

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EASTER DAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“CHANGED LIVES – MARY MAGDALENE”
John 20:1-9
March 23, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

We are here today--to hear the story of the resurrection. Today is Easter.

According to John's account of the Easter story, Mary Magdalene was the first to come to the tomb. *“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’”*

Contrary to what people may have said about Mary Magdalene the Bible is clear that she was the first to discover the empty tomb. Now beyond that, there is very little that is actually known about her. She is certainly shrouded in mystery. What we think we know is mostly conjecture and legend. *Newsweek* magazine did a major story on Mary Magdalene a couple of years back. They called her **“An Inconvenient Woman,”** because she is at the center of so much controversy and yet so little is really known.

One tradition with which is very popular identifies her as a prostitute before she met Jesus, but there is no evidence of this in the Gospels. In fact, the Eastern Orthodox Church maintains that Mary Magdalene was a virtuous woman all her life.

All the New Testament really tells us about Mary is that she entered Jesus' ministry as he preached throughout Galilee, that she had once been possessed by seven demons, and, of course, that she announced the Resurrection. The Bible never mentioned her occupation, nor the color of her hair. We don't whether she was old or young, homely or beautiful. There is a tradition that Mary Magdalene led so chaste a life that the devil thought she might be the one who was to bear Christ into the world, and for that reason he sent the seven demons to trouble her. Unsurprisingly, the fact that she is so important in the resurrection narrative and so absent from the rest of the New Testament has led to all kinds of speculation and even conspiracy theories.

In the **"The Da Vinci Code"** there is a plot that revolves around the idea that the early church sought to suppress the fact that Jesus was actually married to Magdalene and she had his child. As absurd as it sounds, it is not a completely new idea. There are manuscripts from as early as the second century that seek to show that Mary Magdalene was closer to Jesus than all the other disciples, that she was a leader in the early church, but that she was shunted aside because she was a woman.

But as interesting as that may sound, let us stick with what we really know. As Jesus hangs in agony on the cross, his life ebbing from him, Mary Magdalene is there, beside his mother, Mary, keeping watch. Crucifixion was a slow, brutal, bloody way to put a person to death, but she stays there. Finally the hour comes. ***"It is finished,"*** Jesus says, and bows his head. His body is bound in linen, carried to a garden, and buried in a tomb.

Before dawn on the third day it is Mary Magdalene who rises to anoint Christ's body. She makes her way to the grave. It is empty. The Lord is gone; she is confused, and terrified. She races back to tell Peter and another disciple, probably John. Both are running, Peter and the other disciple start for the tomb. They confirm what Mary Magdalene has reported to them. The disciples leave the scene and go home, but Mary, paralyzed, stays in the garden, in tears. Then comes a voice, and a question. ***Woman, why are you crying?"***

“They have taken my Lord away,” she says, *“and I don’t know where they have put him.”* Hearing this, she turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not recognize him.

“Woman, why are you crying?” he asks, *“Who is it you are looking for?”* Thinking he is the gardener, she says, *“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”*

Then Jesus speaks her name, *“Mary.”*

She turns toward him and cries out in Aramaic, *“Rabboni!”* (which means Teacher).

Jesus says, *“Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”*

Mary Magdalene goes to the disciples with the news: *“I have seen the Lord!”* What a testimony! These are the words of a woman that would change the world. *“I have seen the Lord!”*

Have you ever had an experience so momentous, so decisive, that you knew your life could never be the same again? It happens; I imagine when you win the lottery. But it also happens when the doctor says, **“I’m afraid it’s malignant.”** It happens when you are elected President of the United States. It happens when Hurricane Katrina blows your world away. It happens when someone you love dies. These kinds of experiences initially cause a feeling of disorientation. The world has turned upside-down, or inside-out.

Suddenly you feel like a stranger in the world. The foundations are shaken. Your grip on reality weakens. You feel dizzy as if you are falling. Your orientation to the only world you’ve ever known is lost.

The last thing Mary expected when she went to the tomb that first Easter morning was to find the tomb empty. She went there to anoint a corpse. What have you come for this morning? Are you looking for a corpse, or have you seen the Lord?

Even Peter and the other disciple who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry were not prepared for what they found that morning. Even after they found the tomb empty they were mystified. ***“They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.”***

The disciples of Jesus were slow to apprehend, or lay hold of, the reality of the first Easter, which is understandable. In a sense, their initial reactions of disorientation and disbelief underscore the reality of Jesus’ suffering and death. Changing your worldview does not happen in a moment. What they would come to see, however, was that Easter’s dawn had broken on a new and different world. The old world of alienation and darkness has been conquered. Through God’s own self-giving love, in the cross of Jesus, death has lost its power. Now comes a new creation in the risen Christ. Old things are passed away, and all things have become new. The critical moment passed away. The fullness of time has come. The cosmic powers of evil and death have been broken. This Easter morning, **“like the first morning,”** dawns a new creation.

I can assure you, the religious leaders, who put guards on the tomb, did not do so because they expected a resurrection. What do we expect? The resurrection is real. We have experienced it here at Park Hill United Methodist Church. We have new life in our ministries, in our committees and in our church. That is resurrection!

Christ has come to us, here at Park Hill, just as he came to Mary Magdalene in the garden that morning. He has spoken our name. Let us open our lives and our hearts to the power of the risen Christ. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

PRAYER

Easter is the crowning day of the Christian year. On this day the hopes and fears of our lives are transformed by the power of God's redemptive love. In Christ, faith overcomes doubt, hope overcomes despair, and love overcomes hate. Let us pray that the reality of Easter will reach to every needy heart:

That the victims of discrimination will find strength to seek justice without hating their oppressors.

That the grieving who have lost loved ones to accident or disease will find consolation and gratitude.

That sufferers from addictions will find courage to take control of their lives.

That those burdened with guilt will find strength to seek forgiveness from those they have wronged.

That families in crisis will find reasons for hope and second chances.

That the depressed will find new possibilities for facing life and the future.

Heavenly Father, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, your power and love are made real for us. Help us, in celebrating Easter, to glimpse the future you offer us in Christ's victory over sin and death. Show us the world reborn by the miracle of your love. Fill our lives with your Holy Spirit that we may experience the joys and assurances of this holy day, then grant us to walk in the way of Jesus Christ, your blessed Son, our Lord and Savior. **Amen.**

When things look hopeless and the world seems like a tomb, God is at work to bring life out of apparent death. This is the good news of Easter. Christ is risen! Amen