

Homily – St. Mary Magdalene  
July 20-21, 2019

I have seen the Lord!

Good morning, church! Thank you for welcoming me to this wonderful parish weekend. We're celebrating St. Mary Magdalene – as well we should!

Two thousand years after Jesus' resurrection, we know about it because Mary Magdalene faithfully fulfilled Jesus' commission to her. Mary is the first evangelist – the apostle to the apostles. She was the first to see Jesus risen and to proclaim the good news – "I have seen the Lord!"

I'm Alison Benders, Interim Dean of the Jesuit School of Theology. I'm honored to be here to offer my reflections on St. Mary Magdalene. I'm particularly pleased to speak on the readings we just heard – because I can talk about Mary Magdalene and about Jesus' resurrection. It's a 'two-fer' as they say; two topics in one reading.

I'm a systematic theologian, which means my expertise is in doctrine and explaining the meaning of our faith. To make theology come alive, I usually approach the teachings through imagination. I find that this can fill in the gaps and help me grasp what our Catholic beliefs mean in my daily life. So I'm going to use this approach in my reflection today.

First, I want to say a few words about Mary Magdalene. Now, in this parish, I'm literally preaching to the converted. We just had an amazing panel of scholars here on Saturday morning. I can't add to their insights, but I do want to draw a quick picture of Mary Magdalene. For me, Mary Magdalene is the first and most courageous witness to the resurrection.

Her gift to all generations was the moment that she recognized Jesus as he spoke her name.

Much of what we know about Mary we learn because we can read between the lines in the New Testament. Here's what we have:

- In Luke (8:2), Mary of Magdala is one of several women who followed Jesus and supported him. Luke tells us that Jesus cast out

seven demons from her. We don't really know now what that meant. But the number seven indicates many, many; so we can imagine that she was terribly afflicted and Jesus healed her.

- She must have been a woman of some financial security, since she was able to leave her town nearby and become Jesus' disciple. In that society, women were usually segregated from public life. Their fathers or husbands controlled them and spoke for them. The fact that she followed Jesus, and lived within the community of his closest disciples, gives us a glimpse into how radical Jesus' preaching was in Israel 2000 years ago. I think of her as amazingly probably decisive and courageous; she acted on conviction. She was respected and believed by the men of the community, which reveals how much they respected her as a leader.

Let's now imagine what she witnessed as she followed Jesus:

- She experience Jesus' healing power. He healed the lepers, welcomed strangers as neighbors, received the 'anawim' (the poor and marginalized), and cast out demons who caused so much anguish.
- She certainly heard Jesus teaching about God's deep love and tender care for human beings and she saw what this looked like as they walked from town to town.
- She might have eaten the bread and fish, which he multiplied to feed 5000 hungry people
- Quite possibly, she ate with the disciples at the 'last supper,' sharing in the cup of the new covenant.
- She almost certainly watched Jesus' trial and condemnation by the civil and religious authorities. She saw how his message of love and care for the oppressed threatened the status quo.

From all this, we can be sure that Mary was completely dedicated to Jesus, as a disciple and a close friend. She believed that Jesus spoke the truth because she saw the consistency between his words, his actions, and every aspect of his being. In faith terms, we can say Mary believed in Jesus as God's love and life in the world.

With this in mind, let's turn to the gospel reading for today. I want to focus on the moment when Mary recognizes Jesus as he calls her name. It is a profound **aha!** moment for her. The world shifts and in that

moment she turns away from her confusion and grief; she turns toward Jesus. She understands how everything hangs together in Jesus - Jesus is alive again!

As I was reflecting on Jesus calling Mary, I remembered a similar incident of my name being called, several years ago. Not completely earth-shattering, but significant for me.

My mother was dying. She had had dementia and had been declining for 10 years. She had lost the memory of her grandchildren and her children, and even failed to recognize her loving husband of 60 years. As she lay dying, I was beside her in the hospice room. I was saying what I thought were comforting words. "It's ok, Mom. God loves you. Your work is done here. You can go to God." Then I turned away. Suddenly, she called my name - Alison! I recognized her voice, her NY accent. It was *her* voice, just as I had remembered it from childhood, as it had echoed through our conversations over 50 years. I recognized *my mother* in that moment when she called my name. She was with me again! That was her last gift to me- she died the next day. But I have that gift - the moment of her presence when she called my name.

