

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 Chuzza (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".

The other unborn twin can barely contain his contempt for such foolish ideas and notions. Suddenly that moment comes when the "believer" of the twins is forced down through the birth canal leaving behind the only way of life it has ever known. The remaining unborn twin, of course, is deeply saddened, convinced that a great catastrophe has befallen his companion. Outside the womb, however, the parents are rejoicing. What the remaining brother left behind has just witnessed is not death, but birth.

CLOSING And this, Wolpe is reminding us, is a classic view of life beyond the grave - a birth into a world that we here on earth can only imagine. The Easter message is that we have an "Older Brother" who has travelled beyond the womb (the tomb) down the birth canal of Eternity and has returned to assure us that GOD IS LOVE, and that there is a place prepared for any and for those who trust and accept the Good News.

And whether your name is Mary or Marie...whether it's Peter or James or John....or even, Judas....Christ came into our world to save this old world from ourselves, from our sins and selfishness....and to get us headed in the right direction....down the birth canal toward Eternity. And friend, part of the joy of Easter is that once again He comes to offer us a view of that new life....life, here and now, and also, life in days and years to come. At times, we, too, can be like Mary...such "unlikely witnesses", but listen carefully...for in the great wonder and mystery of this Day, He is calling us - by name! That's worth putting into our Easter baskets and taking along with us.

And a Happy Easter to each of you in the fullest sense of those beautiful and treasured words!

PRAYER Risen Lord...Lord of all life...we pause at the end of this Easter service...in quiet moments of prayer and wonder....asking and hoping that somehow we might comprehend as never before the great mystery of this Day....as we stand before You...cradling new-born hopes and passage into greater areas of life. Take our natural impulses and stretch them. Confirm and strengthen within each of us the message of this Day.

Come and touch that which is dead within us. Transform our timid caution into joyful confidence and strong assurance. And then let this word of hope go forth with us until in the light that streams from Joseph's "lovely garden", we come to see our world....our country, our city, our church, our neighbors and friends...ONLY through the Christ spirit. Dismiss us now on this Day of Resurrection, believing in the wonder and great mystery of it all. Amen.

PERSONAL CLOSING (optional)

As I come to the final sentence or two of this my 43rd and final Easter message to you, from this historic church's pulpit...may I wish for each of you from the bottom of my heart....both today and in the days, the years ahead...

"A joyous and a happy Easter to you....in the fullest sense of those beautiful and treasured words. Thank you and God bless you!"