

Feast of Mary Magdalene
John 20:
July 20, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

A Friend to Follow Through the Door:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Who is this woman waiting and weeping at the tomb? Who is this woman so eager to find Jesus' body? This woman whose heart leaps with joy when she hears Jesus call her name? Who is this woman ready to throw her arms around him and hold him tight? Who is this woman—the first to serve the Risen Christ? Who is this Mary Magdalene? And what are we to make of her?

There are those who say Mary Magdalene was the penitent sinner that anointed Jesus with oil, washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Not so! Others claim she was the Mary who sat at Jesus' feet while her sister Martha cooked and served. Untrue! The Da Vinci Code would have us believe that she was Jesus' wife. Absurd! Still others picture her a red-headed, bare-breasted harlot. How far off the mark can you get!

But who then is this Mary Magdalene—¹this woman who weeps at the tomb?

We know so little about her. In the gospels we catch a glimpse here, a whiff there. Just a trail really. She came Magdal, a town not far from the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps she heard of Jesus' healings. Perhaps she was part of the crowds that followed him. Luke tells us Jesus healed her of seven demons. Could it be that Jesus lifted her burdens of pain and guilt, of grief and sorrow, of anger and disappointment and shame? Perhaps. Or maybe it was that he calmed the fears that caused her such dis-ease. We'll never know. But what we do know is that she was a woman healed by Jesus and that she began to follow him, to serve him, and to minister to him and to the others.

Who is this Mary Magdalene? A person healed by Jesus. That much is certain.

From the gospels we get a clearer picture of Mary Magdalene at the time of Jesus' death. She waits at the foot of the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus. There she stands, perhaps unflinching, perhaps turning her eyes away when she feels tears rising, as they nail him to the cross. She watches with him as he dies. She follows as they bring him to the tomb. And then she has a restless sleep. She rises early, her hands full with spices to rub on his body. In the early morning she goes to the tomb. The stone is rolled away. She rushes back to tell the others and then she returns to the empty tomb where she waits and weeps. She looks inside the tomb and hears the angels ask, "Who are you seeking?" She tells them and turns again. There is a man standing there. She thinks he's a gardener and demands to know where they have taken Jesus. When she hears him say her name—Mary—she cries out "teacher" and turns towards him once again. He says to her, "Do not hold onto me." And then he sends her out saying, "Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" She goes and tells them, "I have seen the Lord...."

Who is this Mary Magdalene? The first apostle. We can be sure.

But there's so much more to Mary Magdalene. So much that has laid buried for centuries. From ancient texts discovered in Nag Hammadi in 1945 and from other texts as well, we learn more about Mary Magdalene. One of these ancient texts describes her as "the one who was called his companion."¹ Another quotes Mary saying to Jesus, "I do not get tired of asking you questions...." To which he replies, "Ask what you will."²

In my mind, I have this picture of Mary Magdalene walking with Jesus. They're deep in conversation. Sometimes they stop and turn to face one another. Perhaps she asks a question that gives him pause; perhaps he says something that makes her wonder. Then on they go along their way. Two friends walking down the road.

Who is this Mary Magdalene? Friend of Jesus, friend of God.

Perhaps we come to know her best when we remember the deep friendships we ourselves have had. Those special friendships with people who are there with us in moments of deep joy and moments of searing pain. Friends who watch and wait with us in our darkest moments. Friends who love us so much they tell us even the hardest truths. Friends who walk with us throughout our days. Friends who help us live into our fullest and best selves.

Think back to Mary Magdalene on the road with Jesus, caring for his needs, supporting him with what she had to give, helping him with his work. Remember Mary Magdalene standing and watching with Jesus at the Cross. Remember, too, her persistence as sought to find him and offer him one last kindness, one last token of respect. Think of the joy she felt when she heard his voice and her readiness to do his bidding. All acts of friendship, all acts of love.

What are we to make of Mary Magdalene?

Mary Magdalene offers us another way of living and being in Christ. A way of friendship. In her acts of friendship and love, Mary Magdalene shows us a way of being friends to Jesus and friends to God. Good friends. Active friends. Friends who watch with one another in suffering and in sorrow. Friends who support one another in the work we are given to do. Friends who call out new life in one another.

I used to think of myself as a friend of God. What I think I meant was that God was my friend or that I wanted God to be my friend—there for me, close to me in prayer and in worship. All that is a part of it. Yet Mary Magdalene, in her deep friendship with Jesus, opens the door to a way of being a friend to God as well as a friend of God, a friend who stands with those who suffer, a friend who puts their shoulder to the burden, a friend who says, "Here I am. Send me." Let us walk through that open door. Let us be friends to God.

¹Pistis Sophia in Richard Smoley, "Forbidden Faith: The Secret History of Gnosticism," p. 27.

²Pistis Sophia, 139 in Esther De Boer, Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth, p. 68.