

Feast of Mary Magdalene

John 20.1–18



Way, way back it seems now, way back in 1989, something new, something quite unprecedented, occurred. The place was Boston, Massachusetts, the occasion was the consecration of Barbara Harris, African-American priest and civil rights activist, who on that day, became a bishop in the Church of God, the first woman bishop in the history of the Anglican Communion.

The occasion was marked by death threats and obscene messages, and Barbara Harris declined the bullet proof vest the police had recommended she wear.

The day was marked by the gift to the new bishop of a beautiful icon. Today, we have a pale copy of it leaning on the altar, and just for good measure, we have black and white copies of on our service booklets. The icon was written by Bro. Robert Lentz, of the Community of Christ the Sower, California. Perhaps Bro. Robert saw important similarities between the two women, despite the almost two millenia between their distinguished ministries.

This icon is a beautiful piece of work. Mary Magdalene's posture mirrors the posture we see taken by Jesus' mother in so many other icons; she looks steadily towards us; she is clearly

Middle Eastern; her long hair, and her plain red robe, which is completely unadorned by embroidery, give her an air at once both arresting and self effacing.

Mary Magdalene holds a white egg in her left hand. The gesture itself says “focus here,” whilst, just in case we don’t get it, her right hand, with index finger extended for emphasis, points to the egg. It is the same gesture we see in icons of Mary the Mother of the Lord, as she points to the Divine Infant.

But Mary Magdalene holds an egg. Why? This egg points us to two powerful myths. The first tells us that at the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene placed a bowl of eggs, symbols of new life, at the foot of the cross. They became saturated with Jesus’ blood, that blood which, besides being red, offers us abundant life of a quite different kind.

I invite you to hold that story lightly in your minds, while I tell you the other. This second story, set some few years later, recounts Mary Magdalene’s attendance at a banquet held in the court of Tiberius Caesar. Mary Magdalene stood in front of Caesar, plain white egg in hand, and said the words we, too, know well. ‘Christ is risen’, she said. Caesar laughed at this central act of proclamation, suggesting that Christ rising from the dead was as likely as the egg turning red even as Mary Magdalene held it. According to the story, the egg became red as he spoke.

Clearly, neither of these stories is to be taken literally. Equally clearly, they both point to aspects of the kind of transforming love which was Jesus’ gift to all of us.

Our icon has Mary Magdalene pointing to the egg. In this act, she is continuing to do just as Jesus asked her to do in today’s gospel reading. Outside his tomb, Jesus had asked her to go to those he had formerly described as disciples, but who, following his resurrection, had just become friends/apostles, to report that he was ‘ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’.

And the egg motif? Well, it does exactly what all myths are given to us to do. A myth takes a truth, which is too big, too complex, too deep to be contained in a simple concrete

statement of the kind we use habitually, and gives us a metaphor which vibrates with meaning in the same way that poetry, that music, that all good art does. Poetry, music, and art add nuances to a story, making it replete with the kinds of divine meaning we otherwise find it too difficult to apprehend.

But these were not the only stories of Mary Magdalene which have filled the centuries. We actually know very little about this woman who came from a community called Magdala. These are the things we do know: Jesus cured her of a complex illness, (in the idiom of the day she was said to have had seven devils); she was a faithful follower of Jesus, and helped to fund his work; she and a group of other women were present at Jesus' crucifixion; she was the first to see and speak to Jesus after the resurrection, on which occasion Jesus told her to take that momentous message we looked at only a moment ago 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God', to those who three days ago were disciples, and whom Jesus now calls brothers for the very first time, since they were now to become apostles.

And Mary, what does this make her? She has been asked to convey Jesus' most intimate and authoritative of messages to those who would carry on his work. The most apposite title, I think, is the beautiful and accurate "apostle to the apostles," which we often use for her these days.

Despite this clear and pre-eminent trust Jesus places in Mary Magdalene, the writer of the gospel of John gives us only the beginnings of what will become a heart-wrenching story. Like so many people about whom relatively little is known, even today, Mary has had her story tampered with. Details have been added, not always in order to add nuances which simple statements cannot give, and not always to point unambiguously to Jesus the Christ, but simply, and with malice, to diminish her, to vilify her.

Stories about Mary Magdalene have identified her as a prostitute, and have, systematically, trashed her. Pope Gregory the Great brought it to a head in 591CE, calling her a prostitute officially, and pronouncing that the seven devils we now recognise as illness were the seven

deadly sins, you know the ones: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride. Hardly surprisingly the art of the middle ages made capital of it. Such tales continue to be told.

So Mary Magdalene's story is a complex one. She was one of those who were closest to Jesus, who seems to have trusted her highly. She continued to point to him, into the period of the Early Church. Later, her story and her reputation were trashed, comprehensively. In our own time painstaking scholarship has revealed truths which show more clearly who Mary Magdalene was.

And today? What can we learn on this most poignant of Feast Days?

I can think of a few places we might begin. Sometimes we fill in information gaps in each others stories, sometimes we look backwards, filled with nostalgia and sentiment, more than we look forwards. Sometimes we live in the past, rather than in the future Jesus promised, a future which was, he said, full of his own truth which would make us free.

If we look carefully at what kind of woman Mary Magdalene was we get three clues. Three is a good number. It is generally do-able. It is unlikely to be grandiose. So . . .

Clue number one might be: Mary Magdalene loved Jesus with all her heart, all her soul, all her mind, all her strength, and she didn't hold back.

So, is there a place where I hold back on loving?

And clue number two might be: Mary Magdalene knew illness, had been vilified and misunderstood. She also realised Jesus was interested in her potential, more than her track record, and that a step at a time was all he was asking. She must have been hugely surprised to find herself being called the "apostle to the apostles."

So, what small step might I take in ministry?

Mary Magdalene took her part in making Jesus' name known, and in building the new community, the Church.

In a month, we will be beginning a third Sunday service. Can I read, pray, sing, bring someone to church with me, help with flowers, make coffee, or any one of a thousand other things?

Mary Magdalene knew that we are all here to minister to each other, and she didn't stint on this kind of godly and practical loving.

Here, in this beloved Cathedral parish, we have talked and dreamed of growth into an extra service each Sunday, and in other ways, too, for more years than I can remember. In order to be available for God's dreams, as well as our own, we need to take home our pictures of Mary Magdalene, and with our hearts open like hers, and ask the question:

Is Mary Magdalene a good model, holding up potential for new life here at St. Paul's, to families and neighbours, to this city of Bendigo and beyond?

The Lord be with you

Judy McAdam
Bendigo
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