

Mary Magdalene, Apostle
Bishop Guy S. Edmiston, Jr.

July 22, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 2:1-10; Psalm 73:23-28;
Acts 13:26-33a; John 20:1-2, 11-18

Joy and peace to you, my sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus.

Sounds like Easter, doesn't it? We heard these Gospel lessons not too many weeks ago on Easter Sunday. And yet the Gospel lesson this morning directs our thoughts and our attention to the person of Mary Magdalene, who the early church many, many years ago, declared to be a saint and decided to commemorate her on July 22, which is today, which explains why we're talking about Mary Magdalene today. So, I think we need to spend a few minutes thinking about Mary's place in the history of God's activities, as she lived at the time of Jesus, knew Jesus, and ministered with Him.

The name Mary Magdalene, most people think, probably comes from the town from which she came, Magdala. So because there were so many Mary's, and you can read in the Gospels there's Mary-this and Mary-that and Mary-the Mother of Jesus, all the different Mary's, they had to differentiate, so Mary came from Magdala – Mary Magdalene.

We read in the eighth chapter of St. Luke these words, "Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. So, Mary Magdalene was one of many women, one of many people really, whom apparently Jesus had cured. She had seven demons, we are told in the Gospel of Mark and other places. Demons in those days were thought to be experiences of what we would call today perhaps mental illness and things like that. But Jesus had cured these women, and because He had cured them, out of their gratitude they follow Him, they ministered with Him, and Luke tells us, they provided for them out of their resources. These women were supporting the ministry of Jesus. They were the first Christian stewards, perhaps, who were giving out of their wealth to help Jesus and His ministry in the holy land.

As I said, in Mark we read that Jesus was one who had cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene. In the twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew, we read that Mary Magdalene was present at the crucifixion of Jesus. She was one of the women who were there at the foot of the cross. And when Joseph of Arimathea received permission to take the body of Jesus from the cross to his garden tomb, we read that Mary Magdalene and others were there, observing where they had buried Jesus, the Lord of life. So Mary Magdalene is one who has a lot of history in relationship to Jesus during His earthly ministry.

And then our gospel this morning tells us how Mary was the first person to discover the empty tomb. And she was the first person to whom the risen Jesus spoke, when he called her name, "Mary". And she is the first person to fill the role of an apostle, the first person who felt

compelled and called by Jesus and ordered by Him, in fact, to go and tell others that she had seen Him, that He had risen from the tomb, that He was alive. And so Mary Magdalene certainly seems to deserve the sainthood that has been bestowed upon her, and we give thanks today for her devotion to the Lord.

But we need to be honest; it was not always so. Not everybody thought she was a saint. You remember the story in the scriptures where Jesus was invited to have dinner at the home of the Pharisee, and while He was there, a woman came in and weepingly anointed His feet with precious oil and began wiping His feet with her hair and worshipping him, and the Pharisees who were at table with Jesus criticized Jesus. “Why would you accept this gift of devotion from a sinner?” For in early Victorian morality days at the turn of the previous centuries, Mary was thought to be a harlot, a prostitute, one who had set herself apart from the community. And now Jesus was honoring her by accepting this gift of precious ointment on his feet? How could you do this, Jesus? Mary Magdalene finally heard the words of Jesus say, “Your sins are forgiven.” That’s in certain interpretations. There is really nothing in scriptural understanding that says that the woman who was washing the feet of Jesus was Mary Magdalene.

And of course, that suspicion of Mary Magdalene has continued even into our own day, as Dan Brown’s wild imagination opened up the idea that Mary was married to Jesus in *The DaVinci Code*. Have you read *The DaVinci Code*? Mary was married to Jesus and bore Jesus’ son? And Leonardo DiVinci has her placed in a very auspicious location in his painting, *The Last Supper*. But there is nothing in the scriptures, as I said, that would allow us to believe that Mary was a harlot, or the wife of Jesus. You really have to have a stretch of imagination to go in that direction. So, we shall allow Mary Magdalene to keep her saintly halo and her saintly title and we will honor her for her devotion to the ministry of Jesus so many, many years ago.

