

## Sermon for Easter Sunday

RCL Lectionary

[Acts 10:34-43](#) / [Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#) / [1 Corinthians 15:19-26](#) / [John 20:1-18](#)

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

### The Wisdom of Magdalena

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

There's been so much hand-wringing in the press in recent days over the loss of the "meaning of Easter." Maybe it's the doldrums of the past few years, and a growing fatalism in our culture in response – I wonder. But I was confronted last night just before Easter Vigil by a check clerk at one of our local stores. She lamented that Easter is so much more than eggs and dye, and then she said that the meaning of Easter seems lost now. "Not yet," I responded. At least not yet for me. How about for you?

Mary Magdalene – the name stirs legends and myths in our shared consciousness thanks in no small part to recent fictional works like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Mary is as enigmatic as she is important in the Christian tradition. In both Eastern and Western Christianity, she became a critical bearer of the good news of resurrection. All of the canonical gospels have her among the handful to be present for the complete story: the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In early Christian writings that didn't make it into the Bible, she is an essential apostle, a teacher of the Gospel, sometimes intimately connected with Jesus in ways that make the Dan Browns of this world leap into wild realms of speculation about her connections with our Savior. Regardless of how we or scholars answer these questions, we are left with a striking image of someone whose faith to Jesus allowed her to walk with him through his darkest hours, more so it seems than any other follower. She encapsulates the healing wisdom that walks through the darkest hours with those we love. That wisdom that remains in solidarity with those who suffer. That wisdom that refuses to turn away from the powerful emotions that surround crisis, dissolution, and even death. That wisdom that is willing to grieve the loss of a beloved, for without that willingness, we cannot share in the greatest joys with one another.

In Western Catholic Christianity, Mary sadly became something of a black sheep amongst the apostles for a long time. Until quite recently, it was taught that she was a former prostitute, the lack of biblical witness to the assertion aside. But for contemporary Catholicism and Protestants, she is restored to her rightful place, as a bearer of the heart of our tradition's wisdom, the first to declare the good news of God in Christ. The Eastern Orthodox traditions have always revered her, believing her to carry news of the Resurrection even to the Emperor Tiberius. Part of the origin of the Easter egg tradition is the story that while Mary was at table with the Emperor, he scoffed that unless an egg could change its color, he would not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. The legend many centuries old is that Mary, in response to his skepticism, held up an egg that changed to a brilliant red before his very eyes.

Mary Magdalene is bearer of the central, pithiest, tenant of our faith: "Christ is Risen!" And the mystery surrounding her is just as much the mystery surrounding the Resurrection itself. But it is not a mystery to be solved, or a truth shrouded in darkness and mystique. It is rather a mystery of light, of hope, of utter wonder at what our God is up to, of what our God intends for us ultimately. Of what it means to become part of God's family, and the transformation that is promised in today's primordial Gospel reading; a mystery that reflects the earliest traditions of Christianity about who Jesus is and his crowning achievement in overthrowing death.

As always in the Gospel of John, nothing can be boiled down to one, simple meaning. In today's Easter reading from the gospel, that Mary "mistakes" Jesus for the gardener is a case in point. What could be more natural? For if this Christ truly is God's Word, as John's prologue declares, then he is the Great Gardener, the Creator tending creation, nurturing

the rootstock, turning the soil, caring for the very basis of the great chain of life. Mary's momentary uncertainty about who this is has to do with Resurrection – the full revelation of Christ as God. Jumping the yard-arm of death makes him almost impossible to recognize. There is new humanity here, infused completely with the light of the divine – so new we can scarcely understand what we are witnessing. In Eastern Christian tradition, Christ has descended into hell and torn the gates off their hinges. He has liberated with God's love all who have come before and all who will come after, including Adam and Eve, restoring them to paradise. So John's Gospel has him here in the garden, preparing the promised home for all of God's beloved children, making Creation anew with the care and love any gardener would bring to a plot of untended or neglected earth, of ensuring that all that once was dead springs forth into new life.

In this we are invited to see the Resurrection at work in the darkest places of our lives, from the rubble of Haiti and Chile to the plight of the homeless and unemployed in our own land. From the war-torn regions of Afghanistan, to our own darkest hours, deeply held in our hearts like Mary attending grief outside the tomb of Jesus.

Yesterday, my son began Japanese language school in San Francisco – a definite cross-cultural experience for me, as Japanese elementary is highly ordered: the children walking in straight lines, speaking together in unison, attentive discipline in the classroom so that each detail is profoundly cared for. It makes even the best American elementary school look chaotic! And it frankly melts my Anglican/Episcopal heart, because the orderly going back and forth between the opening day ceremony and the classroom, of counting the number of times the children bowed, was so much like well-planned liturgy! But the most touching scene yesterday is the one that touches for me on today's Gospel. For part of the first-day-of-school ceremony involves the roll-call. When my son was called by name he hopped up from the chair to utter a loud and cheery, "Hai!" Yes, I am here, *sensei*. I am here. And I am because you called my name.

It is when Jesus calls Mary by her name, her recognition of him is immediate, and she responds by calling him *Sensei*, Teacher, "Rabbouni," in her native Aramaic. When the Risen Christ calls her by her name, she immediately knows him, recognizes him, understands intuitively at once the great mystery that she is beholding: that Christ is risen to new life. She is transformed yet again. She becomes at once, in the language of the early church, "apostle to the apostles," the bringer of good news to Jesus' most intimate followers. Her message, "I have seen the Lord!" is earth-shattering, for it means death has been overthrown, that God has faced evil, stepped into death – even the horrific death on the cross – and has won. And won not just for God, but for the whole of the human family and all of Creation. That the dominion of fear is at last ended at once and forever. That humanity now is free of the pressures of time, decay, and selfish ambition. That a radically new thing has begun to unfold in our midst – so radical we can scarcely name it, let alone contain it or boil it down into intellectual constructs. And that it is given to us, not so much to comprehend with our minds, but with our hearts, with our souls, with the very basis of who we are.

Resurrection is a joyous mystery. It does not fit neatly into pat answers and arguments over risen bodies or spiritualism. It does not conform to even our most carefully worded theologies. Nor does it yield to media field polls or cultural fatalism. This is because Resurrection is *experienced* by the Christian family much more than *explained*. And it begins most fundamentally when we hear our name called by our Beloved, the gardener of our souls, the Risen Christ tending our hearts and relationships. When our communities are chastened into actions of compassion, justice, and peace by our great Shepherd, the Living God in Christ, the Risen One. When miracles, small and great, unfold inexplicably in our lives – sometimes even without our invitation or help. When love breaks into the middle of heartbreak, light into our darkness, recognition into bewilderment. Resurrection says something is always happening even when we thought we reached a dead end, that hope is always at hand, that love is ready to carry us over the boundaries of death into new life.

And all we must do is listen for our name to be called and respond: stand up in the wisdom of Mary Magdalene and utter, "Hai!" Yes, we are here, *Sensei*, oh Great Teacher, oh Holy One. The meaning of Easter is never lost to us. Oh Risen Christ, we see You. We have seen the Lord!

*This week, discuss this sermon and other sermons delivered at Church of Our Saviour at <http://oursaviourmv.org/podcasts>*