

## Sermon 11 August 2019 Mary Magdalene

### John 20:1-2, 11-18

Mary Magdalene is a fascinating character who features in the story of Jesus. We don't hear much about her until the last days of Jesus's life but there is no doubt that she played a very important role alongside Jesus during his ministry. This is really interesting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that she is a woman. But more on that shortly.

We first hear about Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:1-2. *'Not long afterward Jesus began a tour of the nearby cities and villages to announce the Good News concerning the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women he had healed and from whom he had cast out evil spirits. Among them was Mary Magdalene, from whom he has cast out seven demons.'*

Two interesting points here. Firstly, Mary was obviously a fallen woman who had repented and been forgiven. The reference to demons has given rise to all sorts of conjecture down through the ages, including the speculation that she had been a prostitute. However, there is no justification in the Bible for that assumption. It is, though, a wonderful story of redemption and renewal, a classic example of the power of forgiveness and how that can transform our lives. I say that because it is apparent that Mary became a close companion of Jesus. There are two reasons for that belief.

Firstly, even though this is the only reference in our Bible of Mary accompanying Jesus, there are several references in the Gospel of Philip of Mary being a companion to Jesus. Just to clarify, the Gospel of Philip was not accepted as part of the New Testament canon but is one of several books that have been acknowledged as having some degree of authenticity. Also, a recent programme on the life of Jesus as shown on the History channel made the same claim. I am not a Biblical scholar but the programme did appear to also have a significant degree of authenticity.

The second reason why I believe Mary must have been a close companion of Jesus is the role she played in the final days of Jesus, namely his death, burial and resurrection. I just cannot believe she could have had such a presence on those momentous occasions if she had not been such a close companion. So let us look at those occasions.

Firstly, Jesus's death. All four gospels record Mary's presence at the crucifixion of Jesus. She obviously wasn't the only one there but let's remember that virtually all the disciples had run for cover. Mary was loyal and committed to Jesus right to the very end.

Then there was the burial. Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man who owned a tomb was given permission to lay Jesus's body there. The only two other people recorded as being with him at the time were his mother, who was also named Mary, and Mary Magdalene.

Then finally, we have the Resurrection. Matthew, Mark and Luke record Mary, along with a couple of others, discovering the empty tomb. John, however, takes it a step further. According to him, not only was Mary the only person to initially discover the empty tomb, but Jesus also spoke to her. *John 20:11-18*. In light of that passage, I suppose we can say that Mary Magdalene was the first one to preach the Gospel. I think it is becoming clear just how important a role Mary played.

So here we have what is arguably the most pivotal moment in the history of our religion, and indeed our history, period, and who should be at centre stage? None other than a woman, and one with a rather dodgy past at that. Why is that significant? Because as we have pointed out before, women were very much second class citizens in those days, so to have a woman featuring to such an extent is quite amazing. Apart from anything else, if as is often claimed, these stories were concocted by the gospel writers in order to create this legend, no one in their right mind would have a woman playing such a vital role. It would stretch all credibility. So the fact that Mary was the one in these stories to bring to light this mind-blowing incident, surely puts a stamp of authenticity on the gospel writings.

In recent weeks we have looked at how Jesus turned the convention of his day on its head, and this was especially so in regards to the place of women in the overall scheme of things. Women were expected to take a back seat, to be present but not to really take part in proceedings, but Jesus challenged that mind-set. And here we have the defining moment in the story of our religion, Jesus rising from the dead, and who does he first appear to? Who does he anoint as his chosen one to announce this momentous moment? Mary Magdalene – a woman! It is very difficult for us, living as we do in what we would call a far more enlightened society, to fully appreciate the significance of this. It was massively significant. It says a lot about Jesus, and it also says a lot about Mary's role in the life of Jesus.

Some commentators have taken it a step further, or should I say several steps further, and have suggested that Mary actually married Jesus and they had children. That is mere conjecture and there is no evidence to support that notion.

There are two points I would like us to take away from Mary's story. Firstly, she was undoubtedly a companion to Jesus on his ministry journey. The fact that she doesn't really feature as such in

the Bible can be put down to the fact that she was a woman and so wasn't considered worthy of mention a lot of the time. The message for us is that we also need to accompany Jesus on our journey. Any journey will have times when the going gets tough. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, *'That is why we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid."'* Hebrews 13:6. We need Jesus alongside us on that bumpy journey. The second point is a reminder that her story is a wonderful anecdote of redemption and renewal. Thanks to the healing and loving power of Jesus, Mary went from being a woman immersed in sin to a woman playing an integral role in the greatest story ever told. It is a story of hope and new life born out of love and forgiveness. Let me finish with a similar story.

Casey Diaz is a native of El Salvador and a former gang leader. Raised in an abusive home and growing up on the mean streets of Los Angeles, he was forced to fight for his life. He was eventually incarcerated as one of the most violent criminals in California. Casey was a 'shot caller' in prison. Shot callers have an elevated rank in the gang world. They are the power brokers inside the prison walls and determine who gets hurt or killed and who doesn't.

One of the shot callers' responsibilities was to control the shanks within the prison. The shanks were crude homemade knives used for stabbing another prisoner. Casey kept them under his mattress. It would be suicidal not to give him your shank because if you didn't, he would have you killed.

One day Casey was visited by an elderly woman who told him that God was going to use him and that she would pray for him. Naturally, he scoffed, but then some time later he had an experience in his cell. He had a vision of Christ carrying his cross and Christ looked at him and said, 'Casey, I am doing this for you.' He hit the floor in the middle of his cell and started weeping. He confessed his sins, which took a while, and felt this huge burden lifted from his shoulders. He asked to see a chaplain who gave him a Bible to read.

When he was finally released from prison, he set up a sign company and spent a huge amount of his time speaking in churches, sharing his story with audiences around the country. He wrote a book called, 'The Shot Caller.' Parts of this book are not that easy to read but it is an incredible story of how God can reach even the worst of sinners. In that sense, it is a story of hope for us all. It is certainly a wonderful story of redemption, in the same vein as the story of Mary Magdalene is.

