

The Feast of Mary Magdalene

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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July 17, 2016

Have you ever met someone whose reputation preceded them? Maybe it was when you met your boss' boss for the first time. Maybe it was a public figure, or even Mickey Mouse. Before you met you had heard all about them. Whether the reputation was accurate or not, others set the tone for your interaction with that person. Reputations are interesting. After all, our unique reputation isn't something that we can control; instead we can only have influence on it. Our reputation lives apart from us and has the potential to live on after us through our legacy.¹

The focus of today's feast is on a woman whose reputation is well known. This woman has often been marginalized and largely discounted in the arch of Western Christianity. While the church officially celebrates her this Thursday, I challenge us to reclaim her legacy today. In celebrating her feast day we don't pray to her or worship her, rather we find ways to learn from her. The woman we look to learn from today is Mary Magdalene. Before we explore what we might learn from Mary Magdalene, let's

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happiness-in-world/201004/the-value-good-reputation>

clarify a few things about her. What kind of things have you heard about Mary Magdalene, either true or false?²

She was a prostitute- We've often heard that Mary Magdalene is a prostitute and that her sins were so great. In Luke 8 we hear that she had seven demons cast out from her, yet it never mentions the specifics of her sin. Many people have believed that the unnamed woman that we heard about a few weeks ago in Luke 7 is Mary Magdalene as well. In that instance we heard that there was a woman who was described as a sinner, but again, the type of sin is never mentioned. This woman came into a dinner party and wept at Jesus' feet and dried her tears with her hair. We might also remember that the text *never* says this unnamed woman is Mary Magdalene. So where did we get that from? Well, Pope Gregory the Great gave a homily in 591 that confused Christianity for hundreds of years by claiming that Luke's unnamed sinner, and Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene were all the same person. Wow, that's one way to lump all women together and devalue a feminine biblical presence!

She is the second most mentioned woman in the New Testament- Mary Magdalene is mentioned as she followed Jesus as he taught and was present through his crucifixion and resurrection. In fact, she is mentioned a total of twelve times in the bible, which is only second to another Mary – the mother of Jesus.

² While many sources were used, this is a comprehensive source for information about Mary Magdalene: <http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/200806/who-framed-mary-magdalene-27585>

She is not identified as related to another person- Unlike other women in the Bible, Mary of Magdala is not identified in relationship to another person. This is important, because it implies prominence in the city. Some believe that she was well off enough to be a key supporter of Jesus' ministry financially.

She was at the resurrection- All four gospels agree that Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection. Today we read John's version of that story. We know Mary was one of the female followers who became central when everything began to fall apart. While the main twelve male disciples fled or killed themselves, Mary was faithful. Yet, we don't often remember her for this. We can pretty easily think of the disciple who betrayed Jesus (Judas), or the disciple known for denying Jesus three times (Peter); yet, Mary doesn't have the reputation of being the first and primary witness to the resurrection. Mary isn't remembered as the one who faithfully watched Jesus' crucifixion. She isn't remembered as the one who was tending to the Jewish burial customs. She isn't remembered for her strong, bold witness to her faith.

Why are we so confused about the real Mary Magdalene? Great question. It's hard to know exactly. Many feminist theologians believe that her reputation was deliberately altered to suppress women's leadership in the church in the early centuries. While early male leaders couldn't deny her importance, they could change her to be less threatening. Scripture scholar Mary Thompson notes that "It's really remarkable that all four gospels have the same story [of the resurrection]. You can be sure that if it

had been possible to eliminate those women who went out from the empty tomb, [the gospel writers] would have done it' because of the prevailing attitude toward women in those times.”

Destroying or diminishing someone's reputation is not confined to only Jesus' time, though. We see people working to ruin other's reputations or diminish them in a variety of ways all the time. Take a moment to think of ways that you've seen people diminish another's reputation. (Ask a few people to share.) There are so many examples: we diminish another's reputation when in 2015 full-time workers who are women made only 79 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gender wage gap of 21%;³ we diminish another's reputation when we force people to step into a gender binary and use the bathroom of their assigned gender at birth; and we diminish another's reputation when we make over 21 million poor people our slaves so we can buy cheap clothing and electronics.⁴

Yet, today's gospel is a reminder that those on the margins cannot be eternally silenced for they witness to the power of God's presence. In today's gospel reading we find Mary Magdalene early in the morning finding the empty tomb. At first she thought someone took Jesus' body. Yet while she wept outside the tomb she had an encounter with the risen Christ. She experienced Jesus calling her by name and she was

³ <http://www.iwpr.org/initiatives/pay-equity-and-discrimination>

⁴ http://www.antislavery.org/english/slavery_today/what_is_modern_slavery.aspx

sent. Mary was sent and she became the apostles to the apostles. She became the first apostle - the first advocate and supporter of the resurrection. She was the very first.

However, Western Christianity has suppressed this image with perhaps malicious intent or, at its best, on accident. Yet for our Eastern Christian or Orthodox Christian counterparts this hasn't been the case. You see until 1054 the Christian church was unified as one until the Great Schism. From that point forward Christianity developed in different ways. The Eastern Church never lived into the fallacy that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. In fact, a legend in the Easter tradition has Mary Magdalene in Rome before the court of Emperor Tiberius. There she told Tiberius about Jesus' death and resurrection. The emperor challenged the resurrection story and said, "No one could rise from the dead any more than an egg in a dish on the table could turn red." With that, according to legend, Mary picked up an egg and it turned bright red in her hand. To this day, icons of Mary Magdalene, including the one on the front cover of your bulletin, often depict her holding an egg. This is also where our tradition of coloring Easter eggs may have originated, as Eastern Christians still color their eggs bright red.

