

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
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St. Mary Magdalene (Pentecost 8)  
July 22, 2007  
John 20:1-2; 10-18

*“What are You Looking For?”*  
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

The day is in the church calendar. It was in the calendar in Lutheran Worship. It is most assuredly in the calendar of our new hymnal, Lutheran Service Book, but I believe this is a first in this congregation. For today we observe the day of St. Mary Magdalene. Saints days have a mixed reception in our churches. Some still consider the practice too “Catholic”. Others consider these days as useful for teaching and growth in the Scripture as we remember the saints of old and give thanks to our Lord for their faith as it serves as an example to us. In this sense nothing could be more fitting than to observe this day especially since in recent years there has been a great deal of attention paid to Mary Magdalene in contemporary literature. Much of the speculation of that literature has no basis in Scripture or in the history of the church. But the influence of those books and the recent “Da Vinci code” movie might cause many to state that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus. With so much confusion on this topic it is good to consider Mary Magdalene and her faith according to what the Scriptures say. In so doing, we will especially emphasize the climactic account of Mary’s encounter with the risen Lord Jesus and use as our theme “What are You Looking For?” May the Lord bless us on this day and may His Word enlighten us.

I. Mary Magdalene in the Scripture

There are 6 (or 7 or 8) Marys mentioned in the New Testament. The name Mary (Maria) is the translation of the Hebrew name Miriam. We have Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, the other Mary, Mary the wife of Clopas. Some scholars believe that the last three Marys are the same person, that’s why I just said there are 6 or 7 or 8 Marys in the N.T. Then there is Mary the mother of Mark and finally, a Mary greeted by St. Paul in the last chapter of the epistle to the Romans. Now it is coincidental but the Gospel reading for this Sunday if we had chosen not to commemorate Mary Magdalene is the account of Mary and Martha at Bethany. And the hymn of the day, has reference to that account. Now there is a curious tradition in portions of the church which identifies Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany as the same person. But that identification is stretching the Biblical account and is not really supported by the Bible. Others identify the sinful woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7 with Mary Magdalene as well. But she is not named in that chapter and Mary Magdalene is specifically mentioned and named in the opening verses of Luke 8. Now that you have had that explained to you, we will have a test. No, just kidding. It can be confusing, can’t it? So the question remains, what do the Scriptures tell us about Mary Magdalene? Not much, but at the same time, quite a bit.

There are just 12 verses in the New Testament gospels that mention her name. But if you take into account the parallel accounts in the Gospels there are really just three events in which she takes part. First, she is mentioned in Luke 8, as one of the women healed by Jesus during his Galilean ministry. We read, "Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." The next reference to her is with the women standing at the cross of Jesus, as St. John writes: "standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." And shortly thereafter it is recorded that she was with the women at the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea as Jesus' body is laid to rest there.

The third and final reference to Mary Magdalene brings us to Easter morning. She is mentioned with the other women as they journey to the tomb with their spices. She is mentioned by St. John as hurrying to find Peter and John when she discovers the tomb is empty. And it is Mary Magdalene who is left weeping at the tomb as the disciples return to their homes. Weeping and alone.

## II. What are You Looking For?

Well, weeping, but not really alone. How do you explain the two angels who are there? "Woman, why are you weeping?" "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." And then the question of the man standing beside her: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" or as our theme suggests: "What are you looking for?" Yes, Mary, what are you looking for? Open your eyes and see! But eyes, blinded by tears, often cannot see. They see a gardener but nothing else. "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." And ears often do not hear. But this time, they hear quite well: "Mary" and the voice responds: "Rabboni! (Teacher)" The reality of the Resurrection is literally standing there before Mary Magdalene. Resurrection in the flesh. The crucified Lord Jesus Christ is the Risen One and he calls her by name and then sends her on a mission: "Go to my brothers and say to them: 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" And Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord!" And so we prayed in the collect for today, that the Lord "called her to be the first witness of His resurrection." And that is the last reference to Mary Magdalene in the Scriptures. And her last words: "I have seen the Lord."

How tragic it is then that the succeeding generations both within and without the church have associated Mary Magdalene with so many myths and legends—with the holy grail and the knights templar, with popular movies and books that confuse and disturb the faith of some. But that is the way of the sinful world and of hearts and minds that often seek the

darkness rather and the truth. And the question must then be asked: "What are you looking for?" Perhaps in answering those questions we can be assured by the presence of the risen Christ and turn our attention to Him. Amidst all the misunderstanding about the observance of Saints days, we need to be reminded again that if we look to the Scripture we will see that the lives of the saints point us to the one place where we find our hope, our life and forgiveness, for we are standing beside Jesus and we hear him call our name just as he called the name of Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morn and filled her heart with the peace that passes understanding.

### Conclusion

At the beginning of this sermon, I mention that the Gospel lesson for this Sunday would have been the account of Mary and Martha at Bethany. There we hear the familiar story of Mary at the feet of Jesus listening to his words and hear as well the blessing of Jesus, "Mary has chosen the better part. For one thing is needful." Perhaps when some in the early church identified Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, they were struck by the similarities of these two women as they sought Jesus and found in him their salvation. So it is more than a little fitting that we sang as the hymn of the day, a hymn that reminds us of Mary of Bethany, but could speak just as well of Saint Mary Magdalene:

How were Mary's thoughts devoted  
Her eternal joy to find  
As intent each word she noted,  
At her Savior's feet reclined!  
How kindled her heart,  
How devout was it feeling,  
While hearing the lessons  
That Christ was revealing!  
All earthly concerns she forgot for her Lord  
And found her contentment in hearing His Word.

Wisdom's highest, noblest treasure,  
Jesus is revealed in You.  
Let me find in You my pleasure,  
And my wayward will subdue,  
Humility there and simplicity reigning,  
In paths of true wisdom my steps ever training  
If I learn from Jesus this knowledge divine,  
The blessing of heavenly wisdom is mine.

(LSB 536 st.2 and 3)

"What are you looking for?" "I have seen the Lord!"  
It is not Easter today, but then again it is: Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!  
Alleluia! Amen.