

## DO YOU SEE THIS WOMAN?

### Scripture Readings:

**Genesis 21:8-20**

**Proverbs 8:22-36**

**John 20:11-18**

So when the questions for preaching this summer were passed around, this was the one I leapt at. Preaching about women can come from as many angles as there are perspectives in life. You can go with loyalty in Ruth or Naomi. Or courage in Rahab. With wisdom in... well, Wisdom, a feminine figure who establishes herself as somewhere between a muse and a collaborator with God in the creation of... creation. You can go with deep joy in Mary the mother of Christ and her magnificat, or resolve in Sarah, or God's consistent way of showing up for those on the margins, as with Hagar. But, for me, if I want to better understand how Christ thinks about women, I can think of no better place to start than Mary Magdalene.

Let's start with acknowledging the role of the Mandela Effect in our shared knowledge of dear Mary M. The Mandela Effect is a psychological phenomenon named after the fact that there was once a shockingly large subset of the world's population that were convinced they knew that the anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela had died in prison. People – lots and lots of people – were sure that they had watched his televised funeral. Which is odd, because he didn't die in prison. After spending 27 years incarcerated for the crime of believing people should be treated equally, he went on to serve as president of South Africa, before he passed away in 2013 at age 95. This effect is bizarrely common – including a preponderance of shared cultural memory of movie lines that are not actually a part of the dialogue, like Darth Vader never actually says the full line “Luke I am your father”, and so forth. And in the case of Mary Magdalene, the Mandela Effect appears again in our shared knowledge that Mary was a prostitute. Except... you know... she wasn't.

Sometimes the Mandela Effect is just caused by the global game of telephone we're all playing all the time – things get warped in the re-telling. And sometimes our memories are more curated than that. What we think we know is there because someone, somewhere, decided to teach it that way.

There have been volumes and volumes written about Mary Magdalene, so I'll only summarize what we do know about her. She was a woman of sufficient means to help fund the lives of the disciples and Jesus. I think it's sweet that we often think of them as a raggedy band making it on their own, but they had no stewardship campaign co-chairs among the disciples, and our best understanding is that they were funded by Mary Magdalene and several other wealthy women. Mary Magdalene was present at the crucifixion and the resurrection, she had been healed of seven demons or afflictions, and we don't have a record of her having kids or being married. We know Jesus trusted her and treated her with dignity. We know she had a place in the world with Him. The stories of her as a reformed prostitute are mostly traced to the conflation of her story with the scripture where the line “do you see this woman?” is found. But the idea that that woman is the same woman as Mary Magdalene isn't found anywhere Biblical. Yet that one falsehood is the thing most of us Christians claim to “know” about her. Fear not, though. She's still speaking.

We can find other pieces of her story, inferred and implied by where she shows up and how. Orthodox Christian tradition celebrates Mary Magdalene through iconography, most often with her holding up a red egg. The story goes that, as we know she was a woman of wealth, and after the

resurrection she pushed and plied her way all the way to an audience with the Roman Emperor Tiberius. She wanted to make it clear that, resurrection or no, Pilate needed to be held accountable for his role in the trial and crucifixion of Christ. Then she held out a plain egg to the Emperor and declared “Christ is risen!” The Emperor was less than persuaded and let her know he saw resurrection as about as likely as a chicken’s egg turning red. And at that moment, the legend goes, it turned bright, blood red before their eyes.

We also get a sense of Mary’s position among the disciples from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, one of the apocrypha testimonies of the early church. I will resist the urge to go full church history nerd here because that’s not what we’re doing today, but suffice it to say that we’d all do well to remember a few key points about the Bible. Namely, that the Bible as it looks today is made up of writing from up to 120 years after Christ’s death, and those writing weren’t formalized as a canon until more than 600 years after he walked around on the planet. None of the gospels were written down until between 35 and 65 years after Christ’s crucifixion. I have trouble remembering what I had for dinner last night, so it’s good to remember that these accounts were not eye-witness transcripts, but rather collected memories. Even the Gospels weren’t notes jotted down in the immediate presence of Jesus. Mark, Matthew, and Luke’s gospels came around the same time, between 65 and 85 AD, with John coming in later around 90-95 AD. And the argument about which testimonies got in and which were left out went on for centuries, in very human ways. Lots of meetings, lots of divisions. So the Gospel According to Mary Magdalene is dated to the early second century and was rediscovered in 1896 in Cairo. And it’s a short read – just a few chapters, with pages missing in sections. What remains is translated and easily accessed online, and a fascinating read.

In it, we get some clues about her character and position among the disciples. In a society that tells women to sit down and shut up, she spoke, to a group of men. She interpreted the teachings of their shared Rabbi, and she helped set the course for their future direction in the sharing of the Good News.

