

Mary Magdalene slept fitfully into Saturday morning, the first day following what is called Good Friday. The events of that day were terrifying and unbelievable to this woman who had followed Jesus for several years and who was called one of his disciples.

As her eyes opened that day, they immediately filled with tears that quickly wet her cheeks. "He is in the world no more", was Mary Magdalene's first thought that morning. She clenched her eyes shut as the sounds from yesterday once more filled her thoughts. She heard, crucify him, crucify him. Over and over these words played in her head and she still could not believe that her people shouted them at Jesus.

Mary Magdalene was with the group of women who watched Jesus nailed to the cross and waited for him to die. Mary Magdalene shook with fear as she watched the man who was the savior to people like her, hang there bleeding and slowly dying a torturous death. When Jesus cried out for the last time before giving up his last breath, Mary Magdalene felt her body go limp. She also felt relieved that the crucifixion was finished, and Jesus could be taken down from the tree where he was hung. The women quietly wept over the fate of the man they loved, and watched as he was removed and carried to the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. The women followed and helped wrap the limp body of Jesus in linen and added herbs and spices hurriedly as the Sabbath was approaching. Then the tomb was shut by a large stone in front of the entrance, and they left.

On the say of the Sabbath, the disciples stayed low, overcome with the raw grief that Jesus was dead. None of them thought about what would happen next, other than perhaps the men who worried that they might be called out for being his followers. The women stayed amongst themselves, caring for one another, and especially for the mother of Jesus, Mary, who felt that pain when a parent loses their child: bereft, not understanding, consumed with grief and holding on to their pain. Mary Magdalene went to bed early that night, she dropped into bed, exhausted by the emotion that overtook her that day. She would never see the face of Jesus alive again, his smile, his look of

wonder as he described his view of God, his Father. She closed her eyes and prayed for sleep.

Sunday morning, Mary Magdelene woke early, it was still dark, just before dawn. She was free to leave the house and gathered some spices together to bring to the body of Jesus. She did not think much of what she would do, just that she needed to be near him, more to console herself and to remember his life, his teachings, his precious words.

Mary Magdelene hurriedly walked the empty streets towards the garden a short distance from Golgotha. The sun was starting to rise as she arrived at the place where the body of Jesus was buried. She slowed as she approached the tomb. What is this, the large stone was no longer covering the entrance and was moved to the side. Mary Magdelene caught her breath as she wondered where the body of Jesus was. Who moved the stone before she arrived? Her thoughts went to Peter, he would want to know about this. She turned and ran to tell him and John.

“They have taken our Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they had laid him”, Mary told them when she got to the place where they were staying. Peter and John looked at Mary and immediately ran towards the garden. Upon arriving, they witnessed what Mary Magdelene had told them, the entrance to the tomb was open. They looked in and noticed that the linen wrappings that had surrounded Jesus were lying in the tomb. There was no body to be found. A sense of fear gripped them and without saying anything more to Mary Magdelene, they quickly walked back home.

Peter and John were afraid, terrified of being named as a follower of Jesus and brought in to the religious authorities for questioning. Peter had already experienced this and when put to the test, he denied being a follower three times, as Jesus had told him he would do. The shame Peter felt was overwhelming; shame that he could not save the life of Jesus and that he then denied even knowing him. Shame is a powerful emotion and takes over all thinking. Did Peter feel shame once again at having come to the

tomb, following Mary Magdelene, seeing the covering stone rolled away from the tomb and the emptiness inside, what did he feel? Despair, confusion, anxiety, shame. Peter did not go looking for the body of Jesus, nor tried to make an explanation to Mary Magdelene, or ask her what her suggestion was. No, Peter ran back home to get away from this death of Jesus that was taking on a new level of complexity. Did Peter think that the religious authorities stole the body of Jesus to remove him from any one of them making some reference to his death? Anything was possible. In the gospel of Matthew, there is a guard in front of the tomb but who cannot stop it from being rolled away, "they trembled and became like dead men". Later, when the guards told the High Priests, they gave the soldiers money and told them to make it known that Jesus followers stole his body from the tomb to make up a story about his rising from the dead.

The Jewish High Priests were aware of the prediction of his rising from the dead that Jesus made, but we see no remembrance of that from his disciples. Not once did Peter, or John or Mary Magdelene or anyone else come to realize, on their own, that perhaps Jesus was resurrected from the dead into new life. That was not on their minds. Instead, the men were afraid and hid from the authorities, and the women wept in their grief.

In the gospel of John, after Peter and John left the tomb, Mary Magdelene is left alone, and she is weeping. Weeping for everything that continues to happen to Jesus, not only his terrible death, but now his disappearance. He was not found, and she was unable to visit him once more. Mary Magdalen felt utterly alone, abandoned and despairing. Everyone was either hiding or consumed with their feelings of grief, each alone in their thoughts, wondering what was to happen next. Mary Magdelene was unprepared for what was about to occur.

Mary Magdelene now looked into the tomb and was surprised to see 2 angels sitting inside, one at either end of where the body of Jesus had laid. They were dressed in dazzling white, and seeing her, they asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She answered them, she did not know where they had taken the body of Jesus. She then turned and saw someone whom she thought was the gardener, who also asked her,

“Woman, why are you weeping, whom do you seek?” Mary Magdalene asks the gardener to tell her where the body of Jesus is and she will come and take it away. The gardener then said, “Mary!” Mary Magdalene’s eyes were open at these words that she immediately knew were from Jesus. “Rabboni!” was her reply, telling Jesus that she now recognized her teacher. With joy, Mary Magdalene started to reach for the feet of Jesus to clasp them and hold on to this amazing apparition standing in front of her. Jesus tells her not to hold him as he has not yet ascended to the Father, but to go and tell the disciples what she has seen. Jesus says, “Tell them that my Father is their Father, and my God is their God”.

