

Saint Day: Mary Magdalene

St. John 20:1-2,11-18: "We Journey with Mary from Death to Life."

July 22/23, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

### In Nomine Iesu

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Precious Savior, You are at God's right hand and intercede for us, and You are here and reveal Yourself to our hearts. We thank You for Your holy Word and Your most worthy Sacraments. We do not want any other signs and will not look for You anywhere else. But You know how much unbelief we still have to fight against. We pray You, increase our faith, open the Scriptures to us, give us a simple and childlike mind, keep us with You, grant us grace to confess You and never be offended at Your cross. Amen. (Laache, *Book of Family Prayer*, 286)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the twentieth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." ... / Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" / She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. / Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." / Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to Him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). / Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'" / Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" – and that He had said these things to her. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who has compassion on poor sinners and suffered and died for each one, dear fellow redeemed:

In the three years of Jesus' public work, the twelve disciples went wherever He went. But they were not the only followers of Jesus. The New Testament informs us of other men (Ac. 1:23) and women who traveled with Him. Regarding the women, the evangelist Luke writes that they "provided for [Jesus and His disciples] out of their means" (Lk. 8:3). Their financial support allowed Jesus and the Twelve to focus on teaching, preaching, and healing, rather than on finding daily bread.

The women showed this kindness toward Jesus because of the compassion He had showed them. Luke notes that some of the women *“had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities,”* including *“Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, [King] Herod’s household manager, and Susanna”* (vv. 2-3). Our focus today is on Mary Magdalene.

## I

As far as we know, Mary came from a village on the Sea of Galilee called “Magdala,” which made her, “Mary the Magdalene.” Mary would not have been remembered beyond her lifetime except for her association with Jesus.

She first beheld Him, as though peering through a dark cloud. Seven demons had taken residence in her. This could have caused her to behave in all sorts of troubling ways. One girl was possessed by a demon which gave her fortune-telling abilities (Ac. 16:16). A demon afflicted another boy by trying to cast him into fire and water to destroy him (Mk. 9:22). A legion of demons possessed another man and drove him into the desert to live among tombs (Lk. 8:26-30).

Demons inflict harm and are constantly working to move people to sin against themselves and others. According to tradition, Mary’s demons led her to sin especially against the Sixth Commandment. [Luke 7:36-50 has been applied to Mary Magdalene in the history of the church, but there is no proof that this woman and Mary are the same.]

We do not know how long Mary had been possessed by demons, but we do have an idea how it came about. Jesus explained that demons are only too ready to enter hearts that are empty of saving faith. He said that a demon *“finds the house [the heart] empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there”* (Mt. 12:44-45). Mary was in a terrible state. She had no hope. She was controlled by satanic forces. She appeared to be alive, but her body was full of death. If nothing changed, her anguish on earth would have given way to an eternity of suffering in hell.

Then the menacing cloud was lifted. Jesus stood before her, and as He did for many others, He commanded the demons to come out of her. Mary was freed from the chains of death that held her. The same powerful Word that forced the demons out of her body also worked its way into her heart. Her hardened heart of unbelief became a living heart of faith. She looked upon her Savior and loved Him for the mercy He had showed her. She could never repay Him, but she could follow Him and devote her life to Him.

## II

Mary joined the men and women who traveled with Jesus until their journey led them through the gates of Jerusalem on a Sunday of palm branches and praises. Still, the mood was tense. It was well known that many of the Jewish religious leaders despised Jesus. Would they try to have Him arrested during this festival week on charges of blasphemy and insurrection? And in fact they did, in a secluded garden with few eyes watching.

By Good Friday morning, word began to spread about Jesus’ arrest. Mary heard too and went to where the crowd was gathering to see what would happen. The religious leaders succeeded in turning the people against Jesus, and they pressured Pilate to give the order for Jesus’

crucifixion. Wearing a crown of thorns, bruised and bleeding, Jesus was sent out from the governor's palace carrying His own cross. A great many joined the procession, including women who mourned and lamented for Him (Lk. 23:27). Mary must have been one of these, because we know she was among the few followers of Jesus who stood by His cross at Golgotha (Jn. 19:25).

