



Sermon from our Vicar, The Reverend Canon Dr Colleen O'Reilly. The 20th Anniversary of ordination of women to the priesthood at St Paul's Cathedral, Sunday 9th December



The Revd Canon Dr Colleen O'Reilly

(Photo Courtesy of "The Melbourne Anglican")

Mary from Magdala, a woman disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, comes to his tomb and finds it empty. She has no explanation beyond theft. 'They' have taken the Lord out of the tomb she tells the others. Things are not as Mary Magdalene expected them to be. The outcome of Jesus' death is no longer as Mary assumed it would be. There is now no body to care for one last time; no tomb to visit later when her grief is keenest. So, what now can be done or said about the situation?

The male disciples who join Mary briefly in the garden have had nothing to say. They have gone home! Mary is alone. Her tears are seen only by two angels in white. They are messengers of a future Mary cannot possibly

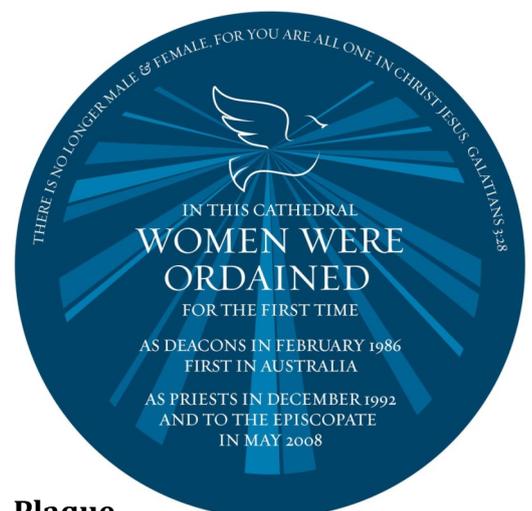
yet comprehend.

So her tears flow as the shock of the new overtakes her. She is feeling a truth she cannot yet comprehend. The astonishing truth about Jesus which Mary from Magdala cannot yet see clearly will soon become the good news she will give her life to making known.

Margaret Marsh was the first woman priest I ever met, in 1981. She came from a place of almost mythical advancement then, New Zealand, where women were first ordained in 1977. So, I went to hear Margaret Marsh preach in St James' King Street in Sydney. There was never any hope of her presiding at the Eucharist that day. She was given permission to preach as if she were a protestant minister from another church. Later she did preside at a Eucharist, around my coffee table. Not being church property my laywoman's front room was beyond the reach of canon law.

That morning, in one of Sydney's oldest parish churches I watched as the Revd Margaret Marsh, vested as a priest walked in procession to the sanctuary. It was exciting; it was amazing; but suddenly my eyes were full of tears; tears not of joy but of grief. For the first time in all the years of church going since I was baptised at six weeks and went to Sunday School at three and watched the processions of men, I knew without doubt what negative and false notions those procession had taught me. As I watched my first ordained woman it suddenly came to me that, 'it really is OK to be a woman; being a woman really does have something to do with God after all.'

The patriarchs had taken away my Lord and I had not known it until that moment.



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Mary cannot see clearly through her tears but she remains in the place of her grief and does not depart, as the men have already done. Only the dazzling strangers are kind enough to ask what is wrong. They of course know full well what Mary has yet to learn, that the future has been transformed. These tears must seem to them to be unnecessary, even unwarranted, given what news awaits her, yet they are patient and compassionate with her grief.

When the risen Christ himself speaks to Mary her grief still blinds her. At first her hope remains simply the recovery of Jesus' body. Mary cannot yet imagine the transformation she will soon encounter. She is caught in the place of death, looking only to a solution of her own imagining.

She has yet to be called by name into the new life which is already before her eyes.

I'll never forget Nadine's question. She must have approached me around 1985. I was a lay minister in a pretty run down inner city Sydney parish. Each week I would be in the sanctuary with the clergy in colourful deacon's vestments, incense filling the air and preaching regularly. By now I'd gone to theological college and completed postgraduate study. The Archbishop of Sydney had licensed me as a lay reader in 1982, Sydney being a more generous place then. It was as good as heaven in the circumstances, especially since the Uniting Church now employed me on the faculty of their College. Nadine had left school at fifteen; that's what girls in her suburb did. She worked at the supermarket; that's what girls who left school at fifteen did.

