

Trinity College Cambridge
23 February 2014

PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
Mary Magdalene

Song of Solomon 3: 1-4 John 20: 1-18

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“I don’t know how to love him, what to do, how to move him.” When I was about 15, a torch ballad that began with those words stormed the charts. Jesus Christ had become a superstar, and Mary Magdalene was the woman who had an unrequited passion for him. Suddenly, the gospel story became cool to teenagers all over the western world, thanks to Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber.

The picture of Mary Magdalene as a sexy sinner wasn’t new in the 1960s. Centuries of theological commentary had paved the way. By the 6th century, in the western Church, Mary Magdalene had been given a starring role in the Christian story, combining the personalities of at least three women. All we know about her background from the biblical record is that Jesus healed her of seven demons, and we don’t know what that means. But in the course of the next few hundred years she became in popular teaching and iconography a reformed prostitute, identified with the woman who weeps over Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair, which a chaste wife would have kept under wraps. She was also sometimes confused with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who neglected the housekeeping and chose the better part by sitting at Jesus’ feet as if she were a rabbinical student.

It’s as if three strong-minded and independent women were just too many for the cast list. There must have been only one, the reasoning went, a real handful, who could safely be patronized as a bad girl who repented. And she was an absolutely irresistible subject for religious art. If you go to the National Gallery and see in a painting a woman in tears who has slightly disordered clothing and masses of red hair, you can be sure you have stumbled across some artist’s notion of Mary Magdalene. It took until 1969 for the Roman Catholic Church to admit that the composite Mary Magdalene was a case of mistaken identity.

I am not going to discuss the Gnostic traditions that she was Jesus’ secret wife, or their modern counterparts in the fiction of Dan Brown and others, except to say that these speculations arise from the failure of the Church over 2000 years to confront the whole subject of desire. The Hebrew scriptures were not so shy, as our first reading from the Song of Solomon demonstrates.

But our subject tonight is people of the New Testament. And I would like to introduce you to the New Testament Mary Magdalene, a figure of extraordinary importance for the Church who leaps off the page, full of courage, passion and commitment. She is named at least twelve times in the gospels, more than almost any other disciple. It seems she came from a place called Magdala, hence her name. She travelled around with Jesus and his company of followers. She appears to have been the foremost female disciple, a counterpart to Simon Peter who was the leader of the male disciples. But her real significance becomes clear at the end of Jesus' life.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke record that Mary Magdalene stood with other women at a distance to witness the crucifixion of Jesus in the absence of most of his male disciples. They helped attend to his burial, and they brought spices to anoint his body on Sunday morning. In all three of these gospels, but with different details, Mary Magdalene and the other women are given the news of the resurrection by an angel. It has always been one of the strongest arguments for the empty tomb, by the way, that the witnesses were women. No one would make up such a detail, in a culture that valued men's testimony at twice the worth of a woman's.

The gospel of John tells the story rather differently, as is so often the case. In this version Mary Magdalene stands close to the cross with Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple John. Joseph of Arimathaea attends to the provision of spices for a wrapped corpse, so there is no need to bring them afterwards to the tomb. When Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb on Sunday morning, as we heard in the second reading tonight, she does so alone and empty-handed. She sees that the stone has been rolled away and instantly assumes Jesus' body has been stolen, and she runs with this terrible news to Peter, who notably has kept away from the place of Jesus' burial.

Mary seems to have been drawn to the tomb simply by a compelling need to be near the place where her Lord was laid. This is the natural action, not of a failed disciple towards a betrayed master, but of a bereaved companion towards the friend she loves. There is a mutuality and partnership between Mary Magdalene and Jesus which people have always been tempted to turn into a romantic fantasy. But the theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel says that 'friendship was the constitutive mark of the eschatological community of disciples'. Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus provides a model for all the members of the Christian community, not a special one-off example of favouritism.

