

Sermon, 22 July 2007—Feast of Mary Magdalene

Exodus 15:19-21; Psalm 42:1-7; 2 Corinthians 5:14-8; John 20:11-8

In the happy synchronicity of the calendar's rotation, this Sunday coincides with the Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene. Of all the figures in Scripture, Mary has been the most misunderstood and mistreated. Some of this might be simple confusion; there are several Mary's mentioned in the Gospels. Some of this might be a way of giving her a back story to justify the singular honor she has in being the first to see the Risen Jesus. All four Gospels present her as one of Jesus' followers, particularly as one of the women who stood by Jesus' cross and went to the tomb to anoint his body. Luke and Mark tell us that Jesus cast out seven demons from her, but give no details. Unjustifiably excited by that titillating tidbit, the Medieval commentators made her the quintessential woman with a past, deciding she might well be the woman caught in adultery, the weeping sinner who anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair, and the demure Mary of Bethany, who sat at Jesus' feet to be taught and later anoints his head before the Last Supper. This is all fantastic nonsense—though not as fantastic and nonsensical as what was spun by the Da Vinci Code. No wonder the word “maudlin,” which describes any story oversaturated and leaky with sentimental self-indulgent tears, is a corruption of the word “Magdalene.”

John, in his Gospel, gives us the richest portrait. As we know, he tells his story from a different place. Of all the evangelists, he is the one who most treats women as equals and leaders in the Christian community. He shows Jesus talking to them regularly and extensively. While in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, most spoken exchanges with Jesus are occasions for him to lecture or tell stories, in John, dialogue is Jesus' essential way of engaging

and quickening those around him. What is remarkable in the Gospel of John is that three crucial positive conversations are with women, all of which have triumphant conclusions.

When Jesus reaches the well at Sychar, he talks at length with a Samaritan woman. When Jesus reaches the tomb of Lazarus, he has a conversation with Martha of Bethany. When Jesus appears by his own tomb, he speaks with Mary Magdalene. The result is that all three women become proclaimers of the Gospel. Far from rendering them silent in church—as the women whose stories are used to fill out Mary Magdalene’s story are depicted—talking with Jesus converts these women into preachers. Their power as evangelists is released into their communities. John depicts them as the heroines of the story, exemplary ministers of the Word, which leads us to assume that he wrote for a Christian community that affirmed women as preachers and evangelists.

Now, all three of these stories move in a similar pattern. In each case, there is an initial difficulty, which Jesus questions. The woman resists what she perceives as his apparent lack of realism. Jesus, however, shows her his own perspective by identifying himself. The woman sees what she had not seen up to that point, which transforms her and leads her to proclaim her insight aloud. Of course, John is a great artist; he does not flatly repeat himself, but varies the pattern, and even arranges the three stories in a significant sequence with a crucial teaching that John is trying to pass on.

The key to unlock this sequence is the understanding in Antiquity of the components of a human person. We are familiar with this from Paul’s writings particularly. Our ancestors believed we have three parts: a body, a mind or soul, and a spirit. The body is what is evident; it is material; it is animated by the soul. The soul quickens us; it is a combination of what

gives us life, gives us intelligence, and gives us the rudiments of identity. The spirit is what opens us to God, what connects us with God, what enables us to transcend our daily identity, so adequately managed by our soul. Our dear older brother Paul realized that we suffer from these divisions, and that flesh and spirit war against each other. But he also said that we have been given the Spirit of Christ, which enables us to call God “Father” as Jesus did, even when our mind cannot understand our charismatic speech and our body’s habits hold us in a captivity we hate.

John also worked in this tripartite human structure. This is why he insists on the reality of the Word made flesh: the body is not something defective, but the chosen vessel of God’s Spirit. He appears to have put these three encounters between Jesus and the women I mentioned into a sequence that begins with the body and ends with the spirit, moving us each time a little deeper into the mystery of salvation.

The talk with the Samaritan woman, the first encounter, is dominated by concerns about the body. She comes for water, essential for keeping the body alive. When Jesus promises her living water—which in Greek could mean running water—she immediately interprets it as a material liquid. She has had five husbands and is now living with a man who is not her husband. Her question for Jesus, when she perceives he is a prophet, has to do with the physical location of an altar: is it OK to offer sacrifices, that is, present the slaughtered bodies of animals, here on Mount Gerizim or only in Jerusalem? Also Jesus’ disciples, when they return, are concerned that Jesus needs food. Even Jesus’ body is engaged in the story: he is thirsty and asks the woman for a drink of water from the well.

Jesus’ responses, though, over and over direct the Samaritan woman to a fuller picture. “The water I will give,” he says, “will become in you a

spring gushing up to eternal life.” As for the contest of altars, Jesus dismisses both and says, “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and in truth.” And when the woman, perhaps tired of their intellectual back-and-forth, says that when the Messiah comes, she knows he will explain all these things, Jesus answers, “I am he, who am speaking to you.” Responding to his concerned disciples, who offer him food, Jesus directs attention beyond the body, saying, “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete that work.”

For the Samaritan woman, this is sufficient to transform her. She rushes back to the town and, still anchored in carnal facts, says, “I have met a man who has told me everything I ever did; could this be the Messiah?”

