



# SAINT LUKE'S

“LIBERTY”  
EASTER DAY

ACTS 10:34-43  
PSALM 118  
1 CORINTHIANS 15:19-26  
JOHN 20:1-18

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY  
APRIL 21, 2019

This first Resurrection appearance has a cast of two people: Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene of all people! There are many Marys in Scripture, but this Mary is identified as Magdalene - from Magdala - to set her apart. She is mentioned in all the gospels as being among the women at the tomb.<sup>1</sup> But in John's story, the other disciples are always in pairs or groups, but Mary Magdalene is twice alone: she comes alone and after the other disciples have returned to their homes, she is alone again. It was not appropriate for women in that culture to be walking alone, especially when it is still dark out. Behavior like that damages a woman's reputation but Mary Magdalene doesn't care about that because she *already* has a damaged reputation. She is not attached to a man and his household as women "should" be. Scholars have often assumed Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. That may be untrue, but there are certainly some shadows from her past that follow her: she is the Mary who according to Mark and Luke had "seven demons" cast out by Jesus.<sup>2</sup> She may well have left Magdala because of her reputation. I think John is spiritually accurate in seeing her alone. Even the other women don't want to be associated with the Mary from Magdala. When I picture her, I imagine her as isolated even when she is with others,

<sup>1</sup> *Matthew 27:56,61; Mt. 28:1; Mark 16:9f; Luke 24:10*

<sup>2</sup> *Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2*

because we know how that gossip dynamic works. What Mary Magdala has been told about herself is that she is not one of the gang and she never will be.

Her relationship with Jesus is the most significant relationship in her life. Probably ever. Her interaction with Jesus this morning has overtones of the love poem, The Song of Solomon. Her relationship with Jesus has always been highly personal; like a love affair for her. It is easy to imagine what Mary Magdalene finds in Jesus. Love and acceptance. And most of all, liberty; Jesus sees who she is beyond the gossip. Jesus sets her free from being judged through her past.

Mary Magdalene is the first witness Jesus chooses. Jesus could have chosen any number of more credible witnesses. In the Hebrew tradition in which Jesus was raised, you must have 2 witnesses to verify something. Women didn't count as witnesses. For example, Maimonides, the great 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish scholar, taught very clearly that women, along with slaves and mentally ill people, are among the 10 classes of people who are not competent to be witnesses. For credibility's sake, Jesus should have chosen a couple of male disciples to witness his first appearance;

perhaps the disciple whom Jesus loved, and Peter. This story is deeply unorthodox and subversive in its own cultural context: one witness, a woman, of poor reputation, from out of town, whose family are not known. That this story has survived as it is despite its patriarchal custody is because the Holy Spirit wants this story told in this way. God wants us to hear that Jesus' choice of Mary Magdalene is part of the good news itself. Mary Magdalene shows us in her own person what Resurrection means. Jesus makes a new Creation of all of us – not only in the next life but in this life too.

Mary Magdalene is really the representative for all humanity – alone, sorrowful, heartbroken, shamed and broken. Jesus takes away the old story Mary has been told about herself. Jesus is not embarrassed to be seen with her – he chooses to be with her. He gives Mary a new story. He restores Mary to the community of disciples and gives her a place at the center of his beloved community. Mary Magdalene is the midwife of the church. Just as the Angel Gabriel announces the Conception and Incarnation to the mother of Jesus, Mary announces the Resurrection. We could even say Mary Magdalene is the new Angel Gabriel, the messenger of the next chapter in God's love affair with humanity.

For all those who are feeling sad or heartbroken this morning, for any of us in the shadows of life, carrying heavy burdens, for any who feel alone and friendless, for any who are wondering if you will ever find welcome and a home in a spiritual community, this gospel is especially for you and the answer is Yes. Seek and you shall find.<sup>3</sup> If we have lived very long, we have all spent time in the shadows. Jesus meets every one of us in Mary Magdalene and leads us out of shame and shadows into new life.

The first words that Jesus speaks to Mary Magdalene after she recognizes him are: *Do not hold onto me*. The translation I grew up with is different: *Do not touch me*. One of the first things our parents teach us is: Don't touch a hot stove or an open flame. So as a child I thought the Resurrected Jesus must be white hot. I thought Jesus was protecting Mary Magdalene from being burned. But this translation makes more sense: *Do not hold onto me*. Mary Magdalene has to let go of what was, including Jesus' earthly body and ministry. The past is over. Resurrection changes everything. Let go of what we think we know about ourselves, who we are and can be, about life, about death, about God. Be open to something new, something more.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:7

Our chapel behind the altar is dedicated with an inscription running around the dome: *To the Most High God and Christ the Liberator*. That's today's good news in three words: Christ the Liberator. We are liberated from our past, we are free for a new beginning in this life. And in Jesus' Resurrection we are liberated forever from our last and greatest enemy – death itself. *Jesus came down that we might rise up.*<sup>4</sup>

AMEN

<sup>4</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus: "Homily on the Holy Pasch"



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