

## **Mary Magdalene: Tethered to Resurrection Hope**

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018

*John 20:1-18*

Our scripture lesson for today is John's account of the first Easter morning. As you listen to it, pay particular attention to Mary Magdalene. Try to imagine yourself in her shoes: coming to the tomb before sunrise, filled with grief over the horrific death of her good friend and teacher, Jesus. In John, Jesus' body has already been covered in burial spices and wrapped in grave clothes and laid in a tomb by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Mary makes the trip to pay her last respects, perhaps seeking to anoint his body further. As a woman in that culture, she takes the risk of coming by herself and before daybreak. Listen now for God's word:

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Since the middle of January here at Immanuel, we've been focusing, in a series of sermons, on Jesus' 12 Disciples. Over the weeks of the series, and in a drama on Maundy Thursday, each of the 12 disciples took on a life of their own. As we looked at their stories, each one taught us something about what it means for all of us—in our own humanness—to be followers of Jesus. It's been an interesting and edifying exercise.

But all along it has felt a bit like something's missing. Because, of course, those 12 men were not the only ones who followed Jesus. There were women in his inner circle, as well. Like Mary Magdalene, for instance.

A strong case could be made that Mary of Magdala and some of the other women were—at least in some ways—braver and more faithful than any of the twelve. After all, when the chips were down and Jesus was hanging up there on a cross to die a humiliating death, it was Mary and the other women who were there at his execution.

The guys? Well, they had all disappeared. They'd denied and deserted and betrayed and gone into hiding. But not Mary Magdalene. She was **present**.

She was there on that first Easter morning, too.

Among the various Gospel accounts of the first Easter morning, Mary of Magdala is the only figure who appears in each one. In Matthew, she shows up with the other Mary. In Mark, she arrives with Mary the mother of James and Salome. In Luke, she comes with an even larger group of women. In each case, she's **present**.

But in John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene is there all by herself. John highlights her bravery by having her come not only alone but also in the dark. A risky move for a woman in that culture—and I suppose any culture.

Driven by her grief and her sense of connection to Jesus, Mary can't do anything else but to try to be there with and for him even after his death. She is there to honor his body, to honor his life, and to honor the impact that his life lived in that body had on her.

That's the way love works. When someone really matters to you, you want to be there with them. You want to be there for them. You want to be **present**. Mary Magdalene as much or more than any of the twelve models what it means to be present for all of us.

Two days ago, on Good Friday, I attended a memorial service at Everly Funeral Home in Falls Church for Luke McCrary. A number of Immanuel youth and adults knew Luke, who was a senior at Marshall High School. The chapel of the funeral home was jam packed with family and friends.

There wasn't enough seating, so many of us stood out in the hall. As I took note of how many people were there, and craned my neck to watch our own Susan Graceson speak about what a special kid Luke was, and then saw Susan and David's son Carter stand up to bravely and eloquently eulogize his best friend, I was reminded again of the power of being **present**. Present to and for each other, present to our own pain and the pain of others, present to life in all of its ups and downs, its hopes and fears, its joys and sorrows.

Memorial services and cemeteries have a way of bringing the importance of presence home. It was Mary who **was present** at the tomb that morning, to do the vitally important work of grief, of tending to bodies and to pain. But it was also Mary who was tethered to a limited notion of what was possible in life and in the world, so tethered at least for a little while, that she couldn't see signs of resurrection, not at first, anyway.

Now to be fair to her, except for in John's gospel, neither can anyone else. As a whole host of my female clergy colleagues have shared on social media this week, in each of the gospels, including

John's, "Without women preachers like Mary Magdalene, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection whatsoever." She was there. She was present. And she eventually saw.

Barbara Brown Taylor helps us to understand Mary's initial inability to see the resurrection that she went on to proclaim with these words about how unnatural resurrection is. She writes:

*When a human being goes into the ground that is that. You do not wait around for the person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off—not this side of the grave, anyway. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is ON the graves, and not in them.*

*That is all Mary was doing that morning—paying her respects, going to his tomb to convince herself it was all true. It was still dark, but even from a distance she knew something was wrong. She could smell the damp earth, cold rock from inside. Someone had moved the stone! Afraid he would become a saint, afraid his tomb would become a shrine, someone had taken him away—God knew where—to a steep cliff, to the town dump. His body was all she had left and now it too was gone.<sup>1</sup>*

That was the double anguish that Mary faced. When she first saw the stone had been rolled away, she assumed and reported to Peter and the other disciple that Jesus' body had been stolen. After they came and checked it out and somehow went away believing, it was Mary who held on to the notion that Jesus' grave had been robbed.

Even the two angels she saw when she looked into the tomb couldn't talk her out of that perspective. In fact, it's not clear that Mary even understood they were angels, so locked in was she on the idea that his body had taken. Perhaps **this is** why the angels don't feel the need to preface their words to her with "Fear not!" like angels **always do**. Sometimes you're too heartbroken and sad about life or death or your own circumstances or the circumstances of the world to be afraid or to notice angels human or divine reaching out to you. Sometimes you're too sad to feel hope.

If that's where you are this morning, let me suggest that we have something more to learn from Mary Magdalene than just the importance of being present to pain. She also teaches us the value of becoming aware of and clinging to resurrection hope, which is something very different than trying to hold on to the way things used to be.

