

Talk given by Canon John Simpson in the Lent Series 2019 in Holy Trinity Church, Hereford.

Mary Magdalene, Mary, Salome and Joanna

The women: accepted by Jesus, found the empty tomb, proclaimed the risen Jesus

I was ordained in 1963 into the then Congregational Church. The preacher was Revd Elsie Chamberlain...Women had been accepted as ordained Ministers since 1917 in Congregationalism....

Elsie was a strong feminist, married to a C/E Vicar who allowed her only to play the harmonium. He undoubtedly received no preferment in C/E because of his marriage. Elsie told me in that sermon that it would be good if sometimes I would try to think like a woman, pray like a woman and preach like a woman.

There was in an Oxford city church a priest totally opposed to the ordination of women. In that church was a wonderful piece of art work by Eric Gill. It was a sensual representation of a female saint. Some of the men in the congregation were fascinated by it, but were not sure that it should be on display for all to see. They kept it hidden in the pulpit. So the male preacher shared his pulpit with her. She was not to be seen.

Samuel Johnson after hearing a woman speak at a Quaker Meeting : *Woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all .*

My understanding was greatly enriched years ago when I heard a woman preach - she took the Annunciation to Mary as her theme, and spoke as I could never do, from her experience of expecting a baby. Am I pregnant? Will I be all right? Will it be fit? What do I do when my time comes?.... Thus Ruth decrees that I should lead you tonight in thinking about the women in the Gospel story who surrounded him in his last hours and made their way on that first Easter morning to the tomb in which Jesus had been laid. The implication is that I should try to see the Saviour from a woman's point of view.

Well, like a woman detective, Miss Marple, Vera, Scott and Bailey... let us look at the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection and ask some questions:

Matthew 28: 1 - 10

Daybreak - Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to look at the grave. Violent earthquake, an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, rolled away the stone, sat down on it. Face shining, garments white as snow, the guards shook with fear and lay like the dead. Then the angel addressed the women : "you have nothing to fear. I know you are looking for Jesus..."

They hurried away in awe and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples... Confronted by Jesus. Go and take word to my brothers that they are to leave for Galilee: they will see me there.....

Luke 24: 1 - 11

Very early bringing the spices and perfumes they had prepared. Found the stone rolled away, but the body was not to be found. Stood utterly at a loss, when two men in dazzling white were at their side. They were terrified.... Why search for the living among the dead?

They returned and reported all this to the Eleven and all the others.

- **Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and they, with the other women**, told the apostles. But it was discounted as **nonsense** and they would not believe them.

Mark 16: 1 - 8

The ending of a book is important. It has to be satisfying, not necessarily happy ever after.

Mark's ending is strange. Long build up, through trial and crucifixion, then a short funny paragraph about the resurrection and the ending "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" 16:8

That's it. Not even a proper sentence. There are further verses, but not by the same author: style and language is different.

Why? Mark did not finish, was he arrested in mid-sentence?

Did he die at this point as he was writing?

Was the ending Lost or destroyed?

Mark's is the only story about some startled women reduced to silence.

Did they keep silent? If they did how would we have heard of the resurrection?

Of what were these women afraid? They weren't afraid to stand and watch the crucifixion, were not afraid to visit the tomb...

Why silent? Other Gospels conclude resurrection accounts by telling us to go out and proclaim, but not Mark .

Silence is an important theme throughout Mark's gospel. Think of those times when Jesus told people to say nothing - a leper, a blind man, disciples at the Transfiguration - all told to keep silent. But he never tells any woman to keep silent. He healed Peter's mother-in-law, he healed a woman with haemorrhages, he healed the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman, but he didn't tell any of them to keep silent. Why silence the men and not the women?. We joke about women talking too much, gossiping, but not in Jesus' world. There women did not speak in public- they were used to silence, so there was no need to tell them to keep quiet. So we see it reflected in the early Church:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent 1 Timothy 2:12

A woman anoints Jesus with precious ointment. Jesus tells everybody what she means. A poor widow puts two tiny coins in the Temple treasury, and Jesus tells us what she is doing. The women stand silently around the cross and the male centurion speaks. That is how everyone thought it should be.

No surprise then that the women are silent and afraid when they found the empty tomb and heard a young man in white speak. They were not afraid of what they discovered or of what they saw. They were not shy or timid women, but they may have been afraid to speak out because they weren't used to it.

Now the resurrection altered all that. The old was overturned; old culture, old life, the dead are given new life, sick are healed and the silent are stirred to speech. But the women are silent. It's as if they have been imprisoned for years by culture, by tradition, by religion, and the Resurrection opens the prison door. (It's a familiar resurrection image), but they are afraid to come out. The angel told them they could speak, but they were too afraid to open their mouths. So the women became those who were the first to see, but left it to the men to speak.

And now we are beginning to add to the lost ending of St Mark. One example is that we are hearing women proclaiming the good news of the resurrection. But we still have a long way to go...

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John 20: 1 - 18

Mary of Magdala came to the tomb while it was still dark. Saw that the stone had been moved away so she ran to tell Simon Peter and the other disciples. Mary then had the encounter with the Risen Jesus, **supposing him to be the gardener**. Go to my brothers and tell them that I am now ascending. Mary of Magdala went to the disciples with her news, "I have seen the Lord" and gave them his message.

