

"AN UNLIKELY WITNESS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Back in those days not too long ago when telephone exchanges had names as well as numbers, a young minister with some tendencies toward male chauvinism was telling his congregation just how bad women are. Oh, he went on at great lengths about women and the problems they cause in the world. Some listened. Some became uncomfortable and angry and after the service was over one lady came up to him at the door and shook his hand...really squeezing it...hard. "Ouch, that hurts!" he said...trying to smile. Then she asked him quietly and calmly, "What was the telephone number of the Garden of Eden?" With a bit of a puzzled expression on his face, he said, "I don't know". Still holding his hand, she squeezed it even harder and repeated the question and again he responded, "I don't know what the number was for the Garden of Eden." The lady then said, "Well...I'll tell you what it was".

"The number for the Garden of Eden was
ADAM ATE ONE, TOO". (Adam - 8-1-2)

DEVELOPMENT

My guess would be that that young minister was just a bit more careful about what he said about women from that day on. It's interesting to note that the first person Jesus appeared to on that first Easter was a woman by the name of Mary Magdalene. They say that back in those days a woman's testimony was considered to be inferior to that of a man's. So, "Why" asks one commentator, "Was Jesus' first appearance to a woman?" Let's think about this for a few minutes here this morning and see if there's an Easter message to take away with us from this.

Now, remember that Mary Magdalene was not only a woman...she was a woman from a town with a poor reputation. Magdala was a town so steeped in sin and wild living that rabbis later on attributed its fall to licentiousness. "Why would God ever entrust such important news to a woman from a wicked town?" asks another Biblical commentator. Then, too, according to a line in Luke's Gospel, Mary Magdalene had once been possessed by seven demons (Luke 8:2). We assume that Jesus healed Mary of her demon possession and certainly that would account for her great loyalty to Him.

Interesting questions raised by Bible scholars. "Why would God entrust such an important message to a woman with a poor reputation and demon possession and from a town known for its loose living?" One does wonder... "Who would believe her?" And yet, here we are on Easter Day reading in John's Gospel that the first person who met Christ in the Garden was this woman with a questionable background.

Perhaps God is saying something very important and very powerful to us through Mary Magdalene about the deeper meaning of this Day. Let's continue on this theme... and think about Mary and her hometown of Magdala.

MORE ABOUT MARY AND MAGDALA

On the western shore of the Sea of Galilee there's a large stone that's said to mark the burial place of Mary Magdalene. The village where she grew up is now called Madjel. Back then it was called Magdala and yes, it did have a bad reputation. The Romans chose it as a place to build one of their fortifications and it was known for the soldiers who were stationed there.

And it was also known for its prostitutes who hung around the soldiers. Maybe this is why tradition has painted Mary Magdalene with a scarlet letter. That and maybe the fact, too, that she is described as a woman who was possessed by seven demons. We have to be careful here...for when the New Testament speaks of demons it can be describing either a mental disorder or an immoral lifestyle; and we really don't know which referred to Mary, but popular tradition leans toward the latter...the immoral lifestyle.

There's no evidence in the Gospels that Jesus ever visited Magdala, but He did visit on one occasion the home of Simon the Pharisee and Simon lived in Capernaum which was not that far from Magdala. And while visiting Simon's house, Luke tells us that a woman who "had lived a sinful life" brought an alabaster jar of perfume and kneeling at the feet of Jesus began to wet His feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, then poured this perfume on them. Remember what Jesus said to her. "Woman...your sins are forgiven".

One wonders whether this woman was Mary Magdalene. Many believe it was, but no one knows for certain, but within the context of this beautiful story, Jesus says that a person who has been forgiven much will love much! And Mary was a living example of such a person. Certainly she loved Jesus.

BUT THERE'S MORE

But there's more. After describing this scene at Simon's house, Luke goes on to tell us about those who followed Jesus. It's there in the eighth chapter of Luke. He says that there were the disciples and also a group of women who "had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities". He names them. Mary Magdalene is mentioned first. Then two other names: Joanna, wife of a man named Chuza (one of Herod's officials) and a woman named Susanna, about whom we know nothing.

