

Feast of Mary Magdalene  
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
The Rev. Jason S. Glombicki  
July 21, 2019

An ancient rumor has it that she was a prostitute. A medieval rumor says that she was Jesus's concubine. A twentieth century rumor notes that she conceived Jesus's child. Rumors, imaginative history, and slanderous stories have veiled the image of Mary Magdalene for thousands of years. Yet, as professor Chilton puts it, "history reveals a stronger Mary Magdalene than the predominately male projections that have reigned from the time of Jesus' critics to her sexualized portraits in New Age fantasies."<sup>1</sup> And, this all makes me wonder: how did we get here? How did we take a beloved disciple and apostle and turn her life and witness into a sexualized story of slander?

In a best-case scenario option, we can apply rumor research to suggest that some people share rumors as an attempt to discover truth. The research indicates that, in the absence of solid information, some may have turned to rumors to answer their deepest questions about this important woman.<sup>2</sup> Now, I think this scenario is being pretty generous to thousands of years of fake news, but maybe it was the case that the silence of our canonical scriptures led to rampant rumors. Maybe.

Perhaps one worst-case scenario for the sexualized stories of slander might be thousands of years of devaluing women's experiences. We must remember that women in Palestine at the time of Jesus were treated as non-persons. As one scholar

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mary-magdalene\\_b\\_898439](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mary-magdalene_b_898439)

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[http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/10/12/how\\_to\\_fight\\_a\\_rumor/?page=full](http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/10/12/how_to_fight_a_rumor/?page=full)

puts it, “Women were not counted as making up the minimum number of ten required for a service to take place in a synagogue ... women’s witness had no validity in law courts... [and] in the Palestinian Talmud we read “The words of the Torah will be destroyed in the fire sooner than be taught to women.”” (Those are some pretty harsh words.) In this time period, a woman’s physical presence was not acknowledged, her word was devalued, and knowledge was withheld from her.<sup>3</sup>

And, we might think that we’re so much better than those barbaric people thousands of years ago. After all, it’s the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Women were given the right to keep their own wages and hold land in their name by 1900, women have been explicitly allowed to vote since the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified in 1920, the Equal Pay Act in 1963 promised equitable wages for the same work regardless of the worker’s sex, 1972 brought us Title IX of the Education Amendments that prohibits sex discrimination in all aspects of education programs that receive federal support, and in 1975 women were no longer allowed to be excluded from juries. It’s 2019 now, and the work is done. Thank God, now, let’s eat brunch! However, we aren’t all that refined compared to the times of Mary Magdalene. For, the World Bank tells us that only six countries give women equal legal work rights as men, and, spoiler alert, the United States is not one of them. According to the World Economic Forum, it will take 108 years to close the gender gap at the current rate of progress. Which means most of us won’t see it and our children won’t experience it. On top of that, 33,000 girls become child brides every day, that’s one every two seconds, or 360 girls by the end of an average sermon. Then there are the little things that have a big impact, like the research that indicates that women are 47% more likely to suffer severe injuries in car crashes because safety features are designed for men.

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<sup>3</sup> Ricci, Carla. *Mary Magdalene and many other: women who followed Jesus*. “Hypothesis for an exegesis of the silence.” p 23.

And, that little tidbit is a great example of what “male-as-norm” looks like, that is, when the experience of men is what is considered the norm. You see, like white-as-norm or straight-as-norm or English-as-norm, the pervasive and covert ways that male-as-norm is present in our day-to-day lives means that we’re not all that better than the generations before us. While we may package male-as-norm differently, it’s still remarkably the same.

And in that place of male-as-norm is where we find Mary Magdalene and Jesus in that garden on that first Easter morning. We find a man, who seemed like a gardener, but is revealed as Jesus. We find a woman who sees an empty tomb, then runs to tell the male disciples, and who, eventually, stands weeping at the tomb. Then, in that moment when the supposed gardener truly recognized Mary as a person, when he acknowledged that Mary as more than a messenger to the male disciples, then, and only then, did Mary see the resurrected Jesus. Mary truly saw Jesus when she was recognized as a person and not a tool, Mary saw resurrection when her full self was valued and her problems were engaged with dignity and understanding, and Mary saw Jesus when her name, and not a descriptor or a pronoun, was spoken in love.

You see, as Christians we are a people of the resurrection. Yet, resurrection is not instantaneous. We don’t immediately move from realization to resurrection. Instead, repentance comes before resurrection. First, we realize what consumes us, and, then, we repent for what destroys our lives, and finally, we embody resurrection. And, repentance is a fancy word for turning away from all that separates us from loving God and neighbor and then the process of turning back toward God’s love.

One way we see the beginnings of a cultural repentance in today's reading is through Jesus's engagement with Mary. For, so often we are caught up in what philosopher Gabriel Marcel calls "the spirit of abstraction." That is, the practice of conceiving people as functions rather than as humans. We see immigrants and refugees as economic liabilities rather than divine siblings fleeing persecution with the same desires for safety, food, and belonging. We see women as sexual objects, vessels for children, and less-than-people instead of strong, intelligent, and multifaceted humans. We devalue the inherent humanity of the other as we see war as a necessary evil instead of realizing the fear and complex situation the civilians find themselves. We see checkout clerks, delivery people, and customer service representatives as functions or barriers to access instead of humans with emotions, dreams, and value.

But, Mary Magdalene and her legacy offers us an important reminder to value the whole person and hold people in a positive light. For, Mary is our religion's first apostle and she was the first person sent from the tomb by Jesus to tell of the Resurrection. Mary was Jesus's devoted disciple. Mary was by Jesus's side during his ministry, at his crucifixion, and at the tomb. Mary was present in the book of Acts helping to form the church in its infancy,<sup>4</sup> and some scholars even believe that Mary might be the "beloved disciple" who is mentioned in John or that she might be the author of the gospel of John writing under a pseudonym.<sup>5</sup> So, while church history may have tried to coverup her impact or vilified and slandered her for thousands of years, Mary Magdalene is a tremendous and faithful disciple, apostle, and human. And in reclaiming the truth behind her impact, we are turning toward God's vision, we are leaning into repentance, and we are looking for the truth that is resurrection.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-mary-magdalene-119565482/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://ramon\\_k\\_jusino.tripod.com/magdalene.html](http://ramon_k_jusino.tripod.com/magdalene.html)

So, there it is. Today, we are reminded of the ways that Mary experienced the resurrection of Jesus. Mary felt the power of new life as she was recognized as a full person. Then, Mary shared how she was transformed by this moment. It is a story that Mary shared and that, ultimately, led us here today. It is a testimony from Mary to the power of recognizing all people as human. And, so too, it is an opportunity – an opportunity for us to both experience resurrection and to be partners with God in seeking resurrection in each encounter. Thanks be to God for Mary’s witness. Amen.