



Sermon

- I -

I have been called a whore and a woman possessed of demons. I have been made into a sexless saint, an over sexed anti-Christ, a manipulative control freak, and a passive sidekick who served up one hell of a Passover Seder for Jesus and the men who followed him. The likes of Dan Brown and Martin Scorsese have played with the possibility that Jesus was my husband and that we bore children together. Anything that has been held up as the best and worst of woman for the last 2000 years has been projected onto me.

So let me tell you who I am. I am Mary Magdalene, Chief Female Disciple, first Apostle and beloved friend of Christ, and this morning I want to tell you about my beloved and how we changed each other's lives and changed the course of history. As it says in the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, which someone so graciously attributed to me, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

I was born in the town of Magdala, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, to a wealthy family and I was cursed with wanting more for my life than I was allowed. In those days, a girl's responsibility was to behave honorably and marry the man chosen for her. I seemed incapable of doing either. All I wanted to do was explore the world, and in my time women most certainly did not do that. I tried to accept what was possible for me, and I just couldn't. It broke my heart and my mind. I sank into a deep melancholy. I couldn't eat or sleep. I didn't talk to anyone. I didn't take care of myself. This pretty much sabotaged my marriage prospects. The longer I remained unmarried, the more uncomfortable people became. I was known as the woman possessed of seven demons and truth be told, I felt like a woman possessed by seven demons: demons of loneliness, fear, shame, anger, guilt, resentment, and despair.

And then one day, a travelling prophet came into town. This was nothing unusual. There were throngs of them. Some predicted the end of the world. Some promised an end to Roman occupation. All of them claimed to be healers for illnesses of all kinds. I'd gone to them all in the hopes that one of them could heal me.

As I walked up to this prophet, the crowd parted. It always did. Who wants to be defiled by the touch of a crazy woman? But this prophet came to me, put his hands on my shoulders, looked deep into my eyes, and said, “Your faith has healed you.” I had never seen anyone so beautiful before and I don't know what came over me. I asked him, “Rabbi, can I please follow you?” I can't believe I said that. What a crazy thing for a woman to say. But he didn't seem phased at all. He welcomed me into his circle and began to teach me as he was teaching his other disciples. He told us parables that stretched our minds. He preached from the scriptures in ways I did not know was possible. Most importantly, he gave us new ways to speak of the difficulty of being Jewish.

This was a horrible time for our people. The Roman Empire was a brutal empire and you saw that brutality everywhere. As we walked from town to town preaching and healing it was not uncommon to see the crucified, those executed for daring to challenge Roman authority. It was a terrible agonizing way to die. I always shuddered as we walked by. And we were supposed to. As you heard the agonizing groans of the not yet dead, saw the half eaten remains of the recently dead and the dried husks of the long dead, this was supposed to frighten you into submission and obedience.

So let me tell you what we did in the midst of this brutality. Jesus taught us when we were alone, then he sent us out to teach what we had been taught. He made us watch him heal the sick and then told us to do the same thing. I'll never forget my first healing. A woman was stooped over with pain. I took her hand, looked into her eyes as



Jesus as looked into mine, and said, “Your faith has healed you.” She straightened like a young woman not yet married. I ran to Jesus. “I healed her! I healed her!” “No,” he said. “You did not heal her, just as I did not heal you. Her faith healed her. You are not the source of the strength, you are its path. Let yourself be the path and you will always know what you are called to do.”

It was a strong lesson and one I practiced many times, which was good because the crowds that followed us grew larger and larger. We could not let our popularity go to our heads because that would betray everything we were about. Our teaching was deceptively simple and difficult to live. The Kingdom of God is not for the powerful, it is for the weak, so do not despair. The Kingdom of God is not for those who hold onto what they have, it is for those who give away what they have, so love your neighbor as yourself. I can honestly tell you I was never happier. I wanted this message to be me. I wanted to live these teaching, and in truth, I was loving as I had never loved, and didn’t know it was possible to love.

Hymn 108 *My Life Flows On*

- II -

There have been suggestions that my relationship with Jesus was more than a friendship. They would be right. There was a deep love between us. He would take me aside and teach me on my own. He would ask my advice. He trusted me to care for our group which was quite large. When we had need of food or money or shelter, I would go to my family. While it was hard for them to accept my unusual choices, they were so happy to see me well and happy. They came to believe in Jesus’ teachings and were happy to support his ministry.

But I have to admit, for all the joy and ecstasy, I always feared this time would end. Jesus would tell us to prepare for the time he would be gone. I could hardly listen. And then some the things he did! One Sabbath as we came out of the temple, a woman asked for healing and he did. The religious authorities were there in a second. “Don’t you know it’s against the law to heal on the Sabbath?” And Jesus said to them, “Man was not made for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man. So you go ahead and obey your little rules but I’m going to heal this woman.” And you know I loved what he said, but I just wished he would be more careful! His teachings were going to change everything. That couldn’t happen if he was gone! That night I begged him, “My beloved. Please be careful. I don’t want to lose you.” And he turned to me with those gentle eyes I had fallen in love with and said, “Mary, all nature, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another, and they will be resolved again into their own roots. He who has a mind to understand, let him understand.”

But I didn’t understand. I wasn’t ready to. And besides, it was Passover.

