

Mary Magdalene

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This sermon is about formation—specifically the faith formation of Mary Magdalene, and I begin the sermon with the end of her story.

No matter how many times I read Luke’s account of the Resurrection, I get stuck at the end of it. The disciples’ reaction to Mary is peculiar to me.

I imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and the other women who were with them hastening from the empty tomb to the location where the disciples were; and upon rejoining the disciples, wouldn’t there have been something unusual about them that would have caught the attention of the others? Wouldn’t the women have been breathless? Sweaty? Animated? Disoriented? Joyful, or something?

Yet, according to Luke, the disciples consider her story an idle tale. Except for Peter, they don’t even budge. Why did the disciples react in the way they did? Were they too filled with grief? Was the story too fantastical? Was there something about Mary’s credibility? Was it because she was a woman?

Since these questions of power and identity rummage through my mind every year this time, imagine my interest when I stumbled upon a credible conversation about Mary Magdalene’s identity—on social media! The conversation revolved around a 2014 article by Gail Wallace, founder of the Junia Project, titled “Five Things You Should Know about Mary Magdalene.”

Thing one. The most likely reason Mary is called “The Magdalene” is that she came from Magdala, a thriving fishing town on the coast of Galilee, near Capernaum where Jesus’ ministry takes off. She’s a contemporary of Jesus “from back in the day.”

Thing two. Though Mary is regularly thought of as having been a prostitute, there is no evidence in the Bible to suggest that she was. It could be that her identity was merged with that of the sinful woman who anoints Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36-50). Mary Magdalene is named a dozen or so times in the gospels, and none of those references indicates that she was a prostitute or known for a lusty lifestyle.

Thing three. Mary traveled consistently with Jesus and the disciples. The gospel writers are specific in noting that Mary and a number of other women had followed Jesus from Galilee (Matthew 27:55). The first mention of her is in Luke 8:2-3, so we know that she was with Jesus from very early in his ministry. The last mention of her is in John 20, where Jesus appears to her at the empty tomb. This suggests that Mary intentionally left her home and lifestyle to follow Jesus throughout his public ministry.

Thing four. Mary supported Jesus’ ministry financially. Luke 8:1-3 reads, “The twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.” Many scholars agree that this was financial support rather than mere domestic support, although the

women probably did that as well.

Thing five. Mary is called “Apostle to the Apostles.” After giving her report that Jesus had risen, Mary Magdalene disappears from the New Testament, but we find some clues about her later life in extra-biblical texts. The apocryphal gospels depict Mary as a disciple who has a deep understanding of Christ’s teachings. Several early church writers portray her as a leader in the early church movement. At some point she was given the title “Apostle to the Apostles” because she was the first person to see the risen Christ and the first to share the news of the resurrection with the disciples.

Now, this may be more than we ever wanted to know about Mary Magdalene! However, on close inspection, her life is worthy life that demonstrates the nature of the Christian journey and faith formation.

The little church I grew up in in Florida sang a lot of early 20th century hymns. One of those written in 1914 is entitled “Since Jesus Came Into My Heart.” Here are several verses:

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought
Since Jesus came into my heart;
I have light in my soul for which long I have sought,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

I have ceased from my wand’ring and going astray,
Since Jesus came into my heart;
And my sins which were many are all washed away,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

I’m possessed of a hope that is steadfast and sure,
Since Jesus came into my heart;
And no dark clouds of doubt now my pathway obscure,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

Refrain:
Since Jesus came into my heart,
Since Jesus came into my heart;
Floods of joy o’er my soul like the sea billows roll,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

It’s a fine tune, but it presents Christianity as sort of a “one and done” occurrence. Jesus visits you once, and you’re done! Nothing else required. All is right with the world—“and the skies are not cloudy all day!”

The Bible presents the Christian faith as the result of a formative process. Peter, for instance, the only disciple who took Mary’s witness seriously, was plagued with impetuosity; and despite his close relationship with Jesus, he denied knowing him on three separate occasions when the chips were down. Later, empowered by the Holy Spirit, this same Peter preaches with power before skeptical audiences. One wonders whether he would have been able to proclaim his faith so boldly had he not had to reckon with his earlier cowardice.

