not the Son of God; He was only a man. He wasn’t viewed as God until the fourth century.*” And Mary? She was married to Jesus. In the original Gospels, Mary Magdalene, not Peter, was directed to establish the church. She was to be worshipped as a goddess. Jesus and Mary Magdalene conceived a child and named her Sarah. Sarah gave rise to a prominent family line that is still present in Europe today. And the Catholic Church has often assassinated the descendants of Christ to keep His bloodline from growing. Well, that’s a lot to hear in the morning.

Where in the world did all this come from? Well, you’ll have to come to the class for that. But the truth is that there is a mystique about Miriam of Magdala. Part of it is that the New Testament has such slim data on her. But here’s the thing. Just because data is slim doesn’t make it unreliable. And why is this data there? (**READ 2 Timothy 3:16-17**) There’s something about us – our understanding, our priorities, our affections – that is incomplete. We are Swiss cheese, walking around with these holes inside. And the Scriptures have been given to fill us. There is a danger then of letting these flights of fancy compromise this great end – the filling out of the holes in our lives. The Lord in His grace has given us this good deposit. We have this record of His work in the lives of those who’ve gone before us to stir within us, to quicken our hearts, to give us something to take hold of that we might take heart. This is a treasure. A living treasure that ought not to be traded in on trinkets. After all, look with me at what we find in its pages.

I. JESUS’ GREETING

Look with me at this beautiful exchange between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, just after His resurrection (**READ John 20:11-16**). Now think with me. What do we see?

A) *His Restoration*

We see His restoration, do we not? The wonder of the simple fact He is there.

1. His own

He is not dead. He is there, standing by her, talking to her, as alive as He ever was. The same – just as real with a body that could be seen and touched, bearing the scars. And yet different too – harder to recognize, able to pass through things. But it’s Him!

2. Of all things

He is alive! He is restored! And with that the assurance that all this groaning creation and all His groaning people will be restored as well. He is making all things new!

B) His Initiative

And notice this. In the midst of this great endeavor, He has time for a grieving friend. He comes to her, takes this relational initiative with her, and speaks these words.

1. Her grief

Mary is grieving. She is “weeping” – sobbing, not whimpering but wailing. She is crying, “*Where is the Lord?!?*” It is dark, light yet to dawn. She is confused, unable to see. To this one she thinks is the gardener, she says, “*Tell me where He is and I’ll go and bring Him back.*” It’s possible her tears keep her from really seeing. She is grieving.

2. Her name

And in that grief, He comes. He comes and speaks her name, “*Mary.*” And dawn begins to break. She then turns and says, “*Rabboni*” – literally, “my Teacher” – not of possession but affection. Remember His words from John 10? (**READ John 10:3-4**)

Illustration:

I came across a story recently of a dog who knew well the sound of a voice. Ginger was a Dalmatian pup with brown ears. And she was lost. The family searched and waited. Six years later, they got a call. Ginger was at an animal shelter. The family drove out to see, called her name, and the moment she heard their voices, she lit up in a way none of the employees had ever seen – after six years! That dog’s memory, the way she knew them and could pick them out – how much more our Lord with His own?

Application:

Listen. Some of us here know well the grief, the pain, the feeling that everything has gone dark. Confusion has settled in upon you. And you can do little more than wail. “*Where is the Lord?!?*” He’s closer than you think. He’s there. He’s alive. You’re not alone. There’s hope. He knows you. And despite all that He knows about you, He loves you. He knows you. And He’s calling your name. That’s what we see here – His work in the lives of those who’ve gone before us. And through it, we can take heart.

II. JESUS’ COMMAND

Now after the greeting, we see a command as well – perhaps a little puzzling (**READ John 20:17a**). What’s going on here? Is Jesus being cold, aloof?

A) The Reality of a Change

A change is being spoken of here – one for which Mary needs to be prepared.

1. Mary’s clinging

Seeing her Lord was hardly what Mary was expecting that morning. Being so overcome with joy and afraid she might lose Him again, she then grabs hold and embraces Him.

2. Jesus’ reassurance

And so Jesus reassures her. “*I’m leaving but not yet. Mary, this is a time for rejoicing and sharing the good news of what has happened, not clutching or closing down.*”

B) The Nature of the Change

But note the other side of the reassurance. It is a double comfort. “*I’m not leaving yet. But I am leaving.*” Again, He is preparing her for what’s coming.

1. The form of His presence

A change in the form, the nature of His presence with His disciples, was to come. After the ascension, He would no longer be physically present. They would not see Him.

2. But not the reality of His presence

But He would be there. And He is here. The form of His presence has changed but not the reality of it. Earlier in John’s Gospel, certain promises were made (**READ John 14:2-3**). He was leaving to prepare a place. But He was also going to return and take them with Him. Meanwhile, they were to go forward – and even then, never alone (**READ John 16:7**). This Helper, Counselor, “Paraclete” is the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, come to mediate Jesus’ presence in this world and continue His work.

