

Song of Solomon 3:1-5; 5:2-8; 6:1-3; 8:6-7

Sung Psalm Response:

We will arise from weeping and seek the One who is Love.

We will sing in hope; we will sing with joy.

We will sing and embrace new life.

Romans 8:31; 33-35; 37-39

John 20:1, 11-18

Mary Magdalene Celebration **Celebrating the Feast Of Mary Magdalene July 24, 2011**

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There is something I particularly like about the gospel of John: Women are central characters in all the important events... Which means, of course, that the community in which this Gospel was written believed in the importance of women in the Church.

Jesus performs his first miracle (or “sign” as the author of this gospel calls them) because Mary, his mother, asks him to do something for the newlyweds who have just run out of wine. It is to a woman, the Samaritan at the well, that Jesus acknowledges for the first time that he is the Messiah. This, despite the fact that a Jewish man was not supposed to talk to a woman alone and that Jews did not speak to Samaritans. Some authors think that the woman at the well is not a real person but a symbolic character. In any case, the author of John’s gospel presents a female figure who “gets” what Jesus is saying better than Nicodemus, an educated man, who in the previous chapter of John’s gospel does not understand Jesus’ message.

Also, in John, it is Martha, *not* Peter who answers Jesus’ question about who he is, saying “I believe that you are the Messiah, sent by God, the one who is coming into the world.”

And finally, there is Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross with Mary the mother of Jesus and other women and as the first witness of the resurrection, sent by Jesus to tell the other disciples that he is alive.

We know that all four gospels present women as the first witnesses to the resurrection. This in itself is important. For the four canonical gospels to portray women at this vital moment is particularly significant considering the patriarchal cultural context in which these documents were assembled. In the other three canonical gospels, Mary Magdalene is present as one woman among several. In the gospel of John, she is the only one discovering the empty tomb. It is Mary Magdalene who goes to Peter and the anonymous “beloved disciple” to tell them that Jesus’ body is not in the tomb. They come and look...and leave and go home. But she stays there alone, weeping for her absent beloved like the woman in the Song of Solomon, because for her “love is strong as death and passion fierce as the grave.”

Scholarly work about Mary Magdalene has grown exponentially in recent years. Books, articles, films, documentaries in the History Channel, and of course, the *Da Vinci Code* speculations have put her at the forefront of discussion not only in theological or religious circles, but also in the popular imagination. She has been catapulted into contemporary

consciousness in the last decade or so. The development of scripture scholarship in the 20th century and the discovery of ancient documents in Egypt and other places have brought to light different and more accurate perspectives about who Mary Magdalene was. One of the recent books about her is aptly entitled “*The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene.*” (Jane Schaberg)

Personally, the way I look at her now is far from how I learned to see her for years. My guess is that is true for you also.

We know now that Mary Magdalene was transformed by Popes and other patriarchs from a woman leader in the early church into a prostitute and repentant sinner. Her figure was conflated with that of other women to create an image that does not correspond to what the gospels actually say about her. In confusing her with women sinners in the narratives and focusing on her invented sexual misconduct her importance was diminished and, by extension, so too was the importance of all women leaders in the church. As new scholarship emerges, it has become evident that this view of Mary Magdalene is a distortion that was developed to accommodate patriarchal prejudice against women’s leadership in the church.

The explosion of knowledge about Mary Magdalene and about the role of women in the early church, however, has not yet reversed conservative perspectives about her or about women in general.

In recent years, it has become appealing to imagine the possibility of a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Discussions about the quality of their relationship have become a magnet in the popular press as well as in the writings of some Christian authors.

Aside from any awkward or uncomfortable feelings this might create in some people, and despite all the confusion created by Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, there is something attractive in this possibility. The positive side of considering this kind of relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is that it enhances the likelihood that our human romantic and physical love could be approached more easily as an expression of divine union.

But there is something problematic in this.

This apparently open-minded perspective, once again, reduces Mary Magdalene to her sexuality. From this viewpoint, her importance in the early church comes not from Jesus seeing in her a friend and collaborator, someone who understood his message and was able to transmit it to others. Her importance comes from being his sexual partner. In other words, *she was promoted to a leadership position because she slept with the boss.*

And *that* is problematic.