But get this. These women, says Luke in a few words, were helping to support Jesus and the disciples out of their own means. Have you ever thought about that or picked up on that? Chances are you haven't! We pay so much attention to the Twelve men who followed Jesus around...the Disciples...but it is these relatively unknown women who are paying the bills! That's often the way it's been in the Church...right ladies? Men seem to get the glory, but the women do the hard work. That's worth an "Amen"....let's here it!

EASTER MORNING

Never is this clearer than on the Day that Jesus was crucified. The men have taken off...deserted Jesus and fled, but not the women. Mark even adds two new names to those who were there and faithful to the end...Mary, the mother of Jesus and Salome. He also mentions that many other women were there and heading the list once again was Mary Magdalene. Maybe she was the natural leader of the women. Mary, the mother of Jesus...she, too, was there and her grief was undoubtedly the greatest of all.

It was Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Joseph, who were still there after the crucifixion when Joseph of Arimathea had permission to take the body of Jesus down from the cross. They were part of a small, sad procession that made its way on Good Friday evening to a waiting tomb. Their hearts were breaking. Their hopes crushed. There was no good news anywhere. But the sun rose on Saturday, as it always does, and again on Sunday, AND on that Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene came again to the tomb...while it was still early. She could not "let go" of the ONE who had freed her from her bondage!

It was still dark, but she could see that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. Fear and grief were ripping at her soul. "They've stolen His body" she cries to Peter and John who quickly confirm her finding. Yes, the tomb is empty. The body is gone. And the men, very confused, return to their homes....and Mary is left alone at the tomb. Weeping, she looks inside once again. This time she sees two angels dressed in white...sitting where the body of Jesus had been. They say to her,

"Woman, why are you weeping?" And Mary answers, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."

And saying this, she turns around and sees Jesus. Her eyes are still clouded with tears and in the dimness of the early morning haze, she fails to recognize Him. She thinks it is the gardener and the following words are spoken,

"Woman"...He says to her, "Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Weeping, she answers...."Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away". And...at this, Jesus speaks the sweetest word that Mary will ever hear. It is her own name. "MARY" He says to her, and in a heartbeat, Mary knows who is addressing her. "Rabboni" she answers, which means "Teacher".

Remember how in Jesus Christ, Superstar, there was the suggestion that Jesus and Mary were romantically involved. That's natural..given our society's obsession with physical love, but the facts dispute this notion. For notice in this most intimate and emotion-laden moment, Mary does not call Jesus by name. She uses a formal term, Teacher. He is the ONE who has set her free from her past...that haunting and terrible past....whatever it may have been and He was for her, her Teacher, her Master, her Savior.

TRANSITION

But, isn't it interesting that in the most dramatic moment of history, the first appearance of the resurrected Christ, that He did not make His appearance to Peter or to any one of the Twelve, nor did He make it to the High Priest or to Pontius Pilate. He made His first appearance to a woman whose reputation was a bit shady and dubious...perhaps a former prostitute.

But listen carefully, friend, for this is the Gospel. We need to remember always that Easter is not only about life beyond the grave, but it is also about the new life of grace and acceptance and forgiveness that is available in the here and now. This is a powerful statement that God is making to us through Mary from Magdala. And whoever you are and whatever your background may be, please...please remember that this Gospel is for you.

SINNERS AND NOT SAINTS

There are a couple of important lessons that we might draw from Mary's story here on this Easter Day. One is that Jesus came to save sinners and not to congratulate the "saints". This may be a tough lesson for us to learn and remember. He came to save the sinners and not to congratulate the saints. As Halford Luccock once said, "The church is a hospital for sinners, and not a museum for saints."

Walter Wangerin in one of his books tells of a woman named Lillian, an elderly African-American woman who was a member of his congregation and he says that Lillian had a way of "keeping him true to the Gospel". She would compliment him whenever he adhered to it in his preaching and call him gently to task when he seemed to drift away from it. It seems that there was a homeless person who hung out in front of his city church who would often somehow use the church's outside spigot in order to have some drinking water. It didn't look good to the pastor and so he had the water spigot removed and told the congregation he had done so. When Lillian came to the door after the service to speak to her pastor, like the lady at the beginning of the sermon, she took his hand and squeezed it real hard and said,

"You preached today, Pastor" said Lillian. "God was here and He was holding you...real good". The pastor smiled. But then Lillian said rather ominously, "And He was not smiling....for there was that homeless person who was hungry and you gave him NO DRINK!"

