

Feast of Mary Magdalene. July 22, 2018.
Called by name.

Do you know my name? If you do then we are closer than if we are strangers. I am still learning the names of the many people I meet here, and as I do then we will be closer.

And more. Knowing names is just a beginning! I want you to know a bit more of me than just my name. And I want to know more about you.

Shall we do that? It may sound easy but it means discovering and embracing a level of vulnerability. What about when you discover that I am not perfect!! I am FAR from perfect. Can we still be friends? Can we still have the chance to get to know each other more?

Mary Magdalene. Mary, perhaps of Magdala. Who is she? Her name MIGHT mean that she came from a village called Magdala. The problem is that no one in the ancient world knew of a village of that name. There is a field on the edge of Lake Galilee which has signposts to say 'Here, in ancient times, was Magdala', but it may just be pious speculation. Magdalene is a mystery.

Was she the woman who was caught in adultery, who Jesus saved from a horrible death and called to 'go and sin no more'? Probably not. That was a connection made much later in Christian history by men trying to downplay the place of this Mary in Jesus' life by casting her as a woman of loose morals.

She was certainly someone very close to Jesus. She travelled with him. He had changed her life somehow, transformed her, and she dedicated herself to supporting him and the good news that he shared.

Was this Mary married to Jesus? It has been suggested that perhaps the wedding at Cana at the beginning of John's Gospel was the wedding of Jesus and Mary. Authors across the centuries have taken up that idea. If you have read 'The Da Vinci Code' by Dan Brown, or seen the movie, you will have seen that theory being presented as if it was a suppressed piece of Christian history. The idea is intriguing. I wonder what fascinates us about it most. Is it the idea that Jesus lived a whole human life as many of us do, including every aspect of married life and had children? Is it the speculation that somewhere out there may be a direct physical descendant of Jesus?

The suggestion is compelling but unlikely. It makes for blockbuster movies and bestselling books but doesn't fit with the narrative as we find it in and around the New Testament.

There IS an unusual fragment of a book which did not make it into our Bible, called 'The Gospel of Mary Magdalene'. All we have is a fragment. The piece which we do have tells a story of the other disciples being petulant and complaining about special status given to Mary, asking with pouting lower lips why Jesus loved her more than them. Wherever that fragment of papyrus came from we don't have enough to know what was the whole story being told, or to tell if it is genuine.

We DO know that Mary was special though. We DO know that she held a special place in Jesus' heart. I don't mean that she was unique though. She saw what others did not see, not yet at least. Even if we had nothing else apart from the gospel reading we heard today (John 20:1-18) we would know that there was a special bond, a loving, intimate, open connection between Jesus and this Mary.

Mary, in her grief, went to complete the preparation of Jesus' body which had been interrupted because he died just before the Sabbath began. In her grief she went to the tomb and was astonished at what she found. She shared her discovery with the male disciples, but they didn't believe her. She was, after all, only a woman. It is very telling that the record of these events even shows the prejudice and ignorance of the male disciples. They didn't hide the fact that they made such a serious mistake or that they treated Mary so badly.

The disciples came, saw the empty tomb, then went away confused and frightened. Mary stayed. That takes courage. When others walk away, to stay takes courage. When others disappear in fear and confusion

or because of some other pressure which takes them away from a place of life, it takes courage to persevere.

In that space of persevering, in that space of remaining faithful, there is an encounter.

Jesus is gentle with her. He doesn't want to shock or frighten her. There is a strong sense here that, as Mary weeps, Jesus is reaching out to her. He is important to her. She is important to him.

What breaks that swirling tension and confusion clouded by grief? It is being called by name. Jesus calls Mary by her name. He reaches out to her with love and compassion. Jesus reaches out and names her. He knows not only her name, but he knows her as she is. He knows her and she knows him. By name and in ways which express that closeness of relationship which means they are connected.

Is that encounter just something we read and celebrate and say 'gee that is nice', as if it were just something that happened back then, to that Mary, and only to her?

No. It is part of THE story and it is part of OUR story. When we listen we hear our names. Spoken into our grief. Spoken into our context. Spoken into our wrestling with life. Spoken sometimes to call us back when we may have already put a foot onto a path away. Spoken with love. We are named. We are seen. We are loved.

This is a story about Mary. This is a story about us. And it is much more as well. In the second reading, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we hear the challenge to be the people who are calling others by name. (2 Corinthians 5:20) "We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us."

I have been reading recently about the context of the letters Paul wrote, including to the Church in Corinth. Before this second letter was written Paul had suffered terrible griefs and pressures in his life. We may think of Paul, super apostle, as breezing through life. He certainly didn't do that. So, when he writes about the call to be people through whom God shines, through whom God makes an invitation to the people around us, to be 'ambassadors for Christ', this comes from a man so ground down that he had even despaired of life itself. Yet, he knew that he had been called by name, on that road to Damascus. He knew that being part of sharing good news gave his life purpose and focus and meaning, even, especially, at the times when he felt ground down.

We are called, and known, and loved. We are known, warts and bumps and foibles and all. And we are loved. Like Mary, we are called into intimate connection, loving relationship, AND to share the love which we know with others.

We see and we love Jesus. We are seen and we are loved. We see and we reach out in love to others. This is Mary. This is us.

Amen.

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