

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I think it's safe to say that the name "Mary" was a top ten baby name during Jesus's childhood. After all, the name Mary occurs 54 times in the Christian Scriptures, it's found in 49 verses, and it's likely that these instances denote 7-12 unique people. Because of this, scholars often need to figure out which particular Mary the author is talking about.

It reminds me of grade school when we had THREE people named "Katie" in a small class of 30 students. Teachers and students alike had to figure out ways to distinguish between them. Sometimes we'd use their last names, saying Katie Johnson, Katie Smith, or Katie Flack. Sometimes, it was Kate, Kat, and Katie. Other times, we used abbreviations, Katie J., Katie S., and Katie F. But it worked out nicely when a substitute teacher was there, because saying "Katie" would get a response from 10% of the class!

In the Christian Scriptures, Mary is their Katie. Like my grade school class, some biblical authors tried to distinguish the difference between the Mary's by adding attributes like "Mary, the mother of Jesus" or "Mary, the mother of John." Sometimes, authors used towns as attributes, for example "Mary of Bethany" or "Mary of Magdala." But it gets really confusing when lineage is vague, or a clear descriptor is missing. So, when the author says, "the other Mary;" then, all the scholars say, "Wait. Who dis?"

So, it's no wonder that the identity of Mary Magdalene has been puzzling. Once you take the confusion of maybe a dozen Marys as the staple ingredient and add in a dash of patriarchy, mix in a male-dominated religious order, add a handful of unintentional (or perhaps intentional) episodes of defamation, and it becomes a cluster.

I imagine it was confusing for Mary herself. I could imagine her correcting people about her identity. She'd say, "No, I'm not a prostitute." Mary would correct a new acquaintance and say, "You're thinking of a different Mary, I'm not the sister of Martha and Lazarus." She'd remind them that she didn't anoint Jesus' feet with fancy oil, she did not weep over Jesus's feet, and she did not wipe Jesus's feet with her hair. I imagine her constantly saying, "Nope, I'm not *that* Mary."

Now, I don't have the same experience as the Katies or the Marys. After all, there was only one other Jason in my grade school class. Maybe you don't have any experience with a duplicative name or confused identities. But I imagine that most of us have the experience of being labeled or perceived in a way that doesn't really relate. Maybe it's when people try to typecast you assuming that all women like dresses, or that all queer people like Britney Spears, or that all Black people like fried chicken. Maybe it's the assumption that all millennials are tech-savvy or that all men like sports. It's the moment when someone or some group generalizes you and makes unfounded assumptions about you without getting to know the real you. Mary likely lived a life filled with mistaken identities and assumptions, that led to her feeling invisible and anonymous.

Back on that first Easter morning Mary went to the tomb and found it empty. She went and told the disciples, and, of course, Mary couldn't be trusted so the male disciples went running to verify her unreliable story. Turns out, Mary was right—the tomb was empty. The other disciples left, but Mary stayed. She was weeping, and I imagine all sorts of thoughts were going through her head. Thoughts about the desecration of Jesus's body, thoughts about her grieving process being upended, thoughts of being left alone and dismissed by the disciples, and maybe even thoughts that her friends and family might be the next victims. I imagine her head running wild as the messengers in the tomb spoke to her.

But, then, Jesus said her name, "Mary." And I imagine it wasn't a shot-in-the-dark, 10% of the classroom kind of statement. Rather it was a definitive statement of knowledge. It was a declaration that Jesus knew her. I imagine a longer conversation than what is written in the gospel. Something personal, something that indicated that she was truly known.

For Mary, to be known, truly known, as THAT Mary was a big deal! For once, she wasn't being confused. She was known by Jesus. She was acknowledged and named. She was given a life that wasn't living in the shadows of someone else, but rather she, heard: yes, you, Mary, YOU are the one sent to tell the disciples. You are sent to be the first apostle. You are the first pastor. You are sent to help shepherd God's people to see the good news, to experience the resurrection, and to receive the gift of being known. You, Mary, you! // In that moment, I imagine she was floored. Finally, there was no confusion about her identity. Rather, God

claimed her, knew her, loved her, and sent her. For her, I imagine that was resurrection.

What we saw from Mary at the tomb that first Easter morning is that specificity matters. You are different from me, different from Mary Magdalene and Katie Smith. Each of us are different in our own ways, AND in our beautiful diversity, God acknowledges that as good. God acknowledges YOU as made in the image of God. That freckle or mole you can't stand—it's the image of God. Those pounds you just can't get off—well, it's the image of God. That hair or lack thereof, those teeth or lack thereof, and those abilities or lack thereof, all of that—image of God.

And with your beautiful image, YOU are given the gift of being sent. You are sent to share the good news that it's not what you do, or I do, or this church does that makes us more loveable, worthy, or special, because the truth is that every day God declares that you are loveable, you are worthy, and you are unique. God has already called you, and calls you each day to share that love, to be gracious, to embody a stance that includes all people because they are made in the image of God.

We'll there it is. That's the beauty of today's feast day. Mary has taught us about the gift of being known by our God. She's reminds us that no matter how much confusion or slanderous ideas they throw our way, it won't stick. For God has promised that you are loved, you are known, and you are sent to share that good news. Amen.