One of the fun things for preachers, or perhaps it’s a challenge for preachers, is to look at the three scripture lessons that the wise church fathers in earlier days chose for a particular Sunday, and to try to find a common theme out of those lessons that direct our thoughts and our hearts toward the Gospel and toward how we are to understand Jesus and His ministry with us. Well, on this Ste. Mary Magdalene day I think it is relatively easy to see where the second lesson which St. Luke tells us is Paul talking with the Hebrews at the Antioch synagogue falls in place, for St. Paul tells them that those promises that were made to Father Abraham so many years ago, those promises that he would be the father of a great nation and that that nation would be a blessing to all the world, that in the risen Jesus that promise had been fulfilled. And Paul is saying to those Antioch Hebrews, “You’ve listened to the prophets but you haven’t gotten the truth of the message.” And so Paul following in the train of Mary Magdalene, is a great apostle; he is proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus; he is witnessing and telling the story of Jesus.

Now the Old Testament lesson is another story. The birth of Moses. The birth of Moses? I still remember, and maybe you do too, those glossy, colored, Sunday school pamphlets with the little basket there in the midst of the bulrushes. I know, our translations today say “reeds”, but I like bulrushes much better. Thank you, King James – Moses in the bulrushes, that’s where he belongs, not in the reeds! I’m not even sure what a reed is! Anyhow, he’s in the bulrushes and Pharaoh’s daughter, with the astonished look on her face when she opens the basket and sees this tiny baby, that pamphlet is one of my earliest memories from Sunday school. And certainly

while there is historical evidence that Moses lived and that Moses became a great leader, he was the one who went to Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go!” and he’s the one whom God had chosen to lead the Hebrew people out of Egyptian slavery, through the wilderness, into the promised land so that the promise to Abraham could be fulfilled. He certainly was a great leader of the Israelite people. But the story of Moses’ birth, I believe, has the elements of legend.

Where did the older sister come from, if Moses was the first child of his parents? And then a little bit later on when Moses was commanded by God to go to Pharaoh and say Let my people go, Moses said, Can’t do it God, I don’t speak well. I cannot articulate what you want me to say. So God said, Okay, we’ll send your brother, your older brother Aaron to speak the work of freedom for the Israelite people. Well, the story of the birth of Moses was written many, many years after Moses was born; in fact, written after the Hebrews had entered the Promised Land. And like so many stories of early births or early life experiences of famous leaders, I think that this story of the birth of Moses, however it truly happened, was written in the way it was to show the importance of this man and the fact that God had chosen him for a particular task.

Like so many other famous leaders. Remember George Washington and the cherry tree? Did George Washington really cut down the cherry tree? I was taught that he did in the early days of my education, but then later on I learned that he probably didn’t really cut down the cherry tree and say to his father, I cannot tell a lie, Daddy, I did it. It’s one of those examples of the ways we embellish stories of famous people to make them seem almost larger than life, and they become role models for us. I think that’s what happened, quite frankly, to the story of the birth of Moses.

But, it is around this story of the birth of Moses, and around this story that was selected for this particular Sunday of the festival of Ste. Mary Magdalene, that I think we find, first, the common theme for today’s lessons. In the verses before this story of the birth of Moses, in the first chapter of the book of Exodus, we read how the king of Egypt became fearful of the Hebrew people. They were enslaved in Egypt, and yet they were growing in great numbers. And he was afraid and said to his advisors, we need to do something because if they increase in numbers and we enter into a war, they might join with our enemies and rise up against us. So we have to eliminate these people. So what did he do? He ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all Hebrew boys. But the Hebrew midwives did not do it. They found a way to say to the king of Egypt, it’s not going to happen. But when the king of Egypt realized that his order was not being fulfilled, he ordered all the people of Egypt to throw any male Hebrew baby into the Nile and in that way, to eradicate the Hebrew people so they would no longer be a threat.