Our tradition has some gems of strong, faithful women leading the church. In today's first reading we heard of Ruth and Naomi who show deep love, commitment, and devotion. We hear of Mary Magdalene in today's gospel, and we're reminded in

our reading from Acts that many are sent to be witnesses to God's life, death, and resurrection.

Being sent to share the good news is a hard thing, however. Mary was met with resistance. So too we are unsure of what to say in relationship to our faith. When council sat down last month to review the results from the Ministry Survey that many of you took back in May, we found that "equipping our members to share their faith with others" was our lowest ranked area. It wasn't a horrible value, but it still was our lowest score of 3.85 out of 5. Why do you think that is?

Maybe it's because Mainline Protestants, of which ELCA Lutherans are apart, haven't always been good to sharing their faith. It feels too much like evangelicals or Mormons knocking on the door. I too struggle sharing my faith because I do not support overbearing conversion or recruitment.

Maybe the score was our lowest because we as Lutherans have a tendency to witness to our faith through our actions and don't feel the necessity to overtly share our faith.

Maybe the score was so low because you don't feel like you have the tools, the language, the desire, or the drive to share. I can't imagine that Mary Magdalene thought she had the tools when she showed up in tears at the tomb. I can't imagine she thought anyone would take her seriously; after all she's an unreliable woman in those

days. However, she was the first witness to the resurrection, so maybe she has something to teach us.

I wonder if being more forward with our faith is essential now more than ever. This is *not* to say that we need to steamroll, tell everyone we encounter, drag people to church, force people to believe something they don't, or argue with every last person. In fact, I think that kind of engagement is not biblical. I *do* think we need to be clear about what we believe and how our belief shapes our lives so that when someone asks us why we do what we do we're ready to respond. I wonder what our world would look like if we embraced our believe that all people are filled with God's spirit, that love conquerors fear and hate, and that a little bit of mystery in our life is a good thing. Perhaps we'd have less blood on our streets if we saw people of other faiths, cultures, races, and careers as children of God. If we were more vocal about the fact that Jesus was an immigrant and refugee perhaps we'd have more compassion when folks flee out of fear and diminished opportunities. If we saw God in our homeless brothers and sisters maybe we'd respond to skyrocketing rents and dwindling affordable housing.

Like Mary Magdalene, our reputation as Christians and religious people is tarnished. Westboro Baptist, armed religious terrorists, and bigoted and hateful religious leaders are what the world connects with religion and Christianity. You and I know that's not the full story, but we've got work to do on our reputation. I want to help equip you to share your faith. I can't do all the work for you, but maybe I can

compel you and give resources so that when the time is right you're prepared to share. Today we allow Mary Magdalene to be our inspiration.

Regardless of what you specifically believe, before you share your faith it's helpful to understand what you'll share. Mary Magdalene was clear before she shared it. I'm going to help direct you a bit today by sharing that I believe that Jesus' single greatest mission was to give us life. To get us focused on what we believe, take a moment to think about why you're here - how does worship, the bible, religion, or WPLC bring you life? (Ask a few to share.)

For me, I see a world where division, hatred, and shame reign supreme. Time and again I come to the scriptures and the ELCA as a denomination because I see a God who continually works to break down barriers. I experience a God of love and not one of fear. I experience a denomination that, while deeply flawed, yearns to identify and participate in God's presence in the world. In that, I experience life. As a gay man there are many places in this world that reject me, but I've felt welcomed, affirmed, and have been given life through this church. That's why I'm here, and that's how WPLC brings me life.

Now, how you might share or witness your faith like Mary Magdalene. How might you share it without being overbearing, but out of passion and love? Take a moment to think of a way or two that is the right time *and* right person. (Ask a few to share.)

Here is an idea I have: So you're having dinner with a group of friends who grew up Christian and have been yearning to find community in Chicago. They ask what you're doing this weekend. Ding - opportunity to share! You say, "On Sunday I'm going to church. I love the music and the reflective nature of the service. It brings me life, helps me see beyond my own little world where I can easily get caught, and sends me out into the world seeing people and experiences in a new way." This is sharing in a non-confrontational way about how you're given life. No need to jam religion or Christianity down their throat. Instead, state your belief and let your actions be the argument for that belief. Share your belief with the right people at the right time.

Chances are that you're here because you see some value in communal spiritual experiences, otherwise known as religion. I know I do! The single greatest factor to someone coming to engage their faith in a communal setting of the church is your relationship. What I'm *not* saying is that we hit people over the head with WPLC or organized religion. I'm not saying that communal spiritual experiences are the only or best way to live out your faith. I *am* saying that I hope you feel prepared to share your faith and why you do what you do, when the time is right.

So this week, try something different. Don't allow yourself to minimize your faith. Don't allow yourself to feel marginalized. Reclaim your identity as a person of faith and explore why your faith matters. Then take hold of the situation when it

presents itself and, like Mary Magdalene, be bold. Be strong. You are loved and sent to share the good, life-giving news. Amen.