

The Last Shall Be First

Thanks be to God, Easter is here at last! The long, penitential weeks of Lent are over, the heartbreaks of Holy Week behind us. Jesus's sufferings have ended, and he returns to us in glory. After waiting, praying, contemplating our shortcomings, and lamenting through the cold, wet weeks of late winter and early spring, we can finally rejoice and say, "Hallelujah, Christ is risen!"

However, Jesus's disciples didn't yet know what we know on that very first Easter Sunday morning. They still thought that their teacher was gone, betrayed by one of his own, condemned by their religious leaders, and murdered by the Roman Empire. His death had come so suddenly that there hadn't even been time to give him a proper burial. That's why Mary Magdalene and a few of the other women who had followed Jesus from Galilee went to his tomb to wash and carefully wrap his shattered body. The Synoptic gospels tell us that, when they arrived, the women found the tomb open and empty, with an angel or two waiting to explain that Jesus had risen from the dead. John's Gospel picks up with Mary Magdalene, who seemingly had neither seen nor spoken with any divine messenger in this version, running to tell Peter and John that Jesus's body had disappeared. John and Peter ran to the tomb, found it empty as Mary described it, and returned home, knowing that something had happened but not yet understanding that Jesus had risen from the dead. Mary must have returned to the tomb with them, either running beside them or following after. When John and Peter left the tomb, however, they left Mary behind as well. They must have kicked themselves later because, had they stayed, they would have been with her when Mary, eyes swollen and flooded with tears, turned at the sound of a beloved voice calling her name to see that their teacher and Savior had miraculously returned to his followers from death, just as he had promised them he would do before he died.

Mary Magdalene has been the subject of much discussion over the centuries. A lot of what has been said about her is just plain wrong. In an attempt to harmonize the Gospels, St. Augustine conflated her with the anonymous, sinful woman who wept on Jesus's feet in Luke's Gospel and Lazarus's sister, Mary of Bethany, who poured fragrant oil on Jesus's feet to thank him for resurrecting her brother. Then, Pope Gregory I hypothesized that Mary Magdalene must have been a prostitute. Scripture doesn't support their theories. Mostly, Augustine and Gregory have given European artists a handy excuse to paint pretty girls with disheveled clothes and hair, clutching expensive perfume jars with penitent expressions on their faces.

If Augustine and Gregory were wrong about Mary, though, what do we know about this woman who plays such an important role in the Gospels? Scripture tells us that she was a victim of possession whom Jesus freed early in his ministry. Some scholars think she came from a town called Magdala, or *Migdal* (מגדל) in Hebrew, though the seaside village we now call Magdala was known as Taricheae in Jesus's day. Bible archaeologist Joan E. Taylor argues that Mary was more likely from *Migdal Nunayya*, a small village just a few miles south of modern Magdala. Either way, her name meant "Mary from Magdala," and that tells us more about her than you might immediately expect.

As the Reverend Joseph Yoo points out in his delightful book, *When the Saints Go Flying In: Stories about Faith, Life, and Everything In Between*, women were identified in Jesus's patriarchal society based on their relationships with their fathers, husbands, and sons. So, for example, the Blessed Mother would have been known as "Mary, wife of Joseph" so long as Jesus's foster father was alive. After he passed away, she would have been known as "Mary, mother of Jesus," her eldest son. If Mary Magdalene had a living father, husband, or son, she would have been referred to as "Mary, daughter, wife, or mother of" one of them. That Scripture

refers to her instead as “Mary of Magdala” tells us that Mary had nobody. Her having nobody meant that she would have been considered a nobody, especially given her history of possession. She was likely shunned, an object of scorn. Reverend Yoo writes, “Maybe a more fitting name for her would’ve been Mary the Rejected One of Magdala. That is, until she met Jesus.”

Jesus recognized the beloved daughter of God behind the seven demons that enslaved Mary, but he didn’t just cast them out and continue on his way. He invited Mary to follow him, and she proved to be more loyal and courageous than his twelve closest companions. When they ran and hid, she stayed at the foot of the Cross. When her murdered teacher needed to be laid to rest, the disciples remained in hiding while Mary took a couple of her friends to tend his body. The women must have known what the authorities would likely do to them if they were caught, but they went anyway. Mary, the rejected, formerly possessed nobody from Magdala, put her faith before her fear and stepped up to offer one last service to the Master she loved.

Perhaps that’s why the risen Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, chose Mary Magdalene, this woman, this *nobody*, to be the first person to see him resurrected. John doesn’t tell us how long Jesus waited before calling Mary’s name. He might have been there all along, watching while John and Peter looked for him in vain. The Gospels don’t reveal every word spoken by the disciples. Perhaps Peter and John tried to console the weeping Mary or invited her to come with them. From what we saw in our Holy Week Scriptures, though, the disciples didn’t handle Jesus’s Passion very well. Their fear and confusion drove them to do things that would mortify them later. When they found the tomb empty, it might not even have occurred to them to put their feelings aside long enough to comfort an insignificant woman, a nobody who had never really been part of their inner circle. Perhaps Jesus saw them leave Mary behind and decided to give her the honor of announcing his Resurrection to those who had walked away.

Jesus might have had an additional reason for appearing to Mary first. He always had a special love for those whom society most despised. He began his ministry with a promise to bring good news to the poor. In his Parable of the Sheep and Goats, he identified himself with the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, offering eternal life to those who served the least among them. He promised the kingdom of Heaven to the poor in his Sermon on the Plain, and closed his Parable of the Vineyard Workers saying, “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Mary, the Rejected Nobody of Magdala, was one of the least and last as society counts such things. Who better to announce the greatest news the world has ever heard?

As we celebrate Jesus’s return, Reverend Yoo reminds us to remember Mary’s words. In the Easter season, Christians like to shout, “Hallelujah, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, hallelujah!” and that’s good. But Mary’s words, “I have seen the Lord,” are even better. Jesus isn’t likely to appear to us on a morning walk or stroll through a locked door to say hello, but that doesn’t mean we can’t see him. All we need to do is look at someone whom society has deemed a nobody with eyes to see the child of God within, then offer whatever help we can, and Jesus will be there. We might not see him right away, but remember, Mary didn’t recognize him at first, either. So, let’s put our hearts and hands to work this Easter season, looking for Jesus in every wounded face we see and helping wherever we can. Heaven knows, there is no shortage of opportunities to show charity and mercy right now, when so many in power seem to have so little. But we needn’t let that discourage or stop us. With every act of kindness and gesture of welcome we extend in Christ’s Name, we’ll bring the Kingdom of God a little closer. As we do, Jesus will be watching, waiting to call each of us by name. And when he does, we, like Mary, will be able to tell the world, “I have seen the Lord!” Our Lord is risen, friends, so let us rejoice! Happy Easter and amen.