I loved Passover and I’ll tell you why. It had become more and more popular every year, one of the reasons the Romans tried to control it so much. Passover celebrated the freedom of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. The night of Passover is a night that is different from all other nights because on this night the angel of death passed over Egypt killing all first born sons, except the sons of the Israelites who had smeared on their doors the blood of a slain lamb. This is what finally convinced Pharaoh to set us free. We were now enslaved by the Romans, and every Passover would see an increase in armed resistance and counter insurgencies. So when we got to Jerusalem, there were soldiers everywhere. And what do you think Jesus did! He comes into the city on a donkey, the crowds surround us shouting Hosanna, which is all great but so much for staying under the radar! Then he goes into the temple and starts turning over all the money tables yelling and screaming that they have turned the



house of the Lord into a den of thieves. And I was like, you know, once again you're right, but think! This isn't helping!

But by then I had learned that he would do what he would do and I simply had to accept it. So I pretended all was fine and prepared for Passover. At least something would feel normal. I was so happy to be at Jesus' side that evening at our Seder. I never felt complete unless I was with him. And then he told us some things that frightened me so badly. “One of you will betray me,” he said. And each of us said, “Not I Lord!” Shortly after Judas left. Then Jesus held up the bread and said, “Take, this is my body.” And we all ate. He took the wine and said, “Take, this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” Suddenly the wine tasted like blood in my mouth. I felt sick.

And then he said, “I need to pray. Come with me to the Garden of Gethsemane.” And we did. He asked us to stay with him. He did not want to be alone. But I was so tired. Tired of being afraid. Tired of trying to understand his cryptic teachings. Tired from a long day of preparing the Passover meal. I am ashamed to say I fell asleep.

I awoke by the light of a full moon just as the armed guards arrived. Judas was with them. “Get up!” said Jesus, “let us be going. My betrayer is at hand.” Judas kissed Jesus. Some words were said. And they took him away. As I saw him disappear into the night it was as if my heart had been ripped from my body. It was over. Everything was over. I was alone.

Hymn 267 When Mary Through the Garden Went

- III -

It was decided that the women would go to the palace of Pontius Pilate. While we were equals with men in our circle of disciples, that stopped in the outside of it. No one would be suspicious of women so we'd have a better chance of getting closer to where Jesus was without raising the suspicions of the authorities. We didn't expect the outcome to be good. Friday was always a big killing day as they tried to finish up the executions before the sun went down and the Sabbath began. If Jesus was to be executed, it would happen quickly.

Four of us, including myself and Jesus' mother, set off early the next morning. We waited outside the palace's prison doors for what seemed like forever.

And the door opened and out he came. My beloved was covered in blood and carrying the beam upon which he would be crucified. I wanted to scream. He lifted his head and looked into my eyes and I forced myself not to cry. I would be strong for him.

I don't need to tell you what came next because I'm sure you know. But I can tell you what I felt. For the next three hours I felt maddeningly helpless. Enraged. Horrified. And absolutely lost. All I wanted to do was rip those damn nails out and carry him home where he belonged!

But we went home heartbroken and empty handed, and told the others what had passed. And only then, did I allow myself to weep.

So what do you do when the worst has come to pass? You eat because you're supposed to eat. You try and sleep because you're supposed to sleep. Life goes on even if it feels like your own has crumbled.



“Mary Magdalene, First Apostle, Tells Her Story”

Rev. Krista Taves

April 4, 2010

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Thank goodness for those who loved him. The bodies of the crucified are rarely returned to their families. It is the ultimate form of humiliation. But Joseph of Arimathea managed to buy Jesus' body and had him buried before the Sabbath began. And when the Sabbath ended I was determined to prepare his body as it should have been for a proper burial. I just had to be with him one more time. Mary and I bought the spices you usually cover the body with and went to his gravesite.

It was a long walk. It was a beautiful morning. What a cruel joke that the sun should shine on such a terrible day. And when we approached the tomb, ... the stone was rolled back.

I started to scream. “Who took his body? I can't believe this! Who took his body? Who would desecrate a grave? Everything has been taken from us! His love! His message! His promise of salvation! This was all we had left!”

But then Jesus' mother put laid her hand on my arm and said, “Mary. I think we're supposed to go into the tomb.”

Inside was a beautiful man in a white robe sitting on the right side and he said, “Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell the others that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

All Men and Women of the Earth (version by Kenneth Patton)

- IV -

I am Mary Magdalene, Chief Female Disciple, first Apostle and beloved friend of Christ and this is what I have come to learn. I would never lose my beloved. I saw him twice more – First when he came to me the very next day. He fell in step beside me and walked with me as we had walked so many miles together. And he said many things to me. You can read them in my Gospel.

The next time was on Pentecost, when he descended as the Holy Spirit into all of us. We spoke in so many languages that we learned we could speak his message of unconditional love and freedom from tyranny to anyone who would listen.

I also came to learn that I didn't have to wait for him to come to me. Sometimes, when I was by myself, I would take a piece of bread and say, “This is my body, broken for you.” And I would take a cup of wine and say, “This is my blood, poured out for you.” And I would know that I was never alone and that his message could never die with him. It lived in me.

As it lives in you. So let us rise from the ashes of doubts and despair. Let us proclaim the promise of renewal and rebirth. Let us celebrate the risen Christ, the Spirit of Universal love and compassion that is manifest in our living.

Amen.

Hymn 268 *Jesus Christ Is Risen Today*

Resources

The Gospel of Mary of Magdalene <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>

Rev. Tess Baumberger. “Mary Magdalene Tells Her Story.”

Susan Haskins. *Mary Magdalene*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994.

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*. New York: Harper One, 2006.