This is my touchstone for today's reading because I know what it's like to hear my name call and to recognize in a single moment the deep meaning of a relationship.

So, let's go back to the Gospel reading.

- She is the first one at the tomb on Easter morning, determined to anoint the body.
- When she discovers the tomb is open and empty, she alerts the disciples and then continues searching for his body in the garden after they leave.
- In her grief, and confusion, from the depth of her loss, she mistakes Jesus for the gardener.
- Then, Jesus calls, "Mary!" She turns, with her heart now open, and responds "Rabboni - teacher!"

What happens in this moment when she hears Jesus call her name? Let's imagine. Well, she recognizes Jesus' voice; she recognizes HIM; she knows that - impossibly - this is Jesus alive before her. Everything

suddenly makes sense when she recognizes his voice as he calls her name. In this moment, Mary connects what she knows of God's compassionate love with Jesus now risen. She realizes in wonder that he has triumphed over sin and death itself.

Her grief is turned to joy! Then, as Jesus directs her, she goes to proclaim the good news to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord." When Jesus calls her name, Mary connects the community of justice he preached *before* the crucifixion - with his *living, resurrected* presence.

So, with this drama firmly in mind, I'll make my last point. Let's consider: How do we connect Mary Magdalene's proclamation and commission with our lives today? What does "I have seen the Lord" mean for us? We're talking now about the resurrection!

Here's the way I think about it. As John's Gospel teaches us - through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are now fully the children of God. This means that our lives must reveal our identity as God's children. Our lives must proclaim God's love and justice, actively healing the suffering world. As Christ's resurrected body, **we** enact God's mercy for all people so that love will overcome the injustices and miseries of the world.

For me, participating with Christ in the redemption of the world *means* noticing the suffering of others and trying to respond faithfully. So, let's attempt one more thought experiment: where **is** the suffering around us? We can name the suffering in our world using terms from Jesus' time. Jesus is now our teacher, as Mary recognized him.

- First, Jesus welcomed the '**anawim**' - that means the poor, marginalized and outcasts. We can see our society's 'outcasts' everywhere we look in our communities of the East Bay. We see individuals and families who are homeless, people who work for poverty wages, without health care. We see people suffering from hunger or violence on our streets. These realities are even harsher for some racial, ethnic and demographic groups. So, how do **we** welcome the anawim? What actions can we take both to relieve their suffering and to eliminate their marginalization?
- Next, we might think of people caught in the criminal justice system as the **lepers** of our day. We know about over-policing and mass

incarceration, often motivated by racism. People caught in the criminal justice system are often ignored as social lepers. Can we work for a criminal justice system that is truly just, aimed at restoring people to full membership, not ostracizing them as 'lepers'?

- Then we can use the lens of neighbor as we look upon immigrants. At the southern border of our nation, and across our states and counties, immigrants are often targeted for imprisonment, deportation, or simply forced to live in the shadows. But these people are our neighbors, not strangers to us. Can the parable of the Good Samaritan inspire us for a humane immigration system that welcomes refugees and migrants as members of our community, as families who need a place to live and thrive?
- Finally, **demons**. We recognize everywhere people's emotional isolation and the alienation from family, friends, and relationships that used to support us through hard times. This isolation and turmoil represent the demons of our day. Can we do something, both individually and systemically, to cast out the demons of emotional anguish, depression and other mental illnesses?

How can we, like Mary, recognize the reign of God that Jesus taught and lived? What does this mean in our day?

Now let me close:

For Mary Magdalene and the others who met the risen Christ in those days, the community of God which Jesus inaugurated and lived did not end with his death. When Jesus calls Mary by name, all of it makes sense. **Jesus is alive** and the work of building the beloved community **continues - even to our day** as the very life we also share in Christ.

The resurrection, then, is God's assurance to us that our work in service of mercy and justice will make a difference. In the promise of the resurrection, Jesus honors and multiplies all the good we do now. So, let us live faithfully into the **promise of Christ alive**, just as Mary Magdalene showed us. Mary's commission is now our commission. We must be apostles to the world. May our lives of witness enable people to say, "I have seen the Lord."