

## Feast of St. Mary Magdalene - July 22, 2009 Reflection offered at Mass by Rita Houlihan

Readings for the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene, July 22

Song of Songs 3:1-4b

Psalm 63: "My Soul is Thirsting"

John 20:1-18 (lectionary reading is John 20:1-2, 9-18)

As I meditated on John 20:1-18, I found that in order to imagine what Mary Magdalene went through on Easter morning I had to go back to the crucifixion. According to both Mark and Matthew, she and some other women stood and watched at a distance. What did she discover as she witnessed the suffering and death of her dear friend, Jesus? She may have realized how the power of her love overcame her fear and perhaps, even revulsion as she witnessed the horrors of His suffering. I can't imagine seeing my best friend's body and face bloody and torn knowing that he or she, of all people did not deserve this.

What kept her there at the foot of the cross - love, a desire to comfort even if only by her presence? Was it memories of how he had healed her and welcomed her fully to his group of disciples; or memories of all the healing and kindness she had witnessed? The Sabbath must have been a day of sorrowful waiting for her. Finally, on Sunday she leaves before dawn with some other women or perhaps, alone as John suggests.

We know she fully expected to find Jesus' body there because she is stunned and afraid when she sees the tomb empty. She ran to tell Peter and another disciple – she calls out, "**They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him.**"

They run back to the tomb together. She and the younger disciple wait for Peter; he arrives, looks, sees the cloths but does not understand. The younger one looks in the tomb and has a sense that something important has occurred; they both leave without saying a word.

But Mary stays. Echoing the soul thirsting in Psalm 63, she gazes toward the sanctuary as she looks in the tomb and sees two angels. They ask her, "**Why are you weeping?**" For the 2<sup>nd</sup> time she cries out, "**They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him.**" She turns away and stays weeping in the garden. I have to ask again, 'What kept her there?' This was the most important teacher and friend in her life. For two years she had traveled with Jesus and the other women and men disciples up and down Galilee and now into Jerusalem. He had saved her life and the lives of many others - the woman who had hemorrhaged for 12 years and was, according to Jewish law unclean. When this woman touched Jesus he did not condemn her but blessed and cured her, breaking her horrible and long isolation. (Mark 5:21-34) He raised a 12 year old girl from the dead – in a society that permitted people to leave unwanted children out to die. (Mark 5:35-43) He saw an old woman crippled and bent praying quietly in the temple; he called her over to where he was teaching in the male side of the temple and praised her as a true 'daughter of Abraham'. (Luke 13:10-17)

This was a man who not only saved Mary of Magdala's life but also clearly laid out new rules for life; he included women, children, lepers, sinners and tax collectors in his community and mission. She probably had thanked him and may have generously supported his mission in

Galilee from her own funds; but when your best friend suffers and dies that isn't enough. He had to have a proper burial.

So there it is; I think it was the unremitting kindness that Jesus had shown to her and to so many others; the guidance, the prayers He had taught them, the example He had set – this could have kept Mary of Magdala at the tomb. But on the other hand, she may not have been thinking of all those memories – yes, they were in her soul, a deep part of her experience. But maybe on this first Easter she was simply being present; something foreign to us but that the mystics, prophets and teachers of contemplation urge us to do. There she is showing us how to be present to God's presence in the face of our own powerlessness, helplessness, fear, confusion and overwhelming sadness. Her love for Jesus empowers her to stay and propels her to act, to give Jesus a proper burial and to insist that someone tell her where He is!

There she stayed - Unlike Peter and the other disciple - she didn't leave when she did not understand or when sorrow overcame her. She was staying here at the last spot where she had seen her best friend. A gardener appears; he asks as the angels did, **“Woman, why are you weeping?”** He adds, **“Who are you looking for?”** She's very clear and for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time asks for Jesus; **“Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.”** And so here she is - the witness Jesus needs and maybe waited for – a woman faithful to her duty, who knows Him, who wants to be with Him and is not afraid to let others know she is looking for Him. He calls her name, **“Mary”**; she knows Him immediately, even with her back to Him – as a true disciple, ‘she knew Him when He called her name.’ (John 10:3-5)

Mary wants to hold Jesus here on earth as if her salvation is just being with Him again – but it is not enough. Jesus, now the Risen Christ tells her she cannot hold onto Him **“... for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my (*adelphoi* – siblings) to my sisters and brothers and tell them, “I must ascend to my Father who is now your Father, to my God who is now your God.”** (20:17) Full of new hope and strengthened under his wing (as the soul in Psalm 63), Mary goes and announces this Good News to the disciples, **“I have seen the Lord, He must ascend to his Father who is now our Father, to his God who is now our God.”**

Sandra Schneiders\* (see note at end) offers a potent analysis of this radical statement Jesus presents to St. Mary of Magdala – ‘I must ascend to my Father who is now your Father, to my God who is now your God.’ and of the fact that Jesus ‘sent out’ a specific disciple – a woman - to proclaim it to the others. Yes, Jesus has risen and will ascend to God – but His Resurrection must be proclaimed - His God is now our God; His loving Parent is now ours as well. Through Mary's, and our belief in Jesus - and her, and our proclaiming of His name **“...the purpose of the Incarnation is fulfilled.”** From now on, ‘We - those who believe in his name - become the children of God.’ He has risen and He has also built a new covenant with us - His God is our God, His loving Parent is our Parent.

Why is this important for us in 2009? When we understand that Jesus selected Mary Magdalene as the first witness to proclaim His new covenant, it is clear that each one of us can be a witness. We don't have to be lawyers or people who can give testimony in court – Peter and the young disciple went to the empty tomb; they qualified to give testimony in a 1<sup>st</sup> century court of law

and Mary, a woman did not. But Jesus did not appear to them – did they leave too soon? They were silent. Do we need to call out so Jesus and others can hear our voices?

So who did Jesus select to carry this message: what were her characteristics and how can I model them?

**First** - A disciple faithful to her duty - Mary went to the tomb to fulfill a responsibility to give Jesus a proper burial. She went as early as possible – no hesitation.

**Second** - A disciple who insists on seeing Him; a disciple who calls out, making it clear she is looking for Him.

**And Third** - A disciple who stays, watching, remembering his kindness, being in His presence. Seeing her love I realize I want to know more about the Jesus she saw in action. Her relentless seeking makes it clear that He was remarkable and much loved and that I would benefit greatly from getting to know him better.

When I see St. Mary Magdalene as this model of a true witness - it is clear that the only barrier to being a 'witness' is within me. There aren't any external barriers, just internal. I have no excuses – we can all be complete witnesses in the way we live our lives; do our work; pray and most of all treat our friends, families, colleagues, enemies, and strangers. This is St. Mary of Magdala's gift to us – may we celebrate now the Eucharist she did so much to prepare for us.

\*Sandra Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church". Biblical Theology Bulletin, 12 (1982), pp. 35-45.

*This reflection was inspired by FutureChurch's St. Mary of Magdala celebrations; Chris Schenk's, csj. pamphlet on this wonderful saint; my Aunt, Sr. Rita Anne Houlihan, rc who helped me begin this exploration of early Christian women leaders; my sister, Barbara Houlihan Hecht's love for the contemplative; and my mother, Kathrene B. Houlihan's enthusiastic support for women finding their place in the church. I hope you found some challenges as well as comfort in it. Please copy and share with anyone who may be interested and may you also experience God's healing presence. Rita L. Houlihan, Newton College of SH (1970)*