And then we hear this wonderful story of Moses’ mother saving her son, with even the Pharaoh’s daughter showing compassion and disobeying her father. Well, Moses was to grow up and lead God’s people. God saved him for that purpose. He was the one who would proclaim and fulfill for the earliest Hebrews the promises made to father Abraham. And so you see, I think the first inkling we get of a common theme here is that no matter how great the powers of evil and the powers that are in opposition to God’s intention to save the world and to redeem his humanity will not be thwarted because God ultimately is the victor. Even the king of Egypt, with his order to destroy all male Hebrew children, could not thwart God’s intention of saving the world, of making the Hebrew people a great blessing, through whom Jesus would come, and that theme of

God's willingness and the inability of evil and evil people to destroy God's intention, is the theme that runs through the Book of Acts and St. Paul.

St. Paul himself, a man who was committed to the eradication of the earliest Christian communities, on his way to do that – right? On his way to Damascus to do just that, what happened? God struck him down and Jesus appeared to him and revealed Himself as the risen Lord, and Paul became a great apostle. Paul was not able to fulfill the evil that was in his heart against God's intention for His people. And certainly Mary Magdalene, seeing the risen Lord, witnessing and testifying to the risen Lord was one who saw God's power and God's intention being worked out in a way that was almost unbelievable, that all of the powers that wanted to eradicate Jesus and His message of love and forgiveness and care and compassion could not stand up against the power of God. Mary, the risen Lord said.

So the truth that surrounds the story of Mary Magdalene and Paul and the birth of Moses is that the desires of men to rid themselves of God's intention and will to save the world is thwarted by the power of God. Is that not good news? I think it is. In a world today which seems overridden with events and activities that grow out of the hearts and minds of people that we call "evil" that seem to be in opposition to what we believe to be God's intention for His world, is still with us.

Michael Chertof, the director of Homeland Security, says he has a feeling that terrorists will strike in the United States this summer, bringing to our minds again the events of 9/11, or all of the other terroristic events that have occurred since then around the world. When I heard the story about the steam explosion in Manhattan this past week, my first thought (and maybe your's too) was, was this a terrorist event? This concern for terrorism and fear and the destruction of life and property that seems so much against God's will, is always deeply entrained in our minds now. The South American drug trade with its devastating effect on people's lives, not only in the big cities of our country, not only in the small cities of our state, but in the communities like Camp Hill, which are devastating people's lives and leading to an increase in crime which does more and more to deny God's love and the love that we claim to have for other people.

Random acts of killing in our communities. Mary Moola, my neighbor just one street over, killed in a senseless shooting was in the newspaper again this week with the hope of maybe, maybe hopefully finding the person who did this horrendous act.

The media seems full of tragedy and fear producing events that directly contradict Jesus' teaching about love, compassion, care, standing up against injustice, forgiveness, seeing beyond ourselves throughout the world to a common humanity for whom Jesus died, so much that seems against God.

And of course, there's the greatest mystery of our day (which some of you may have already solved) – will Severus Snape turn out to be a redeemed sinner or a totally evil man in Harry Potter's last novel? A book, a series of books, like so many series of books and excellent novels that you and I have read over the years, that hold before us the eternal conflict between good and evil and we read through these books and just hope that the good guy wins.

Well, the world seems to be directly contradicting the will of God. Many people, many events seem to be thwarting God's intention. We need to remember that evil in the world cannot and will not stop God's activities. Nor will they ultimately defeat God in his purpose of salvation. We too, along with Mary Magdalene and St. Paul have seen the Lord, have we not? And I'm not talking about only in the sacrament of holy communion; I'm talking about in the lives of poor people and the lives of hungry people and the lives of naked people in the lives of ill people, in the lives of people who are suffering injustice – for did Jesus not say when you have seen these people and ministered to them, you have ministered to me? When we see the tragic events and the tragic realities of some people's lives, we are seeing Jesus. And we too, with Mary Magdalene and Paul, know that the ancient promise to Abraham has been and is being fulfilled in our lives, as we live lives of committed Christian service, as we reach out beyond ourselves to care for those who are downtrodden, for those who are suffering the realities of this life. As we pray for God's power and His spirit to be moving in the lives of people who are evil, that they might be changed and converted and brought to a realization of God, the ultimate authority, and His will. We are part, my friends, of God's intention to bring healing and salvation to His world. And that, my friends, is no legend.

Amen.

Copyright © 2007, Guy S. Edmiston, Jr. All rights reserved.