

“Mary Magdalene”
Homily of July 23, 2006
by Fr. Brian Joyce

This weekend coincides with the feast of St. Mary Magdalene. So we want to honor and celebrate her and think the best way to do it is to do two things, number one, to clear her name and, number two is to learn lessons. But it's not easy. You know, I asked people to share before Mass, in the earlier Masses and last one thing they knew about Mary Magdalene. Fifty percent of the results usually are that she was a prostitute that she was a public sinner, reformed and repented. Although that belief has been rejected by historians, rejected by scholars and rejected by the official Church it still persists. It's very hard to change that way thinking. I will tell you why.

In the late 500's, one pope, Pope Gregory, gave a great sermon where he confused together the penitent prostitute who was wiping the feet of Jesus with her hair and anointing him before his death (That's a woman.) with Mary Magdalene. He put the two together and, from ever since, preachers and artists have field day, even in our own lifetimes, when it is clear that scholarship and the Church have tried to set the right. Cecile B. DeMille comes along and, in the “King of Kings,” he portrays Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Andrew Lloyd Weber comes along and, in “Jesus Christ Superstar,” he portrays Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Zepharelli and Scorsese come along and, in “Jesus of Nazareth” and in “The Last Temptation of Christ,” they portray Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Mel Gibson, in his movie “The Passion of Christ” part right. He didn't think she was a prostitute, but he decided that she was the woman caught in adultery and invented a new reputation for Mary.

Mary was not a repentant sinner or a reformed prostitute, but a faithful disciple, a member of the inner circle of Jesus and something of a leader in the early Church. It gets further confused..... Time Magazine and Newsweek described a problem in the Church as “the problem of a muddle of Marys.” The name “Mary,” really “Miriam” was very common at the time of Jesus. So, in the gospel, we have a lot of Miriams. We have a lot of Marys. We have Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary the mother of James, Mary the sister of Lazarus and of Martha, Mary Magdalene, and this unnamed woman who weeps over Jesus and who is a prostitute as far as we know, her name wasn't “Mary” and we know for certain that she wasn't Mary Magdalene.

It is remarkable though that, you know the time that the gospels and scripture were written, in that time they were written by men and in a male dominated society and a religious culture that said, number one, women cannot even enter the inner temple; number two, women cannot be discussing in public with men about their faith or anything else; number three, women should not be allowed to recite the Torah or the Bible; number four, women cannot serve as legal witnesses. If a woman here saw someone murder someone, they could not testify in court about it. They'd have to have two men who would testify for them. And it is remarkable, amidst of this, that both Jesus, in his life, and the scripture writers, later on, refused to be politically correct. Only does Jesus walk with Mary Magdalene and have a circle of women among his followers, the scripture writers mention Mary, not once, not twice, but Mary Magdalene fourteen times. She's always named as one of the women, with one exception, at the cross. And she is the one (Can you imagine the apostles having to write this down?), when Jesus died on the cross “we ran away. We ran away, and she stood by the cross. She was there at his burial and she came back to the tomb early in the morning on Easter. And she was the first to meet him in resurrection. And she was commissioned by Jesus to go and tell the others. That's why the official Church always described her as “an apostle, the apostle to the apostles.”

My favorite part of the gospels is after Easter, after Easter, the Resurrection part. It's not because resurrection is less messy than crucifixion or resurrection is neater than crucifixion, or resurrection is happier than crucifixion.

It's because that's the age we live in. We didn't live in the age when Jesus was walking the earth, was walking the streets of Galilee, was preaching in Jerusalem. We weren't there for that. We are there for the risen Christ. We live the day after the Resurrection. That's our time. That's our time.... So, out of that time in the scriptures we have two favorite saints. One is St. Thomas the apostle, usually called “Doubting Thomas” because he asked questions. It's OK to have questions and doubts and still be faithful followers and well-loved by Jesus. A few weeks ago, Bill Moyers on television had Mary Gordon, the Catholic author and writer, on in an interview. She said to her, “Do you ever have doubts?” And she said, “If you don't have doubts, it's not faith. Faith without doubts is not faith. If you have not doubts, you know what it is? It's one of two things. It's either nostalgia or addiction. And they are both toxic.” I like that. One of our parishoners (He's here at Mass.) is a poet. I was looking at one of his books of poetry yesterday and I love this poem. It's called “Alarm Bells.”

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I like it. And I like Thomas because, even though he doubts and he questions, he continues to seek and faithfully follow Jesus.

And my second favorite is Mary Magdalene, because even, given the limits of being a woman in that day and age, she takes action and she makes a difference. She stands at the cross. She goes to the tomb. She meets Jesus, and when she is told to witness to Christ, she goes and does it. We mustn't forget the other Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary who said “yes” to God and who gave Christ to the world. The problem is we look at Mary, the mother of Jesus, and say, “That is wonderful. She did it. Nobody else could ever do that.” Mary Magdalene says, “Yeah, I could. I'll say yes and I'll witness to Jesus and you say yes and you witness to Jesus and all of us are called to say yes and to give Jesus to the world, incarnate and in the flesh.”

You know, last night, I started to ask the parishoners, “Do you have a bulletin with you because I want you to look at it?” I looked out. They were all waving the bulletins! If you have a bulletin, would you open it up and look at the foldout on it. The foldout has a list of witnesses to Christ, like Mary Magdalene. Some lived long ago. Some lived in our own lifetime, and some in our own neighborhood. During the Offertory time Father Terry is going to share a Mary song, and Ave Maria, and we are going to see the pictures of the people on that list. And we invite you to follow along, but to make your own list at the same time, and to look to your own gifts and your own resources and your own energy and your own time, and include yourself as asked to witness to Jesus, to make Jesus incarnate in our world, in our day and age. And let us give thanks to the Lord who is so good. Amen.