Martha’s story brings our attention to the soul. Lazarus, her brother, has died, and Jesus arrives too late to heal him. This story is swollen with the anguish of loss, the distress of death, the festering resentment over the failure to prevent it. Even though a bodily death is involved, what John presents us with is the torment of Martha’s soul. “If you had been here,” she says to Jesus in bitter despairing reproach, “my brother would not have died.” Twice she tells Jesus what she *knows*: “I know that God will give you whatever you ask” and “I know that my brother will rise in the resurrection at the last day”—both of these evidence of her mind recalling and affirming beliefs. Also Jesus’ disciples are distressed: they try to persuade him that it is dangerous to go to Judaea and that Lazarus will recover, and they finally try to persuade themselves that they are willing to die with him—all the hand-wringing of anxious minds. Even Jesus’ soul is engaged in the story: he weeps at the grave of Lazarus, whom John tells us Jesus loved.

Jesus’ responses, though, over and over direct Martha to a fuller picture. “Your brother will rise again,” he says—and that is less a promise

about the body as it is a reassurance to the grieving soul about the personal relationship. When he hears Martha's desolate affirmation of a resurrection at the end of time, Jesus answers, "I am the Resurrection and the Life; those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." Responding to his concerned disciples, caught up in personal connections, Jesus directs their attention beyond the fixations of their soul, saying, "this illness is for God's glory," as he had said about the man born blind, and later, "didn't I say that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

For Martha, this is sufficient to transform her. She responds to Jesus, saying, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world"—which is the fullest proclamation of faith we have heard so far as John tells the story of Jesus in his Gospel.

Finally, these interactions culminate in the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb, which we heard today and which points to what embraces both body and soul and rises beyond them. The empty tomb is for us always a reminder that Spirit is for ever beyond our comprehension. We "don't get it." The bread always seems to be simply bread, and the wine seems to be still wine. To our body and soul, all we have are stillness, silence, darkness, but something in us that opens to what is beyond us perceives another something that is somehow active and thunderous and dazzling, embracing all we know and rising beyond them.

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. She glances in and sees the slab flanked by angels, who sit as escorts of the emptiness between them, just as the Seraphim on the Ark of the Covenant bent over the emptiness of the invisible unnamable God. They ask—and are right to ask—"why are you weeping? Don't you see that where there was a body, there is now the presence of God?" But Mary sees the tomb rather than the emptiness; all

she knows is that the corpse of her teacher has been snatched from its resting place. She is utterly collapsed into body and soul, closed to greater life and God, out of touch with the spirit within her, by which she might see God's hand at work. Of course, she mistakes Jesus for a gardener—and of course, isn't that what God has always been since the beginning? Jesus also asks "why are you weeping? Can't you see there is nothing to cry about here? Who is the person you are looking for? Doesn't even my reminding you of him help you see me?"

Now, what is most interesting here is this. Jesus this time makes no proclamation about himself, as he did with the Samaritan Woman and with Martha. There is no statement beginning "I am." He simply calls Mary by her name, and that is the moment of revelation. Spirit, you see, is the deepest secret in us. It dwells in us beyond the energies of the body and the subtleties of the soul. And Jesus activates the spirit in Mary by calling her name, rather than his own. It is by Jesus calling her to herself, rather than by proclaiming himself as an external vision, that she discerns the spirit that dwells in her and enables her to recognize the presence of the Risen Christ. Let me put it this way: what Jesus does is call her attention to her own spirit, which is the instrument by which she can know that he is still with her. For Mary, the recognition of the Spirit active in her and of the Risen Christ as simultaneous, as if she had been given new eyes that see normally invisible wavelengths. Yes, it matters that she become able to recognize the Risen Christ, but what matters more is that her spirit awaken, come to life, rise from the dead. She enters that new life, the new Creation, within her self in the opening of her spirit, which she knows has happened because she is now able to see the Risen One. This is why Jesus can then speak of "my Father and your Father, my God and your God," because they now stand together in

the presence of God as children of God, as you and I, by the Spirit of God, are empowered to stand as one with Christ and in Christ in the presence of the Eternal Source of all. Jesus' God is our God because we share his humanity; Jesus' Father is our Father because we are taken up to share his divinity.

We experience the encounter with the Risen Christ as an opening within us, a fearless awareness of life over death in us—not a passing hallucination or a bursting euphoria, but an enduring transformation of us. The Resurrection, the pledge of the power and good-will of God's Spirit, cannot be a past event that happened to our great mistreated vindicated teacher. That would make Christianity a religion of morbid nostalgia and holy necrophilia: the dead brought back to life, whom we love and follow. The Resurrection is instead the breath of God's Spirit entering our own, enabling us to recognize Christ, our brother and our Lord, as present with us, in us, among us even now: present in bread and wine, present in our bodies that act and present in the bodies of the neighbors we care for, present in our souls that seek Christ in all persons and present in the souls of the neighbors we love as we love ourselves, all transformed by the presence of the Spirit of Christ in us, who empowers us to call God, "Abba, Father," and to know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. By this recognition, by this internal transfiguration, Mary became the Apostle to the Apostles, the one who brought the Good News to those who carried her message to the ends of the earth, for whose witness we praise God today, as we also pray that we might be witnesses with her of the glory of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, on this day and for all eternity.