

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today, we celebrate the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene. She is probably one of the most misunderstood saints and biblical characters. Part of the confusion stems from the fact that she has been reinvented and rebranded century after century. For some centuries she was seen as the embodiment of Christian repentance. Other times she was called a prostitute. She was branded as everything from a mystic to a celibate nun to a passive helpmate to a feminist icon to the matriarch of divinity's secret dynasty by bearing Jesus' child.

Yet, the Christian Scriptures don't say too much about her. What we do know is that she was from Magdala, a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We also know that she was a prominent figure in Jesus' ministry. According to Luke's gospel, Mary helped provide for Jesus and his ministry. This likely means that she was a respectable figure with the financial means to support Jesus and the disciples.

We also heard two important things in today's reading, but before we get into that, I want to respond to something some of you might be wondering that is slightly off topic. If you were here on Easter Sunday, we largely read the same reading from Mark's gospel. However, it ended at verse 8 with terror, amazement, and silence. On Easter, I told you that's where the gospel ends. Yet, today we went on to hear about Mary sharing about the resurrection. So, what's the deal? Here's the deal: the earliest manuscripts of Mark end at

verse 8. However, beginning around the second century an additional set of verses were added by a different author or authors to leave it a bit less open-ended. These additional verses are known as the “long ending of Mark” and became so popular that it became the dominant ending.

Now, this long ending reveals a few things about Mary that we know in the other gospels. First, Jesus healed Mary of seven demons. We don’t know what these demons were, and we’re not even sure if it was seven. You see, seven is a number in ancient near eastern and Israelite culture that communicated a sense of “fullness” or “completeness.” So, the author told us that she was made whole or that she was fully cured.

What we also heard in this long ending was that Mary shared the news that Jesus was raised from the dead. This fact is similar to Luke’s version of Jesus’ resurrection. It’s also why Mary has often been called the apostle to the apostles. Or, the one who was sent to the ones who were sent. This is probably one of the more important aspects of why Mary is seen as a saint and why she is so important to our faith.

Before we bring together these different aspects of Mary and talk about why we might find Mary important for our faith life today, I want to mention about saints more generally. You see, the Lutheran church doesn’t typically emphasize saints in the same way the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches often do. For Lutherans, we have a calendar of the saints that we commemorate, which we regularly print in the bulletin. But, Lutherans don’t worship saints, nor do we pray to them to intercede or talk to God on our behalf. Instead, saints are individuals we hold up as examples of faith in

action. They are imperfect people teach us something about how they helped live out God's vision for the world. Gathered around us in this space we see saints depicted on our stained-glass windows and with the icons.

Icons of the saints are, as one of my colleagues puts it, both a mirror and a window for the faithful. They are a mirror because as you stare at the icon, it stares back at you, inviting them to see their life and example as a lens for living the faith. Simultaneously they are a window offering a glimpse into a different time, context, and way of being in the world.¹

With that in mind, we can look to Mary's story. Yes, it was a different time, place, and way of being in the world. The roles of women were very different in Jesus' time. They generally were found in the home, married young, and had little access to property or inheritance. Women were often overlooked, they were restricted to certain areas of the temple, and weren't allowed to study the scriptures. Yet, Mary operated differently in her time. She learned about God from Jesus, she financed Jesus' ministry, and she was so important to the Christian faith that her role could not be written out or completely ignored. And this complex interaction with the dominate society is why I think Mary was accidentally or intentionally misunderstood. She was different. She didn't fit society's mold. In such cases, it is much easier to demonize the unknown and misunderstood instead of seeing the gifts they share.

And that is something we all can learn from Mary's story. Mary was essential to our Christian faith in sharing the resurrection and financially supporting the

¹ <https://lstc.edu/story/mirrors-and-windows-saints-are-for-lutherans-too/>

movement. However, the misunderstanding of difference eroded God's gifts. Unfortunately, this is all too common in our world. Misunderstanding can lead to stereotypes or discrimination against race or ethnicity which can bring about systemic inequality and harm. Misunderstanding of political ideology and differences can escalate social division, polarization, and even conflicts within our nation. So too, the failure to challenge misunderstanding and to further seek truth with openness and genuine curiosity can limit learning and innovation that hinders personal and societal development.

And that's why I think today is an outstanding day to welcome six new members into the congregation. These new members will bring new ideas, ways of operating, and backgrounds that are parts of God's gifts to the community. Mary Magdalene's story reminds us that God works through people of all different backgrounds and experiences. For the limits that societies and faith communities want to put on individuals are not of God. Rather, God fully welcomes all people in their beautiful diversity to be a part of seeking God's love, justice, and peace.

So, today, as we reflect on Mary's witness, we are reminded to give thanks for the way God's love, liberation, justice, and truth transform and heal us. In noticing that, may we, like Mary, share God's good news. May we acknowledge that difference is God's asset; may we know that misunderstanding can be confronted with curiosity; and may we recognize that God works through us to share God's gifts each day. Amen.