

A Homily/Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Feast Day of Saint Mary Magdalene on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 18, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

## The very first APOSTLE

Do you know the technical difference between a Disciple and an ***Apostle***? It boils down to one specific issue: Anyone can qualify as a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Apostles, on the other hand, have an additional claim: They are individuals who have actually **seen with their own eyes the risen Christ**. Now that was the original definition but various applications of the term "Apostle" have been used over the centuries, making it less clear and less sharp in its true meaning. These days the term is used much more loosely to refer to any of the twelve Disciples and even a variety of early first Century Christian Church founders and missionaries. It wasn't always that way. St. Paul, who never even met Jesus went to considerable pains to make his own claim to be an Apostle by telling of his encounter with the risen Christ on the Road to Damascus. The reason it mattered to him was because Apostles were the only ones who had full respect and authority during the Church's first Century A.D. The Apostles made all the important decisions that formed the basis for the life and worship of the early Christian community. Their writings were taken seriously and their traditions were preserved and honored. In short, it was an exclusive "club" and you had to have impeccable credentials to belong.

Today, we remember and honor a person who ***didn't*** belong to that august body of Apostles. We celebrate this morning the Feast Day of St. Mary Magdalene. You may not know very much about this remarkable woman. In fact, none of us know very much. She's a person shrouded in mystery but, here's the ironic thing: She has a stronger claim to be an Apostle than anyone else in the whole world because, believe it or not, she was the VERY FIRST one ever to see the risen Christ! It wasn't Peter or John; it was Mary Magdalene! But wait, I'm getting ahead of the story here. Let's back up and learn a little bit about her.

The reason we don't know a whole lot about Mary Magdalene is probably for two reasons: the Apostles who jealously guarded their close relationship with Jesus were embarrassed to admit that a WOMAN might be part of the "inner circle" and, secondly, the only writing containing some detail about her was excluded from the pages of our Bible on the grounds that it cast some of the disciplines in a bad light. Well, there I go again—getting ahead of the story. Let's start right at the beginning and ask, who is Mary Magdalene anyway?

Mary Magdalene wasn't her actual first and last name. It's just a way of identifying WHICH Mary we're talking about since "Mary" was the most common female name at the time of Jesus. This Mary came from a tiny fishing village (modern Migdal) on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, not far from Capernaum. Magdalene simply means "from Magdala." From the very few biblical references to her (only four basic facts, even though repeated by all four evangelists) we learn that she was one of a group of women—including Joanna, Jesus' mother Mary, and Susannah—who went with Jesus and cared for him during his traveling ministry. We learn that she was eternally grateful to Jesus because she had received healing from the torment of

“seven demons.” That bond between her and Jesus made them inseparable. She was present at the trial and execution, witnessed his death on the cross, and—as I already told you—was the very first person to whom Jesus appeared after the Resurrection.

Notice, nowhere in that admittedly scant record is anything at all said about her personal life. The Bible doesn't say that she was a prostitute, which for a long time was a popularly-held perception, one strongly encouraged by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church who found it very awkward, indeed, that Jesus had a close female friend and confidant, someone they were only too happy to discredit. In Church teachings she was often identified with other unnamed women of suspect reputation, such as the “sinner” who anoints him with the costly oil or the woman who was “taken in adultery” whom he saved from the death sentence of stoning. Another popular but extremely unlikely notion that many people have accepted uncritically is that Mary Magdalene was actually the wife of Jesus. In the 2003 book and 2006 film, *The DaVinci Code*, the fictional theory actually convinced millions of people that Mary Magdalene and Jesus had children and that their descendants all over the globe are involved, across the centuries, in a gigantic conspiracy to suppress that shocking possibility.

The much less sensational truth appears to be that Mary Magdalene was grateful to Jesus and wanted to help him to bring his healing and teaching ministry to ordinary people like herself. She expressed her thanks by being faithfully present, undertaking the everyday tasks and chores required by a moving, roving band of itinerants. Her's was not an up-front leadership position that commanded attention and honor. She merely provided shelter and fed Jesus and his disciples, apparently maintaining a humble low-profile servanthood existence. So, is it any wonder that Jesus respected her tenacity and her faith in what he was saying and doing? Is it any wonder that he admired her sincerity and commitment? I'm sure it really bugged those male disciples (who were constantly wrangling over who was most important one among them) that Jesus showed his greatest respect for this lowly female.

You know, in my experience, the dynamics haven't changed all that much over the course of two thousand years. A church is a diverse collection of people, brought together because of a whole range of beliefs, values, and needs. Some want positions of power and prestige. Others want only to find the healing presence of Christ and, then, to share it with others. My experience is that Jesus loves and accepts everyone in terms of what they are able to bring to the altar. Jesus understands, forgives, and just keeps on working to bring out the very best in each one of us.

Well, let's get back to Mary Magdalene. Though, as I've said, there's not a lot to be found in the pages of the Bible, there is one final piece of information that I think you should know about. In the middle of the twentieth century near Nag Hammadi in Egypt there were discovered some ancient scrolls. Written on these parchment fragments in Greek and Coptic is a text called *THE GOSPEL OF MARY* and it dates to the late first century. Here, we find what appears to be a very interesting corrective to all that biblical silence. These documents describe Mary Magdalene as an important leader among the apostles. Let me share with you just a few lines.

In this Gospel account, Mary is depicted as encouraging some very downhearted and depressed disciples. She says to them, "Do not weep and be distressed nor let your courage fail. His grace will be with us all and he will surely shelter us in his hand." Peter says, "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you and confided in you. Tell us his words that you know—words that we have not yet heard." So, Mary speaks at length about her experience of Jesus, emphasizing that Jesus cares equally for all people without regard for status or gender. Peter interrupts her, objecting, "Has the Lord spoken secretly to a woman and not openly so that we all might hear? Surely he did not mean to indicate that he trusted and preferred her over ourselves!" The text continues, telling us that Mary wept, saying, "Peter, my brother, what are you imagining? Do you really think that I have made all this up secretly and that I am telling lies about the Savior? Matthew speaks up and openly confronts Peter: "You are always inclined to anger and constantly give way to it. Even now, you are doing it—questioning this woman as if we were her adversaries. If Jesus considered her to be worthy who are we to reject his judgment and to disregard her witness? The Lord knew everything about her and he loved her unconditionally."

So here's the "bottom line." Just as we will never be able to recover what some refer to as "the historical Jesus"—the unvarnished factual story of Jesus of Nazareth—so also we will never know the real Mary Magdalene. And, that's really not much of a problem for those of us who know the Lord in a different way—through the eyes of Faith. In Him we see pure love without discrimination. In the same way, we have modeled for us in Mary Magdalene pure love expressed as commitment and service. Mary Magdalene is the model for all of us, a model of selflessness and devotion. She was one of the group of women to whom Jesus first showed himself after he had risen from the tomb. He trusted them to carry the Gospel word that life had triumphed over death. In Faith and obedience they went straight to the disciples excited and thrilled but their story seemed like nonsense and the disciples did not believe them.

That's the wonder and the irony of this special Church observance today: the FIRST apostle was completely ignored by the other apostles. The truth had to wait for another day and a subsequent resurrection appearance. The truth, you see, came disguised as a woman.