Even if the possibility of a relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene appears to be an “enlightened” position, it is a variation of the traditional stereotypes of what women are good for. Either through forbidden or acceptable sexual behavior, as a repentant prostitute or a legitimate wife, we are in a similar place: Mary Magdalene is important because of her sexual behavior, not because she had other capacities of intelligence, understanding or empathy that

Jesus appreciated. Rather than a woman who was taken seriously by Jesus, she is explained through her sexuality and her involvement with men.

Yes, I do understand that there are other things involved in committed relationships and marriage that go beyond sexuality; that there is a meeting of minds and souls beyond the meeting of bodies. I do believe in the spiritual value of sexuality and in the erotic significance of spirituality. Being a member of Dignity for close to forty years has made that very clear for me.

My point, rather, is that if a woman's importance, value and very identity derive from her sexuality or sexual attachment to a man, we are diminishing her other qualities as a person.

There is ample evidence of the deleterious effects on women and girls of being equated with body and sexuality. I worry that this apparently "progressive" perspective that interprets her as Jesus' sexual partner can take away, once again, the value of who was Mary Magdalene was in the early church and thus what she could be for us today.

This is not to deny that there are erotic elements in the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene at the tomb or in their whole relationship. All love is erotic in a broad sense, even when its basis is spiritual. The writings of the mystics are full of erotic feelings and images. The language of the erotic expresses intense desire for God better than any other metaphor.

Let me clarify also that I do *not* have any real objection to the possibility that the relationship of Jesus and Mary Magdalene might have been both spiritual and enfleshed. My objection comes, as I have said, from the easy assimilation of anything female with sexuality and the body; from the knee-jerk reaction that assumes a woman's value comes from her sexual connections. I am objecting to positions that reproduce conservative stereotypes about women pretending to present a different "enlightened" perspective.

My question is this: Is a woman's power and authority only based on her sexual connection with a man? Is it possible to understand the importance of this woman—and her intimacy with Jesus—without translating it into a sexual relationship? (...Aside from the sexist implications in this perspective, there is also the heterosexual assumption behind it and the heteronormativity implicated in it, but that's another story).

Interestingly, the early Christian narratives that circulated together with the documents that eventually became the canonical gospel—those other gospels that never made it to the Bible—are full of stories of Mary Magdalene's role and importance in the early church that do not make reference to her as either prostitute or wife. In the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and several other of these gospels, she is presented as an significant figure, as a person whom Jesus trusted. In *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* there is an interesting scene (that I remember Jane Via referred to when she was the homilist for this celebration several years ago). In this scene, after Peter has chastised Mary Magdalene because he does not believe that Jesus would have told a woman some things he did not tell Peter, another male apostle tells Peter, "If the Savior considered her worthy, who are you to reject her?"

All of these early narratives have in common their presentation of Mary Magdalene in a positive light, while Peter or other male disciples appear jealous and envious of Jesus' willingness to trust her with deep knowledge about his message. (There is also an interesting homoerotic element in these documents because the male disciples are jealous that Jesus loved Mary Magdalene more than them).

This and other scenes signify the struggle for women's leadership from the beginning of the movement that eventually became Christianity.

The struggles about women's authority in general and Mary Magdalene's in particular are also present in the canonical gospels and in subsequent interpretations. The women's description of the empty tomb and the resurrection apparitions, although preserved in the text, are dismissed in the same text as nonsense. Later commentators insist that the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene or the other women is a minor and private event; the "real" apparition is to Peter and the male disciples.

But, be that as it may. I want to go back to Mary Magdalene weeping by the empty tomb and to the transformation of those tears into joy when she was called by name and recognized Jesus in the gardener, (because this is what speaks to me in my reading of this text).

She is so intent in her sorrow that she does not pay much attention to visions of angels when they ask, "Woman, why are you weeping?" "*Mujer, por qué lloras?*" And then, when this unknown man appears and also asks her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" "*Mujer, por qué lloras? A quién buscas?*" she does not answer his question, just says, "If you have taken his body away, please tell me, so I can go and get him." I wonder how did she plan to carry the body of a fully grown man all by herself... But the point is that she will do anything, *anything* to find her beloved. And because she stays at the empty tomb; because she is willing to do anything for him, she is rewarded with his presence. When he calls her name, she recognizes that this is not an unknown gardener, but the *One* she is looking for. The sound of that name tells her who he is. But it also reiterates who *she* is. She is being called by her true name.