Her heart broke as she watched her Savior in such agony. How could they do this? How could this happen to such a great man? He had delivered her from her demons, and from death itself. But now there was no one to save Him. Darkness descended at noontime, and about 3:00pm, Jesus cried out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mt. 27:46). He was suffering the eternal fires of hell for sinners. Then He said, *"It is finished"* (Jn. 19:30), and followed that with, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* (Lk. 23:46). After saying this, He breathed His last.

Mary Magdalene witnessed all these things, but she could hardly comprehend what she was hearing and seeing. Could this be it? Could her Savior be dead? Many went home, but she and some of the other women from Galilee would not leave Jesus. They watched from a distance and saw Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take the body down from the cross and wrap it in a clean linen shroud. They followed the men and saw the tomb where the body was buried (Mt. 27:55-61). Then they hurried back to their homes before the start of the Sabbath at sundown.

God established the Sabbath for a day to rest and be refreshed and strengthened through the Word. But Jesus' followers could hardly relax. They could not believe their kind Teacher was dead. They worried that the authorities would be coming for them next. For their part, the women resolved to serve Jesus one last time. After the Sabbath, they would bring spices and ointments to give Jesus a more proper burial (Lk. 23:56).

But their spices and ointments would not be needed. The women found the tomb open and empty. While Mary Magdalene stood there weeping, Jesus appeared and spoke to her. She did not recognize who it was. But when Jesus said her name, *"Mary,"* she turned and cried out, *"Rabboni!"* – *"Teacher!"* This was Jesus' first earthly appearance after His resurrection. Mary – formerly inhabited by seven demons – was the first witness of the event that changed everything forever.

### III

It's a good story with a happy ending. But it's no good if that's all we see in it. We should recognize that Mary's story could just as well be your story and mine. Like Mary, we also were controlled by satanic forces before we were converted by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why in our baptismal liturgy, we ask sponsors to answer this question on behalf of the young child or infant, *"Do you renounce the devil, and all his works, and all his ways?"*

Through Baptism, the light of God's powerful Word pierced our darkness and brought us to faith. This saving Baptism into Christ is our continued defense against the demons who would do us harm. We return to our Baptism through repentance of our sins and trust in God's Word of grace. His Word leads us from spiritual death to spiritual life, just as His Word gave life to Mary.

The proof that this life is ours is based on what Mary and many others witnessed. They saw Jesus die. It was no elaborate hoax. They did not deposit an unconscious Jesus in the tomb and leave an opening for Him to escape. He was dead. Tombs are not closed and sealed unless this is certain. Listen to how Mary referred to Jesus on Easter morning: *"They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."* She assumes He had to be taken and laid somewhere because He was dead. Of course He couldn't move Himself!

And by this assumption, Mary was just as guilty as all the rest. Jesus had told them otherwise. He said He would die and rise again. But they did not believe it. No one had ever risen from the dead. We are tempted to the same unbelief. All we see around us is death. How can we be sure the dead will rise again?

Our certainty is not in what we see with our eyes, but in what others saw with theirs. Did the disciples believe Jesus could rise? No. What changed their minds? They saw Jesus alive multiple times. It was undeniable. Even when they were arrested and killed for preaching Jesus' death and resurrection, they would not deny His resurrection, because it was true.

Jesus' resurrection is a historical fact. It can be rejected, but it cannot be undone. Jesus rose in victory over death, so that each sinner can be certain of forgiveness. His resurrection means that God accepted His sacrifice on behalf of all sinners. Jesus paid the debt of your sin. He conquered your death. The death of your body in this life is only temporary. Jesus will raise you again, and then there will be no pain, trouble, or weeping.

When Mary saw Jesus standing outside His tomb, she wanted to cling to Him. But Jesus told her that His Word—and not His visible presence—would now have most importance. She was to share that Word with the disciples, that Jesus would soon ascend *"to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God."* This is the moment captured in Jerico's altar painting, which is also printed on today's bulletin cover. Jesus holds up His hands showing the marks of the nails and points to the heavens.

This painting reminds us to take Jesus at His Word, even though we cannot now see Him. We believe that He died and rose again for us, and that He has ascended into heaven to prepare a place for all believers. We learn with Mary to *"Set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth"* (Col. 3:2). We wait eagerly for Jesus to appear to us like He did to Mary, and then our journey **from Death to Life** will be complete.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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