While extra-Biblical, her gospel fits well with the profoundly Biblical moment at Christ’s empty tomb, where Mary Magdalene is the first to see the resurrected Christ and is sent to share the incredible news with her brother disciples. Christ trusts her to get the message right and to get it where it needed to go.

The characterization of Mary Magdalene as a reformed prostitute is one that has been crafted across the centuries, controlling both the narrative of her story, and the expectations of women in the Christian context. All of that said, it would make all the sense in the world to me if Christ’s closest friends included a prostitute. That would be exactly His style. Jesus was present for those most judged and marginalized in his day and I’m certain he would be the same way here and now.

Which leads to a sort of grand, theological, exegetical question of... so what? So what if we have different cultural interpretations of who Mary Magdalene was? Does it matter who this one woman from the other side of the world and two thousand years ago actually was? Yes. For the Bible tells me so.

That scripture from which the line “do you see this woman?” comes, it’s an interesting moment of juxtaposition and parable telling, but the most interesting part of it is that a man of power is trying to shut down Jesus for letting a sinful woman near him, and his response is to turn his body towards this woman, gesturing with his personhood and his voice, and drawing attention to her. He insists that the man questioning him really look at her, really see her for who she is. And that, coupled with a dozen other examples, tells me something I believe in my whole heart to be true – Jesus was an early iteration of what we’d call today a feminist, someone who believes that women

are worthy of equal dignity, respect, and space in the world. He lived in a society that silenced women, diminished them, and saw male as the default setting of power, not so very different from here and now. In his clever, subtle way, he clued us in to a long-standing truth... it is to our collective detriment to silence women. When we cast women as something they are not, particularly in an attempt to degrade or diminish them, as with the push to judge Mary Magdalene based on her imagined role as a prostitute, we are doing the opposite of looking at them in their full humanity. Lying about people does matter. We make it easier to not listen to these women. We make it easier to pretend they are invisible. And we miss out on all that women have to teach us.

If God can hear Hagar, the trafficked woman made to bear a child to Abraham and then cast out to the wilderness for the sake of Sarah's jealousy, if God can hear her and respond to her cries... If Jesus can hear and dignify the women around Him and amplify their voices... Maybe it's because women are worth listening to.

Recognizing the voices we are not hearing matters. Female pastors only make up 27% of pastors serving congregations in the U.S.. Women make up 23% of congress, which is meant to be representative of the people, and of those, only 38% are women of color. Churches, government, the arts, science, there is virtually no sector of our culture where women's participation and access actually represents the percentage of women who live in this country. Those voices are missing from the conversation.

And voices are missing in ways that are far more dire. In 2017, 87,000 women were victims of femicide, meaning that they were women who were intentionally killed because they were women, more than half by intimate partners or family members. All indications are this number is rising due to the pandemic, with domestic violence increasing in quarantine. 22 transgender women are known to have been murdered in the U.S. so far this year. It is an undeniable fact that being female is a risk factor around the globe. So while I would dearly love to preach a sermon that is purely celebration of all the incredible things women in the Bible teach and do and represent, I would be remiss if I didn't follow Christ's lead and point in their direction, asking all of us... do we see these women? Do we genuinely know and understand what it is that we have allowed and continue to allow to happen to roughly half of our human family?

We have to be willing to look and see and understand. You can't solve a problem if you pretend you can't even see it. But Christ calls the powerful man in the story of Luke, calls his disciples to listen when he makes Mary Magdalene the bearer of his Good news, calls all of us to witness exactly how important women are.

All of this knowledge is heavy and hard, but also a springboard for remarkable hope. Consider, in the well of all this, how much more miraculous it is that millions of women do speak up anyway, in spite of the risk to their lives. How many women share the light within them and work to solve some of the world's biggest problems. You don't have to look hard to see what can become of the world when a woman is really seen and her voice is, unmistakably, heard.

When Malala insisted on going to school in spite of the threatened and realized violence of the Taliban. When Greta demands that we work to shift the tide of environmental catastrophe, speaking to the hearts of millions about the climate crisis. When Wangari plants her trees and makes herself an active impediment to deforestation. When Nina Simone sang. When Georgia Gilmore funded and fed the Civil Rights movement. When Sojourner Truth insisted on her identity as a woman and a human of full worth. When Maya Angelou let us know that phenomenal could be our default setting. Every single one of these women has had her life threatened or taken for daring to be seen, to speak her mind, and to believe in her own worth. Every one of them.

Which is probably why a woman with a voice tends to scare the wits out of people. Who would do that? Who would know those kinds of odds are stacked against her and speak out anyway? I mean really. Do you see these women?

Christ does. He gestured over and over again to the women in his life and of the world. It is well past time that we look where He is pointing.

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Livestreamed on July 26, 2020