Application:

All this is to say that our Lord is just as present now as He ever was. And one could even say even more so. He is just as present now as He ever was. And His people are just as dependent upon Him as we’ve ever been. He’s here. Now. With us. Think of what that means. There’s not a charge He lays upon us that we are to carry out on our own. Nothing at home, our workplaces, in school, in our ministries, nothing on our own.

Illustration:

Now do we believe that? A time came in the life of Francis Schaeffer in the ministry at L’Abri when he began to wrestle deeply with this very question. His wife Edith writes of him coming to her one morning and saying (**READ L’Abri, pp.64-65**):

Supposing we had awakened today to find everything concerning the Holy Spirit and prayer removed from the Bible – that is, not removed the way liberals would remove it, but that God had somehow really removed everything about prayer and the Holy Spirit from the Bible. What difference would it make practically between the way we worked yesterday and the way we would work today, and tomorrow? What difference would it make in the majority of Christians’ practical work and plans? Aren’t most plans laid out ahead of time? Isn’t much work done by human talent, energy and clever ideas? Where does the supernatural power of God have a real place?

Let those words sit for a while. Let them simmer. This is all so real. That’s what we see here – His work in the lives of those who’ve gone before us such that we can take heart.

III. JESUS’ COMMISSION

Finally, after the greeting and the command comes the commission (**READ John 20:17-18**). Mary is given a task, a charge, a commission with two components.

A) *The Message*

First, there is the message – what it is she is to say, the news she is to bear.

1. Of what was happening

She is to share with the disciples the news of what has happened. Yes, Jesus was dead. But no longer. It’s just as He said. He is alive. And a glorious ascension awaits.

2. Of who they were

But the news goes beyond what was happening to who they were. Note the personal pronouns. God is their Father. Christ is their brother. Notice is given of new standing with the Father because of their union with the Son. New standing and new security. Their new standing could no sooner be changed than the Son removed from the Godhead.

B) *The Messenger*

Do you hear? That’s extraordinary news! Such is the message. And the beauty of this message is borne out in the one chosen to bear it – the messenger herself.

1. Despite her status

Does it surprise you that Mary is the first witness of the resurrection? It's not Peter or even John. It's Mary, one of the women who followed Him. That would have been more than surprising in that culture. It was shocking. But Jesus came to Mary first.

2. Despite her past

Despite what she was. Despite what she'd been. Here it's worth considering her history ([READ Luke 8:1-3](#)). This is the first and only mention of Mary prior to Passion Week. Seven was the number of completion or perfection. Mary had been taken over by this darkness and needed deliverance. Demons controlled her, voices likely speaking through her, causing fits and acts of unusual power. Now keep that in mind here. Jesus delivered Mary from this condition, which prompted her to drop everything and follow him. He delivered her. And then He delegated her as the first herald of the gospel.

Application:

You understand what this means, don't you? No situation is too far out of His reach. And no one of us is so tainted by our past we cannot be used ([READ 1 Corinthians 1:27-29](#)). Or, as Alexander MacLaren put it ([READ MacLaren quote](#)):

There is no condition of human misery which Christ cannot alleviate. None is so sunk in sin that He cannot redeem them. For all in the world there is hope. Look on the extremest forms of sin. We can regard them all with the assurance that Christ can cleanse them—prostitutes, thieves, respectable worldlings. None is so bad as to have lost His love. None is so bad as to be excluded from the purpose of His death. None is so bad as to be beyond the reach of His cleansing power. None has wandered so far that he cannot come back...As long as man is man, so long is God ready to receive him back. There is no place where the sun does not shine. No heart is given over to irremediable hardness. None ever comes to Christ in vain. The Saviour is greater than all our sins.

That is good news and good news indeed. News well worth our holding onto.

CONCLUSION:

The treasure we have here – oh, why would we trade in such treasure for trinkets? The story is told of an oil field called Yates Pool ([READ IllustrationViewer2](#)):

During the Depression this field was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. Mr. Yates wasn't able to make enough on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family (like many others) had to live on government subsidy.

Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he was no doubt greatly troubled about how he would pay his bills. Then a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract.

At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as large. In fact, 30 years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day. And Mr. Yates owned it all. The day he purchased the land he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet, he'd been living on relief. A multimillionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn't know the oil was there even though he owned it.

I wonder if we really know what's there, what's here in the Gospels, in the record of such encounters as we see here between Mary and our Lord. The beauty of the greeting, the wonder of the command, the grace of the commission – we are wealthy people. With inestimable riches, incalculable privilege. Don't give yourself to flights of fancy. Don't exchange this treasure for trinkets, the truth for lies, freedom for bondage. The riches, the great reserves are here, here and found nowhere else. Praise God. And drill deep.

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