True, she doesn't recognize Jesus at first, mistaking him for the gardener, even when he's standing in front of her and asking, "Why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" So she asks him, "If you've taken his body away, tell me where you've put it, and I'll go get it. I'll take care of it. Just tell me where you've put it." But then Jesus says her name. "Mary." All it takes is hearing Jesus say her name for Mary to recognize him—to recognize and hold on to hope alive and loose in the world. All it takes is hearing her name for Mary to be connected to the hope of resurrection.

Her immediate impulse is to call Jesus teacher and to try grab on to him, but he says, "*Do not hold on to me, for I've not yet ascended to the Father, But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*" Go to the community and tell them I am alive.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999)

It is as if Jesus is telling Mary, “Don’t hold on to the way things used to be. Don’t try to keep my physical presence here, because if I’m still here, you and the others will miss the gospel truth that what I came to do will continue in you and in all who come after you. If you hold on to the way things used to be with us, you won’t be able to be fully present for people now and in the future. When I ascend to heaven, you’ll understand this, Mary. You’ll understand that rather than looking back on the past or waiting around for me to appear again, you’ll feel my Spirit working through you in the here and now—as you love and serve each other and the world. Mary, Mary, Mary, I need you to be present now, just as you have always dared to be present.”

Paul Raushenbush, one of our former theologians-in-residence and the brother of Lorraine Bucy, shared this in an Easter post last night. Speaking to the current moment and with great hope in the power of resurrection, here is some of Paul wrote:

*Easter can be that moment when we all become like the women two thousand years ago who crawled out to care for the body, to pay respect to the one who was killed for speaking truth, holding a mirror, who said repent of all the lies and hatred, the bigotry and death. Who risked their lives to show their love for one who was love enfleshed who loved the world so much.*

*Easter can be that moment when we all become women and venture out in defiance of death to honor truth, love, justice and life and find that even in the midst of death we are in life, as we encounter that Divine life that would not die. Even if Easter is not magic, and does not and cannot relieve all of our pain, sorrow and sickness; in Easter we know life in that encounter with the Risen One who loves us unto death.*

*In Easter, even if it is not magic, and maybe it is, we will no longer be afraid of death or those who deal death but will rise and keep rising with our sisters (and brothers) and rise and rise like a moon that gives light, even if it is not blinding, to show us the Way.*

*In Easter, that which we thought was the ending (even our own death, or our struggle for freedom that feels far from won), we see it as a beginning and protect the spark of hope, keeping the wobbly taper close to our heart.<sup>2</sup>*

If we’re going to hold on to something this Easter, let’s hold on to that. Hold on to resurrection hope.

Sometimes you pick a sermon title and the bulletin gets printed and then you think, “O my gosh! I’m a little stuck here.”

Let me tell you about where the title of this sermon came from. It grew out of a post I’d read on a blog called *Hands-Free Mama*. In it, the author talked about how a number of her daughter’s peers—and her daughter herself—had become so caught up in what really wasn’t real. They’d become so caught up in social media that it was beginning to affect their self-esteem, even to the point of driving some of them to utter despair.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Raushenbush, <https://www.facebook.com/Raushenbush/posts/10101285053115062>, 31 Mar 2018 (last accessed 3 Apr 2018)

This *Hands-Free Mama* wrote a letter to her daughter about being tethered to what is really important. When I read her letter, I thought about what it means to be tethered to resurrection hope. She wrote:

*Your thoughts and beliefs about what your body should look like or what your life should look like are being shaped. The hidden influence of the internet can create a poor self-image, unrealistic comparisons, and harmful judgements – and you won't even know it is happening.*

*But here's how you take back control: Awareness ... you see, awareness changes everything. Awareness is your weapon against the hidden influences and damaging behaviors. While you are online, your mind, your thoughts, your core values are drifting to wherever tech companies want you to go. The remedy is to limit the time you spend drifting in the online world and tether yourself to real life.*

***Tether yourself***

*To real people, real conversations, and real scenery.*

***Tether yourself***

*To furry animals, interesting books, good music, the great outdoors.*

***Tether yourself***

*To spatulas, hammers, cameras, paintbrushes, and yoga mats.*

“Tether yourself,” she said to her daughter. I thought about how important it is to be tethered to what is right, and kind, and good, and what lives forever as I stood in that funeral home on Friday. It is so hard for any of us to stay tethered.

Hands-Free Mama wrote this to her daughter. *When your worth is in question ... when you feel lost and alone ... when you feel sad and can't explain why, tether yourself to real life. Tether yourself to real people. Tether yourself to real love.*<sup>3</sup>

I don't know where you are and what you're going through this Easter morning, but let me suggest that all of us do well to tether ourselves to real life, and real love, and real people, and real resurrection hope.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel Macy Stafford, “Tether Yourself: The Enlightening Talk Parents Aren't Having Can Keep Teens from a Damaging Drift”, Hands Free Mama, <https://www.handsfreemama.com/2017/12/15/tether-yourself-the-enlightening-talk-parents-arent-having-can-keep-teens-from-a-damaging-drift/> (last accessed 3 Apr 2018)