

LENTEN PROGRAMME
“Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land”
Week 4, 2021 – John 20. 1-18 [ESV]
A Fresh Start – Mary of Magdala
[Adapted]

GATHERING

OPENING PRAYER:

O God, who through your Only-Begotten Son, have conquered death and unlocked for us the path to eternity, grant, we pray, that we who keep the solemnity of the Lord's Resurrection, may through the renewal brought by your Spirit, rise up in the light of life. Amen.

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES

[John 20. 1-18]

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 from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going towards the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' Having said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned and said to him in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord' - and that he had said these things to her.

Poem: Mary of Magdala

It was early in the morning
of the first day of the week
and still dark
when Mary of Magdala
came to the tomb to weep
persistent and passionate
as she had always been
here to anoint the Lord
who had washed her clean.....

'Rabbuni!' – 'Master!' she cried
overcome with joy, with love for the one she thought had died
she reaches out, grasps for his hand
that once again he might save her, help her to stand
'Do not cling to me,' he says
like tenacious ivy smothering a tree
'Do not cling to me
for I, for you need to be free
of attachment to this my earthly body.'

'I am sending you from this garden of graves
as the first witness of my power to save
to heal wounds, defeat death, take sin away
and transform deepest night into radiant day.
Risen and redeeming
I will be with you always in a new life of grace
no longer in a human body, limited by time and place
but alive in the Spirit, God's gift from above
who will guide and inspire you in this new way of love.'

So Mary of Magdala, faithful and true
persistent and passionate through and through
arose and dried her eyes
then leaving behind grief and pain
she set out as the first to proclaim,
'May heaven be praised
may God be adored.
Everything is changed
for I have seen the Lord!'

Please take a few moments in silence to reflect on the passage and the poem.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE [Susan Barhoum]

Jesus healed Mary Magdalene and restored her dignity. Meeting Jesus changed her life forever, but it did not mean that her life would always be a bed of roses. She witnessed the man who changed her life being hung on the cross to die. It was the worst thing she could imagine would happen. However, when she goes to the tomb on the third day, she finds the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, and meets someone who tells her, 'He is not here.' She sees a man in the garden, but does not recognise him as her Saviour until he calls her name. She then understands that it is Jesus and that He is Risen! She rushes back to the place where the apostles are locked up together in fear. She bursts through the door and breathlessly exclaims, 'I have seen the Lord!' They see the joy on her face as she tells them what she saw and what He said to her; she brings them peace. Mary Magdalene, a woman, is their apostle. She brings them the message they have been waiting for.

As Christians, our lives, like Mary's, are changed with our encounter with Christ who frees us from evil, heals us, and restores our dignity, but it also does not mean that we will now live a life with no difficulties. Challenges will continue to face us, and just as Mary did not recognise the man in the garden, we often fail to recognise God's presence in our daily lives, especially when life becomes difficult. He comes to us through the most painful situations and in our brokenness and vulnerability. But time and again we do not see Him in our troubles and adversities, as we are so preoccupied with looking for Him that we get lost and don't recognise Him. Therefore, we need to hear His call and acknowledge His love. Just like Mary's message, 'I have seen the Lord,' we need to encounter the living Lord who loves us through the power of His resurrection. Jesus has given us eyes of faith to see the truth of His resurrection and His victory over sin and death. The resurrection is the foundation of our hope, the hope that we will see God face-to-face and share in His everlasting glory and joy.

It was a woman who brought the good news. It was a woman who had the courage. Mary continued to be faithful - she was present when others fled and hid; she was present when all seemed lost. She was the first witness of the resurrection. Mary offers women of all walks of life a testimony of hope and courage. Many times history makes no mention of women; we are removed from the narrative. As in any human activity, history and our view of the world is misshapen and distorted through partial stories, mentioning men without women, victors without victims... As a woman and a Palestinian, can say that many times our narratives are dismissed and overlooked. However, Mary Magdalene is an example and firm reminder of faith and courage for us. She shows us the courage to stand up for what is right, to speak the truth, and to keep the faith despite the many challenges that life offers. When life overwhelms us, we are reminded of the hope Mary found in the garden in her encounter with Jesus. Hope in the resurrection - no matter how dark the world may seem, we know that the sun will rise. When we are in a dark place, as we are during these days with COVID-19, we need to believe that we have been planted not buried, and so we need to bloom. No matter how small we might think our light is, we can still make a huge difference in other people's lives. This is the inspiration that Mary Magdalene gives to me.

Short Reflection on Scripture and the Poem

Just as it is striking that on Calvary it is the Roman centurion who first proclaims Jesus' divinity, so it is incredibly significant that it is a woman who is the first witness of his resurrection. And this in a society in which women were not allowed to testify in court cases because their evidence had no legal value! And not just any woman, but a woman who, fairly or unfairly, was burdened with a scandalous reputation for her past behaviour. That is surely the point - that it is to one whose life has been so totally transformed by Jesus' mercy and compassion that the risen Christ grants the unique honour of first knowing the reality of his Resurrection. As Pope Francis has said - Mary of Magdala's tears at Christ's empty tomb are a reminder that "sometimes in our lives, tears are the lenses we need to see Jesus.'

Please take a few moments of silence to reflect on what you have read.

Question for Reflection

How do those words and Mary of Magdala's experience speak to you?

CLOSING PRAYER

Let us give thanks to God the Father, who cleanses our hearts and strengthens us in love through the Holy Spirit.

R: Give us, Lord, your Holy Spirit.

May we always be grateful for all the goodness you have shown us; and may we bear our trials with patience.

R: Give us, Lord, your Holy Spirit.

In the life of Jesus you have shown us the way of love; teach us to follow this way in the great and small events of life.

R: Give us, Lord, your Holy Spirit.

Grant us a spirit of self-denial, and move us to help our brothers and sisters in need.

R: Give us, Lord, your Holy Spirit.

Let us bear witness in our bodies to the death of your Son, for in his body you have brought us to life.

R: Give us, Lord, your Holy Spirit.

In the silence of our hearts let us bring to the Father our thanks [pause]
In sorrow let us ask the Father for forgiveness [pause]
With confidence let us entrust to the Father our cares and concerns [pause]

Almighty God, by the cross and resurrection of your Son you have given life to your people. We have received the sign of the cross: make us living proof of its saving power and help us to persevere in the footsteps of Christ. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Acknowledgement:
“Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land”

[You may wish to purchase a physical copy directly from Friends of the Holy Land or obtain an electronic/digital version (also priced £7.99), both of which are available from their website: www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk

The proceeds of this book (priced at £7.99 plus postage and packaging) will go to the Friends of the Holy Land to aid their work with the neediest of our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. As with those closer to home, our brothers and sisters there have suffered dramatically during the coronavirus pandemic, including economically with the cessation of pilgrimages and tourism and the resulting loss of income]