One day Nadine came to me and said, 'I gotta ask you something.'

'Yes Nadine,' I said with unknowing pastoral enthusiasm and expressive concern.

"I gotta know" Nadine said, 'you sleeping with Fr Robert to do what you do?'"

In Nadine's world that what girls did to get what they wanted.

Thankfully, Nadine believed me when I assured her that was not how I came to be in ministry.

All that stands between Mary and the truth of her calling, is the speaking of her name. Only when the risen Christ addresses her by name, does Mary Magdalene comprehend who it is who has been present all along.

At the sound of her name, Mary turns around; she no longer faces a direction which cannot bring life; she faces and she names her familiar friend Jesus as 'Teacher'. Each names the other. Each evokes the other's new and true identity; each enters the new relationship between them – he the sending one, she the sent.

Not only has Mary found what she was looking for; she has found far more. Not only is her grief overturned, her joy in finding what she feared was lost forever is now made complete.

The day the women deacons were not ordained priests in Goulburn Cathedral I was in the front pew. I expect you know the story of those events in early 1992. The men and women to be ordained were on retreat. Late on the Friday two men, a lawyer and a priest, were granted an injunction in the NSW Supreme Court to prevent the Bishop proceeding.

The next day the bishop presented all the candidates to the congregation and asked, "Do you accept them?"



We did so, but with great sorrow, for only the men were to have hands laid on them that day. The women stood with them, the tears rolling down their faces and I knew with unshakeable certainty that it was only a matter of time. The women were truly priests already – they were bearing in their bodies the pain of the whole Church that day and they bore it in order to transform the future. I had a ringside seat at a contemporary passion.

At the end of that year I was in Goulburn once more to see the stone rolled away and those same women ordained. Over three days in December 1992 I went to Bathurst, to Goulburn and to Newcastle - three ordination services in three days; and I knew myself to be present at the dawning of a new day.

In Melbourne there were three ordinations to cope with the numbers of women deacons to be made priests. I've heard stories of those times- the long, long applause when the new priests were presented to the people of God; the rush from one 'first' Eucharist to another, evening after evening.

On the December day in Adelaide when the women were ordained St Peter's Cathedral tiled floor exploded in the heat - which seemed fine to me since it was so clearly not the roof falling in!

Perth had proceeded earlier that same year. It is hard to believe all this is now twenty years ago and we women working alongside ordained men are the 'new normal'. And even more unimaginable twenty years ago, there are three bishops who are women and one bishop-elect, Alison Taylor, soon to join them.

In 1975 a few friends and I were like the daughters of Zelophehad. We came to believe that God's words to Moses concerning the women, 'You shall indeed let them possess an inheritance' had come into their own in a whole new way. So we formed a group and we demonstrated and we lobbied, and we were elected to synods and we grew into adults members of our Church, not merely confirmed ones.

It was an education in faith, in politics, in the proper exercise of power and in the authority of our being, and it made us. We sensed that it was time to right an ancient wrong. We grasped intuitively that the time had come for the daughters to be given an inheritance and a portion in ministry, and no longer just the sons.

It was happening elsewhere; it was time for it to happen in Australia.

Between our initial request and the final vote in General Synod lies years of learning how the Church really works; finding our voices, and above all taking up the dignity of our calling to be priests in the Church of God, alongside our brothers, our co heirs of Christ's commission to Mary Magdalene.

Being as we say of ourselves, 'an apostolic Church', today give thanks that women as well as men may be called and ordained as deacons, as priests and bishops to follow the example of the witness to resurrection of Mary of Magdala. No longer best described as male priests or women priests, now the only fitting adjectives to describe an ordained person are faithful and fruitful.

Twenty years ago, we Australian Anglicans began to become more truly what we profess to be and for that we rightly give God thanks and praise today.

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