

The figure of Mary of Magdala, or Mary Magdalene, has fascinated Christians throughout the history of the Church, and has attracted more recent attention as an iconic figure for the Christian Feminist movement. She has (incorrectly) been identified with the woman caught in adultery, and the gospel tells us that she had seven demons cast out from her. Many mediaeval churches and places of education were named after her, and the modern spate of self-appointed mythbusting sees Mary Magdalene as a leader among the apostles, as the first woman priest, and, more oddly, as the lover and even the wife of Jesus himself.

We, however, need to keep ourselves firmly to the gospel witness, which is crystal clear. She is placed in all four gospel accounts as a witness to both the crucifixion and the resurrection – and this is the basis not so much

of the fevered imaginings about her later life, but of the truth we need to hear again tonight.

Mary Magdalene actually makes little impact on the gospel narrative until the events we commemorate in Holy Week, but for the early Church, forming and hearing the gospel accounts, she was obviously a familiar figure. The most straightforward way of explaining this is the fact that in Mark's gospel and John's gospel, the two gospel accounts thought by many to be the closest to the eyewitness accounts, she is reported as the first eyewitness of the resurrection – the first person to see that Jesus is alive.

In Mark, she is among the women who find the empty tomb, and are afraid to tell anyone about it. Then, in the longer one of the added endings to Mark's gospel, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, who takes her news to the apostles, who refuse to believe. In John's

gospel, she runs to take the news to the disciples, causing Peter and John to run to the tomb to see if what she says is true.

There is a dynamic process at work here: see; believe; tell (and get disbelieved). I wonder if it had been Peter or John in her place, we would not have been hearing so much about disbelief? Even so, in this very human story, the followers of Jesus look for some more weighty evidence that he is alive.

The problem is that Mary Magdalene is not an iconic figure, nor is she one with special authority or office. On the contrary, Mary Magdalene is an ordinary faithful follower of Jesus. Indeed, she is more faithful than most, for – being unimportant – she is able to follow Jesus through to the end; and she is not under suspicion for spiriting the body of Jesus away. Instead, she is just a person like us – one who has tried to stick close to

Jesus, who has heard his core proclamation ‘Repent and believe the Good News’ – and through simplicity and faithfulness has tried to put that proclamation into practice.

We are none of us heroes of faith with the greatness of the apostles and it is unlikely that any of us will be famous. It is also true that when we give our witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus there are few who are prepared to take us seriously. Should we be bothered? The answer is found in Mary Magdalene – and it is a resounding ‘no’. For tonight, as before, Jesus chooses simple and straightforward people as witnesses to his resurrection; he chooses you and me.

The Church reminds us in tonight’s time-honoured liturgy what it takes to be a witness. We proclaim the resurrection; we hear the prophecies; we sing our own witness in the Great Alleluia; we hear the gospel

account; we reaffirm our repentance and commitment to witness in the baptismal liturgy; and then we follow the command of Jesus to share his Body and his Blood.

We have entered the same dynamic process as Mary Magdalene: see; believe; tell (and get disbelieved). I don't suppose we would know anything at all about Mary Magdalene if she had not done these things, and I am quite sure that the continuation of the gospel witness in these communities depends on us – ordinary people – doing what Mary Magdalene did, and not being discouraged when we are disbelieved – because we know that it is true! We have seen it here; we have believed it here; and come what may we must tell others:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

**PC, April 2014; slightly revised 2019**