Was Mary just being wrong when she mistook Jesus to be the gardener?. This account is recorded only in St John where you have to be prepared for any hidden meanings. If so, was he the gardener? John's gospel begins with creation: *In the beginning was the word*. One thinks of Adam, the gardener. Literally Adam, earth creature. Adam is created from the soil and has a vocation to cultivate the earth. He is to turn the wilderness into a garden. se. **There is a painting by Titian** of Mary in the garden of the resurrection (Venice 1510) *Nolo me tangere*. Jesus is holding a hoe showing that it was quite possible that Mary should have mistaken him for the gardener. Mary stands on brown and barren ground, the risen Jesus on green and fertile ground. Mary is in the wilderness of the old creation; Jesus is in the garden of the new. Jesus is the first of a new creation. *A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came*.

Mary has been weeping. Was she the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears? There is no weeping now. *Do not cling to me.... Go to my brothers and tell them that I am now ascending.....*

I could preach a sermon on the Easter Garden, on new life, linking it today to climate change, for example whereby people and species are dying. New life is needed for all creation.

But if I am to understand better from a woman's point of view, I need to reflect on gender issues, listen to Woman's Hour, read the articles by women in the newspapers, look at Bible stories involving women, Ruth and Esther and Judith, research the women of the medieval church, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, wait for a female Archbishop.... And appreciate language which is gender neutral, perhaps even think and speak of God as female.

Now let us look briefly at the women:

Mary of Magdala

She, according to John, is the first person on earth to encounter the Risen Jesus. She, in popular thought say that she is an ex-prostitute. There is not Biblical evidence for this whatever. We cannot know that she was the un-named woman who washed OL's feet with her tears. We know, Luke tells us, that seven demons had been cast out of her. Sounds pretty horrible. Film makers suggest that she was OL's lover, even married to him and had his children - The Last Temptation of Christ. Absolute piffle. But we do know, with scanty evidence that she was able to provide for OL out of her resources. But the rumour has stuck - two Oxbridge Colleges - Magdalen - are named after her. But why do groups which exercise Christian care for prostitutes name themselves "The Magdalen Project"? No reason to link Mary Mag. With the un-named woman who anoints Jesus in Simon the Leper's house. No need to link her with sexy novels and Hollywood box office draws. Mary of Magdala, for me, stands for all those people who pour out their thanks and devotion to Christ. She was the first eye witness of the Resurrection - all four gospels agree.

And that leaves me with Joanna, Mary, mother of James, Salome, the other Mary, and others...

Luke 8 Healed by Jesus together with Mary Magdalene

Joanna was the wife of Chuza, who managed the household of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee.

Known as a Myrrhbearer - together with other women came to perform the last rites. A woman's job!

She was amongst the 12 who chose Matthias to take the place of Judas.

Why did they not choose Mary Magdalene?

And there was Salome.

In St Mark's gospel there are two Salomes. One is the Salome, daughter of Herodias who danced before Herod and asked for the head of John the Baptist (Mark 6: 17 - 29 The Jewish historian Josephus gives us her name. It's a tale of a girl who is led to an act of betrayal and love. Her story is the one that has stuck. Salome at the Cross and in the garden of the Resurrection is almost ignored. She was a "follower" of Jesus, rather than a disciple. She was one who ministered to Him. Some say she was half sister of BVM, or the wife of Zebedee. Who knows?

Feminists will argue that like so many women she does not get the recognition she deserves.

Poetry quoted during the talk:

I do not think she ever believed
In her son as the Christ,
Any more than her children have believed in him.
Brothers, sisters, all of them
Shrug him off as mad.
But we love him without understanding
Her strange son.
That's why she calls him "My strange son."
But I?
I call him Saviour.
Of course, I don't understand him
Any more than she does.
But I know he is my Saviour.
I love him
So we wait together, his mother and I (Michael Justin Davies)

The Resurrection

I was the one who waited in the garden
Doubting the morning and the early light.
I watched the mist lift off its own soft burden,
Permitting not believing my own sight.
If there were sudden noises I dismissed
Them as trick of sound, a sleight of hand.
Not by a natural joy could I be blessed
Or trust a thing I could not understand.
Maybe I was a shadow thrown by one
Who, weeping, came to lift away the stone,
Or was I but the path on which the sun,
Too heavy for itself, was loosed and thrown?
I heard the voices and the recognition
And love like kisses heard behind thin walls.
Were they my tears which fell, a real contrition
Or simply April with its waterfalls?

It was by negatives I learnt my place.
The Garden went on growing and I sensed
A sudden breeze that blew across my face.
Despair returned but now it danced, it danced.

(Elizabeth Jennings)

MAGDALEN at Michael's gate
Tirlèd at the pin;
On Joseph's thorn sang the blackbird,
'Let her in! Let her in!'

'Hast thou seen the wounds?' said Michael, 5

'Know'st thou thy sin?'
'It is evening, evening,' sang the blackbird,
'Let her in! Let her in!'

'Yes, I have seen the wounds,

And I know my sin.' 10

'She knows it well, well, well,' sung the blackbird,
'Let her in! Let her in!'

'Thou bringest no offerings,' said Michael.
'Nought save sin.'

And the blackbird sang, 'She is sorry, sorry, sorry, 15

'Let her in! Let her in!'

When he had sung himself to sleep,
And night did begin,
One came and open'd Michael's gate,
And Magdalen went in.

(Henry Kingsley)

Mary Magdalene

Men called you light so as to load you down,
And burden you with their own weight of sin,
A woman forced to cover and contain
Those seven devils sent by Everyman.
But one man set you free and took your part
One man knew and loved you to the core
The broken alabaster of your heart
Revealed to Him alone a hidden door,
Into a garden where the fountain sealed,
Could flow at last for him in healing tears,
Till, in another garden, he revealed
The perfect Love that cast out all your fears,

And quickened you with love's own sway and swing,
As light and lovely as the news you bring.

(Malcolm Guite)