

**Holy Trinity Sunningdale**  
**Sunday, March 6, 2022 – The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**Readings – Luke 8:1-3 & John 20:11-18**

Through Lent to Easter, we are studying the “Women of Holy Week” from the book by Paula Gooder who weaved imaginative stories around the names and characters of women in the life of Jesus to give new insight into the Easter story. In an upside-down way, we are starting from the end with Mary Magdalene – the first person to see the risen Christ. I tell you, it’s a good place to start. We all know the Easter story so well and we know the ending which in itself is the beginning of our welcome into the family of God!

Paula Gooder opens with some imaginative insight into Mary Magdalene’s home background, not recorded in the gospels, letting us into Mary’s mental health situation of restlessness and illness described as being possessed by evil spirits. This led to her first meeting with Jesus and the calm wholeness she experienced in his presence. Jesus invites her to sit at his feet like one of his disciples and learn from him.

Her first lesson was on the good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name – a familiar story to her because of her farming background she understood the relationship between shepherd and sheep. Even then, Jesus’ idea of shepherds calling sheep by name still boggled her mind. She thought it was a stretch too far! But she followed him with other women and supported his ministry.

Legends about Mary Magdalene abound. She is probably more well-known for false details and unproven facts. Often she is identified as a former prostitute or the sinful woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. But there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that either might be Mary Magdalene. She has sometimes been confused with Mary of Bethany, Lazarus’ and Martha’s sister. But Biblically, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are two different people. To make matters worse, Dan Brown wrote The Davinci Code and he alleged that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and that they had a daughter together. We know this of course to be false.

I want to share this morning, four aspects of Mary’s story – (1) Devotion, (2) Discovery, (3) Disappointment and (4) Delight

Mary is mentioned 14 times in the gospels, which is more than any other woman except Mary, the mother of Jesus. Often she is named in connection with other women but she always heads the lists, implying that she led the way or was influential to the others. We have no record of any family members causing many to imply that without any home or family ties she was free to follow Jesus. But maybe she left family and home to follow Jesus? And follow she did.

Her devotion wasn’t just in the resurrection story, she was devoted to Jesus when he was ministering in Galilee and she went all the way to Jerusalem with him. She was there at his crucifixion and also his burial. Her devotion didn’t stop at Jesus’ death and burial. Early on Sunday morning, Mary went to the tomb. John tells us that it was Mary who arrived at the tomb first! When she arrived at the tomb that morning she made her discovery.

Thinking that the body had been stolen, Mary went back to tell Peter and John. All three returned to the tomb. The mystified disciples returned to their homes. Only Mary Magdalene remained at the tomb. She could not give up. Definitely, she did not expect to see Jesus, but her devotion to the man who cast 7 demons out of her wouldn’t let her pull herself away.

Mary’s discovery was that Jesus was gone, he was no longer there. She reacted with disappointment. Mary Magdalene wept out of disappointment. Her devotion didn’t seem to have paid off. She broke down and cried. She was so distraught and overcome by her emotions that she didn’t realize that someone was right there with her. “Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” the person asked.

Distressed she assumed it was the gardener and replied, “Just tell me where you’ve taken him.” Then, her disappointment turned to delight!

Jesus called her name. Just one word – “Mary” – and everything changed. Jesus said, “My sheep know my voice..., I call them by name!” It was certainly true of Mary! Jesus called Mary by name. And immediately Mary recognized Jesus and grasped him. “Don’t hold onto me,” Jesus told her. He instructed her to go and share the news of his resurrection. Bernard of Clairvaux called Mary Magdalene the "Apostle to the Apostles", because of her role in telling Jesus’ disciples about the empty tomb.

So what lessons can you and I learn from Mary Magdalene that will help us in our Christian walk?

First, her devotion to Christ driven by her knowledge of what he had freed her from. She knew the reality of life under the powers of darkness and the glorious freedom which is found in Christ alone. That led her to give of her time and her resources to serve Christ. One lesson from Mary is gratitude to Christ for releasing us from sin and death.

Secondly, we all know that in our Christian life there will be seasons of suffering, grief and pain. Mary Magdalene cried at the tomb. She did not put on a brave face. She did not utter patronising words ‘it will all work for the good.’ In tears she said, ‘I don’t know where they have taken him.’ She didn’t know where he was but Jesus knew exactly where she was! She came to the last place she had left him – the tomb. She returned to the last place she was in his presence. She remained there, even when everyone else left and she was rewarded with the resurrected Saviour calling her by name.

There will come times when our heart is breaking and we can identify with those words “We don’t know where he is.” The hearts of many people in Ukraine are breaking and many Christians will be asking “Where is Jesus at a time like this?” This morning you have come to Holy Trinity and you had to come because something in your heart and soul said this is where you will meet with God. I want to assure you from God’s Word – Jesus is here and he is calling your name. Now the response is up to you. Mary fell at his feet in humble adoration – will you do the same?

Finally there is a challenge to us as a church family. Who are we telling about Jesus? How are we telling people this wonderful news?

Let us learn from Mary Magdalene – learn from her devotion to Christ, her search for Jesus, her honesty in the face of pain, and follow her example of telling others that he is risen from the dead. Amen.

Our next song – What Grace is Mine, gives us the words to respond like Mary Magdalene did. I sang it throughout the period I was preparing this talk. Let me highlight the chorus:

So I will go wherever he is calling me  
I lose my life to find my life in him  
I give my all to gain the hope that never dies  
I bow my heart, take up my cross, and follow him

Let sing meditatively as we contemplate the words.

**Dolapo Ogunbawo, 6 March 2022**