For each one of us, that voice from our depths calling our true name, telling us who we are for God, wakes up our uniqueness and identity in ways that nothing else can.

The gospel reading tells us that when she heard her name, Mary Magdalene *turned*. She turns twice: once away from visions of angels to look at the gardener and then again when he calls her name. She turns from extraordinary visitations to look at an ordinary gardener. Then she turns when she realizes it is the voice of the beloved calling her from this person she has not recognized before, but who *is* the presence she has been seeking.

This passage makes me wonder how many times I am distracted with expectations of what the "spiritual" life should entail and miss the very real "apparitions" of Jesus in everyday life. Because Jesus is there, appearing to us all the time, calling us by name *in each person we meet each day of our lives*. It is not only Mary Magdalene who saw apparitions or had a unique relationship with Jesus or witnessed his living presence. We encounter Jesus' apparitions every day in every person we meet. Every day our names are called.

We see Mary Magdalene's unique relationship with Jesus when we see her react to the sound of his voice calling her name. We get in touch with what that unique relationship means for each one of us when we stop to listen to that call from the depths of our beings and learn to recognize the divine presence in us and in our every day encounters; at the most unexpected moments ...perhaps even in our real gardeners...

God is there, at the core of our innermost being and in the others we encounter, calling us by name. All we have to do is *turn* and see and hear that intimate call.

I know there have been moments in my life when I have found myself weeping by an empty tomb...of dead hopes, dead relationships, dead shreds of illusions and future plans. Moments when I thought it was all gone, when I was totally disoriented, when there was not even a dead body to minister to, to alleviate the grief. Moments when it felt that all was completely and utterly lost and life did not make sense anymore. And then, out of nowhere, for no apparent reason, a voice called, a little light started to shine at the bottom of the depth, something reminded me that there is a presence in the depth of my soul that never falters. This voice reminded me that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us/*me* from the love of God." The ever present and ever faithful God is here, calling us by name and reiterating this personal and unique love.

It is in those moments when we cannot see through our tears that God surprises us as Jesus surprised Mary Magdalene. She was looking for a dead body. Instead, he is alive, right there, calling her name. Sometimes a gardener is not just a gardener. And sometimes dead bodies and dead feelings we grieve for give birth to new life in front of our eyes. If we stay there waiting, praying, weeping, the unexpected reveals that presence in our souls and we sense we are being called by name.

Indeed, God always surprises us and comes to us in ways we had not anticipated, much less expected. But to make ourselves available to this God full of surprises we need to wait and watch and perhaps weep for the loss of our misguided illusions.

I constantly need to remind myself that the beauty and true meaning of scriptures is not what happened 2000 or more years ago. What makes scripture important and meaningful is how those events are happening to us now. Water changed into wine when we thought we were running out of the last supply of energy; Jesus asking us for water at the edge of some well where we are toiling; angels and unknown gardeners, who we do not recognize initially as manifestations of divine presence, asking us why are we weeping... "*Por qué lloras?*" ... All that is around us, happening to us right now in different forms every day. Our water and tears are being transformed into wine and joy. Jesus is alive in us and for us. Present in each incident, in each person we meet, among our pots and pans and computers...e-mailing and twittering in many different ways, making us aware of God's presence. To become aware of this presence we only have to do as Mary Magdalene did: first, *turn* from the fascination of unrealistic expectations and mysterious apparitions dressed in bright clothes and then *turn* from superficial understandings of people and events to be able to recognize the presence of God in the events of our lives.

In the many times I have read and reread these scripture passages in the last few months, this action of turning and turning again has called me to reflect on what is in front of my eyes. It makes me recognize that I am being called by name from the depths of my soul...the name that *really* describes who I am.

What I ask for myself and for all of us is that we turn to that inner voice calling from the depths and respond to it as Mary Magdalene did...by going to tell others that there is deep and real presence inside us, that God is alive... and closer to us than our own breath.