The importance of her role in this respect becomes clear in the description from John's gospel of her encounter with the risen Christ. Peter and John the beloved disciple have responded to her news by racing each other to the tomb, where they peer in and see the empty grave-clothes. John, at least, concludes from this that Jesus is risen as he had promised, but he and Peter simply return home. They do so without a backward glance or a word to the weeping woman who has apparently followed them back to Jesus' burial place.

She then takes courage to look into the tomb for herself and has a visionary experience that was not, it seems, vouchsafed to the two men. They saw the forensic evidence, the scattered grave-clothes. She sees two angels who ask her why she weeps. When she says

she is seeking her Lord, another figure addresses her, one who has waited for her to turn around and see him. “Why are you crying? For whom are you looking?” he asks her. Not, What are you looking for, but whom? Whether she knows it consciously or not, she has been drawn to seek a living person, not a corpse. She uses the same grammar in her reply: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Like the woman in the Song of Solomon, she is ready to ask anyone, ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’

It is the sound of Jesus calling her by name that triggers recognition. The readers of this gospel will remember Jesus shouting the name of Lazarus beside a tomb, to call the dead man back to life. Here Jesus stands beside another tomb, and calls Mary Magdalene into a new life. She moves with complete naturalness to embrace him. Having found him again she wants to hold him and not let him go, like the woman in the Hebrew love poem. Jesus answers with the words, “Do not hold on to me”. This scene is often painted as though Jesus were rebuffing a clinging woman – in contrast to the moment a little later in John’s gospel where he positively invites the doubting apostle, Thomas, to put his finger in his wounds. Is her female touch somehow contaminating to the rabbi?

But that is not what this encounter suggests. Jesus has interrupted his ascent to the Father to commission her, as one of the beloved sheep for whom he laid down his life, with an important and urgent message. She mustn’t delay her commission in order to stay with him. She cannot yet follow Jesus where he is going, but she and all the disciples are now to become a new kind of community and she is the first to be told this. I am quoting an essay by the African theologian Teresa Okure in examining the meaning of this encounter.

Jesus says to Mary, “Go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Until now, in John’s gospel, Jesus has spoken of God as *his* Father, but not as the Father of his disciples. At the Last Supper he told them they were no longer slaves but friends. Now he announces a new reality. Like him, those who believe in him have a parent, the source of their being, in God. The crucified and risen Jesus makes this relationship possible. They are born of God, through the life-giving death on the cross, when Jesus’ pierced side poured out water and blood like the womb of a labouring mother.

And if the disciples have God as their Father, then they are brothers and sisters to one another. This is, quite literally, a new family of blood relations. The earliest Christian community took this immensely seriously. The ethnic family of the Jews has now been opened up to all believers. The good news is that Jesus has empowered *all* believers to become the children of God, as the prologue to John’s gospel proclaims. There is, as Paul later wrote, no Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free.

We enter into the mission of Jesus, bringing life in all its fullness and empowering others to become God’s children, simply by opening ourselves up to this new relationship. Only if we love one another can we make the astounding claim that we represent God in the world. Proclamation is useless if our lives do not bear witness to the reality of our family

relationship with one another. Read the whole of the first letter of John to find this message spelled out with great beauty and force: 'Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.'

Mary Magdalene is solemnly entrusted with this commission. It is her message that will constitute the new community as a family of blood relations. She is tasked with announcing, not just the bare fact that Jesus is alive, but the new reality he has brought into being through his death and resurrection. Because Mary has sought Jesus in love and waited to be called by him, it is her privilege to bring the gospel to the bewildered community. She is the first to be able to announce, "I have seen the Lord". The basis of her resurrection faith is not a conclusion drawn from circumstantial evidence, as for Peter and John at this point, but a genuine personal encounter with the living Lord. Later, of course, Peter and the other disciples have such personal meetings too, but Mary is the first, the Apostle to the apostles.

Her friendship with Jesus, based on the desire to be with him, to wait for his word, to share his good news, to relate to God through him, is the model for all Christians. The gift she received is one to be shared, and the family of God opens wider and wider to embrace all who wish to become God's children.