Mary Magdalene’s life is an equally fine example. She didn’t just walk up to the

empty tomb; though she may not have known it, her journey to Christ's tomb was years in the making:

- She didn't get to that tomb except that by God's providence she was a Galilean like Jesus.
- She didn't get there except that she had an encounter with Jesus in which she experienced healing.
- She didn't get there except that she walked many a dry dusty road alongside or more likely behind the male disciples.
- She didn't get there except that she was frowned upon, ostracized, for breaking with the customs associated with her gender.
- She didn't get there except for experiencing some personal loneliness.
- She didn't get there except that she shed tears at her Lord's assassination.
- She didn't get there except that she met an angel on the side of the road who pricked her from her despair.
- She didn't get there except that she had the unmitigated courage to actually peer into that cave herself and see with her own eyes.

Human beings never arrive at the point of resurrection, rebirth, or any sort of renewal except by the often arduous formational processes God affords in life. You know who makes this point very well? Beyonce! For anyone who does not know her, Beyonce is a Texas-born African-American singer, songwriter, record producer, and actress. In the 1990s, she rose to fame as the lead singer of R&B girl-group Destiny's Child, one of the best-selling girl groups of all time. When the group disbanded, she pursued a solo career which catapulted her into iconic fame and fortune. She has won all kinds of awards, and *Forbes Magazine* listed her as the most powerful female musician of 2015.

In February of this year, Beyonce released a track called "Formation." I have to listen to a song a long time before I'm able to catch the lyrics (I don't have a keen ear in that way), but a few words stood out pretty quickly, even for me:

My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana
You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bama
I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros
I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils

I was interested enough to watch the video. I'm glad I did. What I found was a montage of images with the beautiful grit of the human experience embedded within it. The words "my daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana; you mix that negro with the Creole make a Texas bama" intriguingly describes her parentage. But there's a bigger picture. Beyond her immediate family origin, Beyonce is weaving together various aspects of southern culture and history. She creates a tapestry in the song rooted in the experience of African Americans, juxtaposing that which is crude and troubling alongside that which is inspiring and lovely. Her images describe a prominent piece of Americana, offer social commentary, affirm feminist thought, and call for justice — all within a five minute window. Said another way, Beyonce is describing the nature of formation. She spares nothing. The grittiness, the glam, and much of the in-between

of our culture are there.

The same can be true of the gospel. The grittiness, the glam, and the in-between are there. Yes, there are the illumined angels who inform the women that the one they have come for is not there; but there is also the backdrop of the tomb—a cave rough-hewn, humid, smelly, unsanitary. It's the fullness of the experience together that makes for the truest formation. Likewise, earnest Christian formation engages the fullness of the human experience. Why is this important? Because it is out of the depth of our formation that we really find our power as Christ's own. Christ went up on a cross for your and my sins, but the strength and power it took for him to stay that course came as a result of his formational experiences.

Do you remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? Knowing what was ahead of him, Jesus prayed, "Lord, I don't want to do this. If there is any way, please take this cup from me; and if not, your will not mine be done." The sacrificial spirit, the power, of that prayer is evidence of the sum total of his experiences. One of the greatest critiques of the modern day church in the west is that we don't demonstrate our power! We're weak. People are unsure about what we stand for.

Every year at Easter time, I tell the story of a boy whose grandmother was a very good seamstress. He loved to watch her sew. It was amazing to him that she could take shapeless cloth and turn it into wearable garments. When Grandma wasn't in her sewing room, the boy would sneak in and sit at her machine. He would press the pedal and carefully drag fabric across the table just as he had seen his grandmother do. In his mind's eye he made shirts and pants, but in reality, no garments were ever made.

His grandmother always unplugged the machine when she finished. So, when the boy sneaked in to the sewing room there was no power at his disposal. He went through all the motions, but there was no power. He produced nothing. Jesus told his disciples that they would do the works he did and even greater. I'm convinced we have the potential to do exactly that; that we have access to a resurrection power of our own provided we are adequately plugged into the fullness of this earthly journey God has made for us.

Henry Knox Sherrill said, "The joyful news that He is risen does not change the contemporary world. Still before us lie work, discipline, sacrifice; but the fact of Easter gives us the spiritual power to do the work, accept the discipline, and make the sacrifice."

Hallelujah! Christ is Risen.