

Mary Magdalene

Don't you find that the names that parents pick for their children seem to go in cycles ... for a while, Lloyd was a popular name, then Henry. At some point, every girl was called Jennifer, and then Kathy. Neither Heather nor I had ever heard of a child called Logan ... but that didn't last long. There are many women in the Bible who share the same name ... Mary. Today we are going to feature one of those Marys ... Mary from Magdala, Mary Magdalene. Her last name is not always mentioned when she is referred to, so sometimes it is confusing which Mary is being referenced. As with all of us, there are many layers to Mary Magdalene. We will explore some of those today.

Early in the Book of Luke, we meet Mary as she arrives, uninvited, to a dinner at the home of a Pharisee. She has gone because she had heard that Jesus was going to be there. The dinner was happening on a portico – an outdoor gathering venue. She sees Jesus and goes immediately to him. Like the rest of the guests, he is not sitting on a

chair at a table, but rather stretched out in a reclined posture, resting on pillows and carpets. Mary is emotional and her tears fall on Jesus' feet. Immediately she begins to dry her tears with her hair. Then she proceeds to kiss his feet and anoint them with expensive perfume.

The Pharisee at this point does not say anything about this behaviour, but he thinks to himself, 'This is very odd. If this man Jesus really is who he claims to be, he would know this woman's past and he would most certainly have nothing to do with her.'

Somehow Jesus picked up on what the Pharisee was thinking and Jesus confronted him. Jesus told this Pharisee, Simon, a story. Two people owed money to a moneylender. One owed a great deal. The other owed a little. Neither had the money to pay him back. The moneylender forgave them both.

Then Jesus asked Simon which one of the two people who borrowed money would love the moneylender more? Simon suggested that it

would be the one who had the bigger debt. Jesus told him that he had guessed correctly.

With that, Jesus acknowledged the woman and then said to Simon, “When I arrived at your home, you did not give me any water to wash my feet. You did not greet me with a kiss. You did not anoint my head with oil.

This woman, of whom you think so little, wet my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. She has not stopped kissing my feet. She poured perfume on my feet.

The many sins of this woman are forgiven. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Can you imagine Simon’s reaction? Certainly he would have been taken aback, offended. Jesus turned to the woman and said to her, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

Now the other guests who had been watching all of this unfold asked themselves, ‘Who is this man who even forgives sins?’

Do they think he is overstepping his rights? Do they think he is presumptuous that he even assumes he has the authority to forgive sins? Who does this man think he is?

This was our first glimpse of the woman we know as Mary Magdalene.

If we jump forward to chapter 19 of the Book of John, we see her again.

She is one of the few brave, faithful followers standing at the foot of the cross. She is with 2 other Marys – Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary, the wife of Cleopas. Her love and devotion for Jesus are genuine and lasting.

Shortly after this scene at Calvary, we meet her again. It is early on Sunday morning. All by herself, Mary races to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. Upon her arrival, she immediately sees that the stone that had been rolled in front of the tomb has now been rolled away.

What must have been racing through her mind ... perhaps his body had been stolen ... who might have done that and why ... what might they do with her Saviour's corpse? Immediately she races back to tell Peter

and the other disciples. Apparently all of the disciples, or at least many of them, had been staying together during these final horrible days of Christ's life. As soon as they heard her news, they all got up and raced to the cemetery.

Peter and others ran to the empty tomb where Jesus had been buried. They entered and saw the strips of linen that had once been wrapped around their Lord's body, and the cloth that had covered his head lay there in place. Scripture says, "They saw and believed."

I wonder what they believed. The next line indicates that they still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. So when it says, 'They saw and believed', perhaps they simply believed that he had disappeared.

But that woman upon whom those religious, holy Pharisees looked down upon that night, she stayed at the empty tomb. Her emotions were raw. She must have been terrified and confused. But Mary was loyal, and she remained at the grave.

Gazing dejectedly into the tomb, Mary saw two angels. They asked her why she was crying. Overcome with great sadness, she says, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where to find him. Shortly after that, she hears a man's voice and looks to see where the voice is coming from and who it is. A man is standing there and he has just asked her, like the angels, why is she crying and who is it that she is looking for. She presumes that he is the gardener or the caretaker of the cemetery. "If you have taken my Lord away, tell me where you have put him and I will go and get him."

And then the man speaks her name. And it is in that moment that she recognizes to whom she has been speaking! "Teacher!"

He says to her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not ascended to the Father. Go and tell the others I am going to be with my Father and your Father, my God, and your God."

I am sure it was with considerable reluctance, that Mary left him, and raced off to where the disciples were staying. "I have seen the Lord!" And then Mary told them all that had happened.

On the first day of the week, when the disciples were all together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus entered and stood among them. "Peace to you".

The story of Mary Magdalene begins and ends with devotion. With what little she knew about Jesus, with what little faith she had, fighting off fear, confusion, loss, and so much more, Mary was devoted to Jesus. She overcame a great deal to develop a relationship with him. She must have been very brave, very foolish, or just so determined and devoted that she entered into foreign and potentially hostile territory ... the home of the Jewish religious leader.

To stand in solidarity at the foot of the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus ... a woman without sin standing with a woman who was known for her sinfulness ... that is devotion and courage and grace.

To run to the cemetery alone in the early morning light, to check on the body of her Saviour. There was certain danger in that. To see what she saw, and return to tell the others ... devoted to the community of Christ followers. To return with them to the empty tomb, but then to stay on alone afterward. Devotion. To recognize the risen Christ once he called her name ... to recognize him as teacher – devotion. To run once again, back to the others to proclaim His victory over the grave – devotion.

All that Mary had done would have been a wonderful testimony and witness for someone, preferably a man, who had joined in on Jesus' cause from the very beginning – a fisherman perhaps, or a doctor. But Mary had not been there from the beginning. She was a woman in a culture which did not hold women in very high esteem. She was a woman with a reputation.

So given all of the details of this story, it is an even more remarkable story ... even a greater witness ... even a more powerful example of faith and devotion and love.

It is easy perhaps to think that we might do the same, but we are seeing this story from the luxury of our culture and perspective. But for Mary, at that time, and in that place, it was nothing short of heroic.

In this culture, in this time, in the midst of our circumstances and the context of our lives, how might we, with our own mustard seed of faith, how might we be a witness?

Amen.