As Christians, this story of the crucifixion, death and resurrection is one of the foundations to our faith, along with the Last Supper that institutes Holy Eucharist, and the healing stories of Jesus’ ministry on earth. I have filled out the emotions that I imagine were felt by the disciples and Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus. I looked into myself, what would I feel if I witnessed these events over a couple of days, and then enhanced the emotional feelings of the people in the story. This speaks to not only our humanity, but also adds to the story of how the faith in Jesus as the resurrected Savior took hold, slowly, over time. The disciples knew Jesus, they spent a couple of years following him, listening to his parables and speeches, watched him heal men and women, adults and children, and taught them how to pray. With all this knowledge, it did not automatically mean that they either remembered his telling them that he would be killed but then come back in three days, or that they should not be afraid in front of the authorities who were committed to put Jesus to death.

I see the disciples as ordinary people who are then told something so extraordinary that they must make a choice whether to believe it or not. And, eventually, they do believe that Jesus is immortal and is available to them even after his death on a cross. With the help of the Holy Spirit, they transform themselves into early believers of what would become the Christian faith, dedicating their lives to telling the story of a living God who came to give new meaning to life on earth through the acts of love.

I also like that this story is found in all 4 of the gospels. There are differences, yes, but one person in particular is in all of them, and that is Mary Magdalene. For me, Mary Magdalene is pivotal to the reality of the stories, because she is a woman. You see, woman had no personhood in the eyes of the law in those days. She and others were the property of the men in their lives, and her living, her status, her work all revolved around her role in the family of which men resided and were in authority. Most women were on the margins of the society, unless they were wealthy. Mary Magdalene had been cured from evil spirits by Jesus and then followed him afterwards, attending to his and the other disciples needs. There were other women as part of this group as well, taking care of the followers. Jesus recognized the plight of women and among his followers they were treated differently, primarily with respect and with love for one another. Women flocked to Jesus as they were able. To the early church leadership, choosing which scripture to include, the fact that all the accounts of the finding of the empty tomb, include the experiences of Mary Magdalene, would only have been included if it was necessary for the validity of the story.

Mary Magdalene has also been created into something she never was by the early church. Have anyone heard of Mary Magdalene the prostitute? There is not one story in the Bible that portrays her in this light, but it is a tale made up by those who thought she was too dangerous to be taken for more than what she was, a lowly woman. In the earliest gospel, that of Mark, in chapter 16, verse 9, she was referred to as the woman whom Jesus cast out seven demons. Not a prostitute.

There is something about the femininity in the life of Jesus and in the concept of God himself. IF we believe that we are made in the image of God, then God is both male and female, and Jesus saw no distinction in his mission between the two sexes.

I want to close with a story of when I learned of the power of the feminine in our faith history. Most religions have a feminine god, and she is worshipped and adored throughout the ages. God as mother is a powerful image, one that speaks to our being born to a woman. The role of the female god in the world has existed for almost all of

human time. And one Mother in particular has an important role in our Christian faith, the woman I am speaking of is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In 2007, way before I had thoughts of becoming a deacon, my husband and I went on an archeology cruise and visited some of the ancient ports in the Mediterranean. We saw early first century churches, crosses, mosaics, palaces and other things across many countries. One place affected me deeply. We were in the vicinity of Ephesus in Turkey and were on our way up the mountain to see the house of Mary, where she lived following the death of Jesus. You may recall that Jesus gave the care of his mother to the disciple whom he loved, also known as John. The story is that John brought Mary to Turkey and built her a home on the top of a mountain to keep her safe. Arriving at the spot, we got out of the bus and were met with beautiful fig and olive trees in the garden. We walked to a small clay structure, and I entered inside. My eyes had to get accustomed to the darkness inside and I stood just inside the doorway. The room was quiet with a stillness about it. I noticed that the air was cool moving around me. I then found a few people kneeling on benches praying in the room. Very quiet and reverent. Candles burned inside and I felt a sense of holiness in the space.

I walked out the side door and came upon an iron candle box that was filled on the bottom with sand and held many thin, tall candles inside. They were all burning brightly. I then walked down the path a little way and stopped in awe at what was in front of me. There was a long wall that was filled with different colors of paper and cloth; it was about 6 feet high by 30 feet in length, and I went up to take a closer look. I realized that I was alone in front of this prayer wall. There were handwritten notes to Mary asking for the healing of a multitude of concerns. I was stunned at the number of requests. Right there I felt closer to Mary than I could remember. I felt proud of my name—named after her by my mother. I was in what the Irish call a thin space and felt closer to the spirituality of the divine. I stood there for some time, soaking in the prayers and faithfulness of those who wrote them. I prayed to Mary in thanksgiving for bringing me to this space, to allow me to be a witness to the feminine in prayer and healing.

This image has stayed with me over the many years since that trip. It has instilled in me the availability and need of women throughout our spiritual lives. We need men and women who can testify to their faith stories and are to be believed by their words. Mary Magdelene is this for me; a lowly woman who witnessed one of the greatest spiritual stories the world has known. It started with a woman's weeping. I can place my faith in her words, her weeping, emotions and her beliefs. Amen