

Mary's Story

Sermon on Luke 8: 1-3, Luke 23: 44-56 & John 20: 11-18

It can be quite confusing to look at the women of the four gospels.

In many cases they've either got no name – or they are “all” called Mary.

For this sermon I tried to do a bit of sorting among the Marys. The outcome is the choice of readings you've heard in the service today. I have collected passages from the gospels to create a picture of Mary Magdalene – or Mary from Magdala; both names are possible.

Mary from Magdala is neither Mary the mother of Jesus, nor Mary the mother of James, the disciple, nor Mary the sister of Martha.

Rather she is the woman who Jesus rescued from the dark sides of life, and who in John's record of the resurrection meets Jesus, the beloved friend, in the garden...

We haven't spent much time or thought on Mary this Easter. There were the three women and the mystery of the empty tomb – sure. And one of them may have been Mary Magdalene. But the mysterious emptiness of tomb and grave were so much more powerful to wonder about than lingering with one individual biblical figure.

This, however, is something you did last Sunday, didn't you?

You met Thomas in real depth. And you came across the two disciples making their weary way to Emmaus, eventually recognising Christ in the stranger they meet, when he breaks the bread for them.

So, let us focus on Mary Magdalene today. Let us discover the Mary of a time before and after Easter. And in Mary let us discover the power of community that lies in remembering. Remembering Christ at the table.

This Mary cannot only be found in the Bible. Parts of her story are hidden in early Christian tales which never made their way into the New Testament. Nevertheless, there is even a gospel of Mary – just as there exists a gospel of Thomas: worthwhile stories to be dug out and read and reflected upon.

Let us start with what the New Testament, and especially the evangelists Luke and John have to offer...

Her name is Mary.

Magdalene is an addition to tell us where Mary comes from. From Magdala.

A busy and booming little fishing town at the lake of Galilee. The population in Jesus' day was fairly well off. They lived of the lake. Fishing, selling and producing the fish not only kept them busy but provided good earnings for them.

Who is Mary in that context?

Luke talks about demons she is healed from. Jesus must have approached her, touched her, paid attention to her, taken her seriously, befriended her – and thus made her “whole” – healed her.

She then follows him, shares what she has with Jesus and his friends, provides for them from her wealth... as do other women. “Joanna & Susanna, and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.” (Luke 8:3) Mary from Magdala is a woman of wealth and significance. She has the wits to become a leader, but there is this strange illness.

Seven demons. The Bible doesn't specify on them.

But Trevor Dennis does.

Trevor Dennis was the Vice Dean of Chester Cathedral and is a famous scholar among the theologians in Britain. He not only publishes scientific texts, but also rewrites biblical stories, or adds to them, or extends them – all on the basis of his reliable research and studies.

I found a story by him, in which he lets Mary speak in a first person narrative. And parts of this I would like to share with you.

“I was very ill,” Mary says. “Possessed, they said I was. By seven demons. That’s how ill I was. They thought I wouldn’t live long. I don’t know what the illness was, but it lay heavy on me. I felt shut in by it. I was imprisoned, confined to the tiny room of my sickness. It seemed to fill my world. There was nothing else. I was trapped by it, eaten up by it. It was a strange kind of dark, and I couldn’t see anything else. You know what it’s like when you’re very ill. You can think of nothing else. I was cut off, alone, afraid of everyone and everything, afraid of neighbours and friends, afraid of myself and my bitter anger, afraid of God, afraid of dying. No one could reach me. No one knew the way into the small room where I lived with my illness. People themselves were frightened of me.”

We can easily imagine, how true this all might have been, how real... Because we know how sickness and disease were understood in Jesus' day. Being ill meant being absolutely isolated.

No human contact was allowed. Ill people were considered unclean. And everything they touched and everyone they came in touch with, was then made unclean, too. Had I been Mary in those days, not only would it have been impossible for me to touch you, or be hugged by someone; no, even the cup I'd have used, the chair I'd have sat on, the book I'd have read, the comb I'd combed my hair with, the doorstep my foot would have touched – everything would then have become unclean. My life would have taken place without love, without touch, without community. Just try to imagine.

And then you can maybe see or feel, how we are getting closer to some sort of understanding of those seven demons. Who- or whatever they were... I'd like to give them seven names; I'd like to call them pain, loss, grief... (no family is mentioned. Why was Mary alone?). I'd add loneliness, lovelessness, rejection and inhumanity... (since it can at no time in the history of humankind be regarded as humane to leave a suffering and sick person in utter isolation).

