

*St Brandon's, Sermon for St Mary Magdalene + Baptism,  
22<sup>nd</sup> July 2018. Song of Solomen 3:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:14-17;  
John 20:1-2, 11-18*

***Mary Magdalene***

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Last time I preached it was about the story of Adam and Eve. That story has often been used by society to put women down in a general and inclusive way, reading it as suggesting all women are easily deceived and corrupted. It will have played into the notions that women are not capable of being trusted in decision making, having the vote and so on. Well, today's gospel story can help set the record straight.

Today we are celebrating the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene who, very much because she was a woman, can claim the special position of being first among Jesus's disciples to see the risen Lord, and trusted to spread the good news. (Now, apart from unpacking that slightly provocative statement in a few minutes, I'm not going to give you a whole sermon on the feminist perspective, you can look for that yourselves.)

Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all four of the gospels, as always, with some variation of detail but the consensus between the gospels seems to be broadly this:

- Mary Magdalene, having been cured by Jesus of seven demons, becomes one of his followers, along with several other women, who help support the disciples.

- At the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene is present, standing where she can see the cross: she therefore witnesses his death;
- she also sees where the body is laid but it is sabbath, so she can do nothing.
- She returns to the tomb early the next morning, with spices, intending to anoint Jesus' body but there isn't a body: she finds the stone rolled and the tomb empty.
- She runs to tell the disciples - in some versions because she's told to by angels attending the empty tomb;
- the disciples don't believe her, though Peter goes to look but not understanding the meaning of the empty tomb goes home again.
- But Mary stays at the tomb after Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved have gone home.
- She stays, and encounters the risen Lord.

I said at the beginning that the events occurred like this very much because she was a woman. Partly that's because it was specifically woman's work to clean and anoint the dead. It was for her, or in other gospels, her plus other women followers, to do this work.

Presumably, that is why she watched to see where the body was laid so she could return to it.

But I think there is much more going on than that.

More that is emotional and love-driven.

Mary Magdalene had been healed by Jesus, he had changed her life by driving out seven demons. Whatever those demons were

– and they may have been what we would call mental health issues - Jesus brought her peace and wholeness.

The impact of that was sufficient to make her leave her old life behind and become a follower along with his disciples.

Important enough as a follower to be named in every gospel.

And named at the crucifixion.

And named at the empty tomb.

And named at the resurrection.

She is a central and important component, apparently part of the inner circle of friends who attached themselves to Jesus and his twelve disciples.

Through Mary Magdalene we see what it might have been like to have loved and followed Jesus as a woman, risking a great deal, putting herself in danger by identifying herself as one of his followers when he has been crucified for being a political threat.

Surely her love of Jesus helps us relate through her to him.

We've heard the Song of Solomon reading this morning, that is specified for her day about the woman who seeks '*him whom her soul loves*'.

Seeking everywhere, and asking everyone, she found him whom her soul loves and held him, and would not let him go until she brought him into her mother's house: the place of betrothal.

The parallel with Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, seeking, is easy to see.

That reading helps me see Mary's love and distress the clearer.

It sharpens even further the emotional moment when Mary recognises Jesus at the empty tomb: the recognition that hearing her name brings.

And perhaps its a long, and emotional embrace that prompts Jesus to say to her “*Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended*” - he has to complete his work by returning to his father in heaven.

I think Mary Magdalene’s faithful loving and following of Jesus, right to the end, brings the *human* Jesus into greater focus for me.

He is the object of very real emotions and passions, he is loved in a very human way. In a way I can relate to.

And then the story moves on and Mary takes his message to the disciples and to us that the post-death, risen Jesus is as much a reality as ever: ‘*I have seen the Lord*’.

Subsequent events, recorded elsewhere in the bible suggest the parallel with the Song of Solomon passage continues, I think. The risen and ascended Lord sends his spirit on to his followers – surely she she would have been amongst those that were first to receive his spirit. That is the betrothel moment I’m thinking of. It is being ‘in Christ’. Knowing him from the in-dwelling spirit that was a real experience of Christ’s presence for the disciples. ‘*The love of Christ urges us on*’, writes Paul.

That in-dwelling spirit is available for all who ask for it, it is alive in us here today. So its lovely to be holding a baptism today, and asking God to send his spirit on Alexander and Elsie. Their parents and godparents have chosen to make promises on behalf of their children, to help them find their own relationship with Jesus as they grow up.

In making the promises, I will say that *“Christ comes to find us and welcomes us home, in baptism we respond to his call.”*

Its good to have the story of Mary at the empty tomb in our minds as we do this.

Mary turned and saw Jesus but did not know that it was Jesus. He asks who she is looking for.

On hearing him call her name, ‘Mary’, she turns a second time and this time recognises him.

So in the baptismal promises we are asked if we turn away from sin – like the first turning Mary makes, that alone does not enable us to recognise Jesus, though it prepares the way, along with rejecting evil.

Then we are asked ‘Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?’ now its like being called by name and we are able to recognise him, and trust in him as Lord.

At the font, I will sign Alexander and Elsie with a cross on their forehead to signify that Christ has claimed them and takes them to the heart of the mystery of the cross. The cross where *‘he died for all, so that so those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them’*.

It is the beginning of what we hope will be a life-long relationship with the risen Christ where the more we love him, the more we seek him and the more we find him the more we lose of our wrong and unlovable selves and become our truer, lovelier selves being increasingly like him and for him and in him.

We do this searching for truth and Christ not on our own, but as part of the whole family of the church, encouraging each other and recognising glimpses of the risen Christ in each other. It is into this bigger family that we welcome you now, through baptism.