Wangerin goes on to confess his transgression, saying,

"Yes...that person did come to the church for water. He had come to force us, in spite of ourselves, to keep the commandment...and I had shut off the water!"

A cup of cold water. Given to a person in need. A predicament for the pastor and for the people. WWJD? What would Jesus do? Why that very person who hung around the water spigot of that church might turn out to be like Mary Magdalene...and discover the love of Jesus and turn his life or her life around and that's what it's all about isn't it. Mary was an unlikely witness and in this God is sending us a bit of a message.

CHRIST LIFE IS AVAILABLE

There's a second thing for us to pick up on in Mary's story. The Christ life is available today to anyone who will receive it. Think of it this way...

You may be standing today at the tomb of a dead relationship, or perhaps dead hopes and dreams. Life has been a severe disappointment to you. You've tried....tried so hard to get your life together, but you've found nothing but failure and frustration. And you're about to give up...

But, friend, this is Easter Day and someone may be speaking your name, just as He spoke Mary's name that first Easter morn. The spirit of the resurrected Christ may be whispering to you. This is the Sunday more than any other Sunday of the year when we pause to reflect and to celebrate new possibilities. Remember that. This is the day when we affirm our faith in God, in Christ...when we affirm our faith in hope without end.

In his book, Teaching Your Children About God, Rabbi David Wolpe, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary here in our city, recalls an ancient Jewish parable about twin unborn children lying together in the mother's womb. Let me share it with you in these closing moments. One believes that there is a world beyond the womb,

"Where people walk upright, where there are mountains and oceans, a sky filled with stars".

INTRODUCTION

As we now prepare to celebrate our Easter Faith and its glorious message of new life, let us begin our worship by coming together in a time of silent meditation.

Let it be for each of us a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly that the spirit of the Risen Christ may be made real to us in this time of worship. In silence...in quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead....yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die."

Said Paul:

"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us....."

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life - nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers....nor things present, nor things to come - nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

"For this day of days, O God, we bless Your name. With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we rejoice that death is finished..that love prevails....that Christ is alive and present here....to help and to heal."

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing those whom we mention in our prayers this Easter Day:

beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us....be close to those who in recent days have lost a loved one. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need....for we ask all of this in the powerful name and the lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to pray, saying:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

PASTORAL PRAYER: April 4, 1999

O GOD, OUR FATHER....FATHER OF OUR SPIRITS and FATHER OF ALL MANKIND -

We thank YOU that we may gather here this hour,

Not for a MEMORIAL SERVICE to a dead prophet,
But for a FESTIVAL OF THANKSGIVING for a conquering Christ!

Remind us, once again, of the empty Cross,
of the empty Tomb, and
of that truth of all truths,

That the Spirit of Jesus is ever alive in our world, present where
we are to have dealing with our trials and troubles, our lust and
our loneliness, our sin and our sorrow...and to have ULTIMATE
DEALINGS with our death.

In all we do this EASTER DAY, make real to us HIS SHINING PRESENCE,
and HIS RESURRECTION'S quiet joy.

WHEN days of discouragement come to us, give us the Easter assurance that
Your eternal purposes are at work.

WHEN we struggle with the difficulties of life and do not know which way
to turn, turn us again to the Easter Faith that sees Your Presence
quietly removing heavy stones that block a path to life and greater
meaning.

WHEN days of sorrow come to us...and when our loss seems unbearable...like
Mary let us hear You call us by name. Assure us that all is not
lost, that the grave is not the goal of life, and that we are not
alone!

WE NOW OFFER to YOU our thanks for this Easter Day in April and for all that
it means to us.

WE PRAY for the hungry and hurting, the homeless of our society.

WE PRAY for peace among the nations of the world and our prayers
this hour reach out to include the leaders of our land,
and for all in positions of authority and responsibility.

WE PRAY for loved ones, no longer with us, but now "gone home" to
be with You - a part of Easter past ... in the great Kingdom
of light.

TOUCH OUR restless, doubting minds with the profound message of this Day,
that we may depart from here BELIEVING that with YOU there is no
death, that with YOU "all things are possible...that all things
work together for good to those who love and serve You". In
the strong name and lifting spirit of the Risen Christ, we offer
You our prayers.