And we can of course think of any other seven elements of darkness and limitation in our own or other people's lives... We can think of fear, lack of courage, feelings of inadequacy, inferiority complexes, shyness, short tempers and instability, and many more that can all be healed when we let Jesus step into our lives, touch us, heal us and call us by our names...

But back to Mary.

Into this life of Mary's Jesus comes. Fearless.

He touches, as he had touched and healed so many times before. He speaks with Mary, calls her by her name, gives her back her self worth and her dignity, opens her and other people's eyes. He helps Mary to let the world in again. And she may have seen it, as she'd never seen it before. And after a few days, by the time Jesus leaves Magdala, she is strong enough to go with him.

And this surely was the wiser thing to do: walking with Jesus and his friends who'd already overcome narrow mindedness and boundaries... rather than staying in a town in which she'd always remain the possessed untouchable. She knew that she was healed. But how long would it take the others to understand? How long does it take human beings to rethink their values, overthrow old orders and change their minds?

Let's believe that Mary spent weeks and months of joy – real joy of life – and fulfilment with the group around Jesus, before we meet her again at the cross. Crucifixion is a most terrifying way to kill someone. And all the friends had deserted Jesus. All the men following him had gone. There was only Mary and a few other women witnessing the execution above the rubbish dump – because this is exactly what Golgotha was: the municipal place for Jerusalem's rubbish.

The women had to stand back from the brutality of the Romans. It could so easily turn and be directed at them. Friends of Jesus were in danger of being killed themselves.

So the women experienced the cruelty of having to stay at some distance, helpless, left with nothing and not allowed to do anything to ease this pain.

In Trevor Dennis's story Mary says:

“I was afraid not just for myself, but for the whole world. It had gone mad! I was afraid for him in his pain, near to death. I was afraid for God. It was the middle of the day, yet everything seemed pitched into darkness.”

Mary felt strong memories rising of the time of her life before she'd met Jesus.

Danger, darkness, despair.

And then they plucked up their courage and buried him in a hurry. They hoped this would help them to forget some of the darkness of his dying. But the next agony awaited them.

Mary had looked forward to visiting Jesus' tomb. She was in the garden before dawn the next day. She peered into the grave, and it must have hit her with all its cruel force: He was gone!

...all over. Finished.

Mary left and came back with two disciples and in the end stayed there alone.

And then she had an experience just as powerful as her healing long ago. She would never forget this moment of Jesus calling her name: “Mary!”

And somehow she was no longer afraid...?!

Deafened by grief, she suddenly could hear all the sounds and songs of creation again. Birds and flowers, the sun in the morning sky, and glimpses of hope to carry on and tell the others.

Mary goes out and shares the story of Jesus' resurrection with the world.

In an old tale about Mary, early Christians imagined her having returned to Galilee and taking people out into the country to show them the places where Jesus used to live with them. And the people would always want to know from her, what it had been like being there as he died on the cross, being there three days later. And she never got tired of telling it all:

“Those who thought they had power had none, and those who seemed to have none held in their hands the very power of God. Think of the power Herod thought he had. Think of the magnificence of his father’s palaces and the temple his father created in Jerusalem. Think of the town of Tiberias which he himself built on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He thought he could have whatever he wanted from Jesus. All he got was silence. He could not take that. So he turned to bullying and got his soldiers to join in. Bullying made him laugh, but still brought nothing from Jesus but cries of pain as the soldiers hit him. Their cruelty was a sign of their powerlessness. Herod’s places will one day fall into ruin, but we will still be able to hear Jesus’ silence and catch his pain.”

“Their cruelty was a sign of their powerlessness...” – what a remarkable, what a powerful sentence to say!?

The places of the Herods of this world will fall over and over again, but we will still be able to hear – not only Jesus’ silence, but also his words. We will still be able to feel his touch, remember his love, share his courage and fearlessness, live his life...

Mary returned to Magdala.

Mary preached and shared her hope with all she met.

They would sit together in the morning sun, she would bless and break the bread.

She would bless and pour the wine as she had seen Jesus do.

And then they would eat and drink together... feeling so clearly that he was there – with them... driving away all the shadows of their sometimes so broken lives.

Amen.