

“I Have Seen the Lord”

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18).

“Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away...” (John 20:1).

In contrast to the synoptic Gospels, John presents Mary Magdalene alone on Easter morning – the first and sole witness to the empty tomb. In the opening verses of today’s text, Mary is a solitary figure whose final act of devotion has been disrupted by a missing body. And, after Peter and John quickly come and go, it’s Mary who is left, alone again, weeping outside the tomb.

Much has been written about Mary Magdalene and many have speculated about her place in the story of Jesus. Luther himself suggested that Mary Magdalene was the sinful woman in Luke 7 who entered the home of Simon the Pharisee, interrupted the dinner party he had thrown for Jesus, and, with repentant weeping, anointed his feet with her tears. While there are some really compelling connections you can draw from this assertion, the truth is that we actually know very little about Mary Magdalene from Scripture, but what we do know is that Mary Magdalene had personally experienced the healing power of Jesus when He cleansed her of seven evil spirits (Luke 8:2); and, from Scripture, we know that Mary Magdalene was there on Golgotha as Jesus suffered and died; and we do know from Scripture that Mary Magdalene watched carefully as Joseph of Arimathea placed the dead body of Jesus in a new grave; and we also know, beyond any doubt, that Mary Madgalene was one of the first to see the Risen Christ. And John’s Gospel provides the most intimate telling of this story.

As Mary grieved the loss of the One who had spoken to her so many words of grace, who had proclaimed the forgiveness of her sins, and who had shared with her the words of eternal life, she had not only lost a loved one but, in the death of Jesus, the source of her faith and the reason for her hope had also died. The other Gospel writers all include at least one other woman in their accounts of that first Easter morning, and John’s Gospel doesn’t dispute this, but understand this: in that moment of pain and loss and confusion, Mary Magdalene was very much alone. And it’s in this moment, when hope had flown...it’s in this moment when there was nothing left for her to do...it’s in this moment of utter loss and abject isolation that Jesus appears to Mary...that Jesus is present to Mary...that Jesus, in a completely miraculous and mystifying manner presents Himself bodily to Mary Magdalene. And, in a response that served as both a confession of faith and an acknowledgment of need, Mary Magdalene says the only thing she can: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” And to this humble and bewildered statement, God speaks her name: “Mary.”

Dear brothers and sisters, today, the Risen Christ also comes to you. Today, the Risen Christ is also present to you. In His body, in His blood, and through His life-giving Word, Jesus Christ comes to you today in the most intimate and personal way possible, and, in that Divine action, your sins are absolved, your life begins anew...and you are sent into a dying world with a word of life.

The “Treasury of Daily Prayer” tells us that Bernard of Clairvaux called Mary Magdalene “the apostle to the apostles” and that is a wonderful title for this enigmatic disciple. Jesus commissioned Mary to speak the first word about the Resurrection and to speak it those He would later commission to speak it to the world. And when this “sent one” found the disciples, she announced with certainty and with joy these words of life, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18).

Today, the Risen Christ comes to you. He calls you by name, He assures you of your place in His kingdom. And today, you and I and the whole Church can together speak with certainty and joy: “I have seen the Lord.” Go with the peace these words of life promise; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.