

## **“From Gardner to Lord. From Pain to Celebration”**

**A sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant Easter Service, 4/21/19**

*John 20:1-18*

Mary Magdalene is a name with which many of us are familiar, and most of us may not even realize why. There seem to be several Mary's mentioned in the Jesus narrative. For example, Mary—the mother of Jesus, Mary—the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and other Mary's every now and then—but Mary Magdalene is by far the most prominent. She is mentioned in the synoptic Gospels more often than most of the disciples, if not all of them. Little is said about her background other than her designation, Magdalene, which most likely refers to her being from the fishing town of Magdala—not terribly far from Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. Remember, Jesus was often referred to as Jesus the Nazarene and following suit, Mary was Mary the Magdalene. In Luke 8, Mary Magdalene was said to be among a group of women who support Jesus' ministry out of their own resources. So, it appears, Mary may have had some source of money to help with the disciples' endeavors. And on that point, make no mistake that Mary was a faithful disciple of Jesus. And it makes sense. Luke also recorded that she had been delivered from seven “demons.” What these demons were, we have no idea. But there were obviously 7 distinct things in her life that she was healed from. 7! No wonder she was present even at Jesus' death, while most disciples had stayed away, and she was there to care for his body afterwards, while again, most were in hiding. Mary was special. Whether the number 7 was figurative or literal, it symbolizes surely that Mary's whole life had been restored unto her by Jesus. This we know from scripture. And according to some traditions, Mary later became an Apostle in her own right, leading churches in Northern Africa—and was respected as an equal, even in a male dominated society.

But it is Mary's disposition of absolute humility and compassion in her moment of despair, seeking out the body of her Lord, that we get a picture of Mary's true character. Isn't this how it is for most of us? When we lose all hope, all bearing, all grounding, when we are simply floating on the sea of life that our true nature emerges—what last strands of sanity within us find their way to the surface. No more arrogance, no more pride, no more pretending—we are just simply us, lost at sea, trying somehow to survive. It is in these moments of desperation that our character is stripped down to its final essence, and we are laid bare. But it is also in this moment, that we begin to finally exist. Our authenticity shines.

Mary's nature shines at the tomb. She, like the other disciples, was brokenhearted, her hope utterly shattered to pieces by seeing the one they'd been following faithfully for years now suddenly gone—forever. No more kingdom, no more worldwide change, no more healing, no more living—or so they thought. Jesus reveals himself to Mary, before the others. Why? I have a theory. Because when all was said and done, when all was stripped away and laid bare, no more “pretending”—Mary was still there, and Mary was still doing the work of love and compassion. While it seems the others were sulking, Mary was loving. She had prepared to tend to the body of her Lord, even in death. Even when Jesus couldn't see what Mary was doing to honor his body, or so she thought—that's the test. When no one else will see, but God alone. This is your heart. What does your heart in the shadows, under cover, where no one else will know. Mary had it dialed in. Her personal story was such that her whole life had been

completely restored by God through what Jesus did for her. Her healing was an emotional one, it seems—and most certainly a spiritual one, and judging from her loving Jesus in his death, unlike all the others, her depth of love was indeed greater. This is the true test of our love for God and our love for one another—when we lose it all, and we are left with nothing, perhaps even our faith has been shaken—what will we do? Will we still tend to the needs of others? Will we still work to transform the world around us? If you cannot answer in the affirmative, then there is still work yet to do. Much like Peter and the other disciples had more work to do on themselves. They needed to first forgive themselves, didn't they? —for abandoning Jesus in his time of need. Maybe, similarly, you need to forgive yourself today and start fresh. Maybe, surely like some of the disciples that Sunday morning who were harboring anger towards the Roman system that crucified their leader, their Lord, you also harbor anger towards another—maybe even towards others, and this is keeping you from simply loving outwardly. Bitterness can do that. But like the first disciples had to come to grips with, being angry is simply not worth sacrificing our ability to love. Let us love instead of hate. Let us be free instead of shackled to our hurt. Or perhaps like Thomas, you struggle with belief. You don't know what to accept as truth and what to reject as myth. If this is your struggle, a personal debate on the intellectual points of the Jesus story or its scientific or even academic merits, then you may have missed the main theme altogether: Love one another. Period. In this act of surrender, pushing one's ego to the side, and truly embracing others—you embrace God, you embrace both the divine and the human. And on this Resurrection morning, we celebrate the resurrection of both the Divine and the Human—together. To live is a choice. To love is to live. Choose to live through love.