

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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When you look for God in the world, who are you looking for? Don't worry, since it's my first sermon here, I'm not going to actually make you shout out your answers – although watch out, I might make you do that in a future sermon! But really, I just want all of us to take a moment and think about this question: when you look for God in the world, who are you looking for?

This is the question that is at the heart of our Gospel lesson today, and it's at the heart of what it means to celebrate this Feast Day of Mary Magdalene.

To start with our Gospel story, this is the question we hear Jesus ask Mary as she stands, weeping, outside his tomb. She has just discovered that the body of her Lord and dearest friend is missing and she is understandably frantic. I mean, imagine that feeling! Imagine that three days before this you stood there, at the foot of the cross, watching your dearest friend be humiliated and tortured and killed by a brutal empire. And now imagine that three days later you have set out to visit his tomb only to discover that his body is missing. Imagine the desperation and pain Mary Magdalene must have felt. It's easy to look at this story today, knowing how it ends, and judge Mary, to think "how did the angels not make her suspicious? How could she not have known that was Jesus?" And yet, grave-robbing was a common enough phenomenon in the 1st century Roman Empire and anyway, she had seen first-hand how the Empire wielded power to crush those on the margins

of society, to kill someone like Jesus who dared to stand up against societal structures of power and greed and oppression. So, what else could she possibly expect to see but a dead body? And if that dead body was gone, what else could have happened except that it was stolen?

Yet even as I understand why Mary didn't recognize Jesus, even as I would have done the same thing, it's also true that Jesus had not been shy about what was to come. Multiple times throughout the Gospels we hear him telling his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, be killed, and on the third day be raised again. We know that Mary Magdalene had been with Jesus for a long time, had journeyed with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. She would have heard his proclamations, would have had reason to know and believe that Jesus' missing body would be a sign of his resurrection. But, in her deep pain and fear and sorrow, when Jesus asks her "who are you looking for?" she is so busy looking for the version of God that she expects – the dead body of Jesus – that she can't recognize the version of God that Jesus has already foretold, even as Jesus stands right in front of her. She's so busy looking for the version of God that conforms to this world that she misses God entirely.

Ironically, just as how when Mary looked for God in the world, she didn't recognize Jesus standing beside her, the Western church has also fallen woefully short at recognizing Mary as one of God's most important messengers. The Western church has fallen woefully short because when it has looked for God in the world, it has imagined that God could only be found in the faces and words and actions of men. Never mind that the Gospels show that Mary was an important supporter of Jesus' ministry, that his ministry likely would not have been possible without her and the other women who financially supported him. Never mind that she went to Jesus' tomb

“early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,” which means that she cared so much about Jesus that she went the very second that Sabbath was over, the very second she had freedom of movement. Never mind that while the disciples were cowering behind locked doors, scared to be associated publicly with Jesus, she went to his tomb, refusing to let fear or self-preservation or societal injustice separate her from him, even in his death. Never mind any of that because Mary Magdalene was a woman! God couldn’t possibly have spoken through her, right? For most of its history when the Western church has looked for God in the world, it has wondered: Mary Magdalene can’t possibly be what we’re looking for, right?

And so, early Western Church leaders interpreted the Bible in ways that pushed her further toward the margins of society. Pope Gregory I preached a sermon in 591 CE that conflated Mary Magdalene with the nameless sinful woman who washes Jesus’ feet in Luke 7, incorrectly naming her a sex worker. Now this was wrong on multiple levels: first, there’s no evidence that the nameless woman in Luke 7 was a sex worker. Second, there’s no evidence that Mary Magdalene was the nameless woman at all. And yet, according to the patriarchal logic of the Western church, naming Mary Magdalene a sex worker diminished her value even further, pushed her outside the patriarchal boundaries of church propriety, made it seem impossible that she should hold a place of importance, that God might speak through her. Never mind that Jesus throughout his ministry regularly ate with and was friends with sex workers. Never mind that Jesus showed time and time again that his ministry has no boundaries. Never mind that Jesus’ idea of people’s worth was not determined according to sinful, patriarchal norms.

Instead of looking for God the way that Jesus had taught, the Western church

has looked for God in all the places that patriarchy celebrated and diminished anyone who wasn't at the top of its rigid hierarchies. That's why we have countless medieval paintings that depict all the disciples with halos and Mary without one, why we have countless modern movies and musicals that still depict her as adulterous, why it was only in 2016 that the Catholic Church elevated the memorial of Mary Magdalene to a feast day, finally giving her recognition equal to that of the other disciples. This logic—the logic that says when the church looks for God in the world, it only finds God in certain people—is the same logic that has kept women and queer people out of the pulpit. It's the same logic that continues to uphold patriarchy and rigid gender binaries that push God's people to the margins and makes us feel unworthy. It is the same logic that has diminished Mary Magdalene's crucial role as the apostle to the apostles, as the first witness to the resurrection, as the first messenger of God's good news.

The good news today, siblings, is that God does not adhere to this logic. God breaks apart hierarchical human structures that try to say some people aren't worthy of being God's messenger. God breaks apart patriarchal ideas that try to say some people aren't worthy of God's grace. New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman writes that in the 1st century, “women were regarded as unreliable witnesses and were forbidden from giving testimony in court.” Within this reality that didn't consider women trustworthy, Jesus specifically chose Mary Magdalene to be the first messenger of his resurrection. He could have chosen any of the other disciples! But he specifically chose someone that society would view as unworthy to show us that to God, everyone is worthy. He specifically chose a woman as God's messenger to show us just how crucial women are to accomplishing God's work in the

world, just how crucial anyone on the margins is to God's ministry. It is only through Mary Magdalene that we know of Jesus' resurrection today. It is only because of her courage and her witness that we know that Jesus defeated death and with it defeated all the systems in our world that work to separate us from God and from one another.

And we know all of this because even though Mary Magdalene doesn't initially recognize Jesus, Jesus still calls her by name. Jesus still calls her by name and invites her into his good news. And after Jesus so lovingly calls her name, Mary recognizes him. Even in her fear and brokenness and pain, Jesus helps Mary Magdalene see beyond her own expectations. In doing so, he is inviting her to dare to imagine a world according to God's standards, instead of limited human ones. He is inviting her to dare to imagine a world where Jesus lives and the societal structures that seek to silence and exploit those on the margins do not get the final say. He is inviting her to dare to imagine a world where a woman becomes the first messenger to share that God's grace and love truly belong to all of God's people.

And when he calls Mary Magdalene by name, we are reminded that Jesus also calls each and every one of us by name to dare to imagine. In this Gospel, he is inviting all of us to dare to imagine a world where Mary Magdalene is truly celebrated as the apostle that she was. He is inviting us to dare to imagine a world where the patriarchy does not have the final say, a world where women and queer people share God's love from the pulpit and experience God's love out in the world. He is inviting us to dare to imagine a world where when we look for God we are truly looking for each and every member of God's creation.

So I ask you again, when you look for God in the world, who are you looking for? I'm looking for each and every one of you.

Amen.