



Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene by Correggio

I love the way John's Gospel gives pride of place to people who live on the edges of society. The first person to recognize Jesus as the Son of God following the Crucifixion was the Centurion, this foreigner who, at the foot of the Cross who says, "Surely, this man was the Son of God." And isn't it intriguing how Mary Magdalene is the star witness for the Resurrection of Jesus? In the wonderful film our parish went to see last week, Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ*, it was pointed out that women in general were not considered by the Jewish society of Jesus's day to be reliable witnesses for important legal matters. Yet, it was this woman-with-a-past, Mary Magdalene who God used to be the prime eye-witness to this pinnacle moment in the history of our universe.

Luke recounts that Jesus had exorcised Mary Magdalene of 7 demons (see Lk.8:2). An ancient Church tradition holds that Mary Magdalene had been a prostitute. Yet early-on during His earthly ministry, this wayward woman became a disciple of Christ.

Can you imagine her anguish at the events of these days? Mary Magdalene had found this group of strangely loving people who had gathered around this wonderful, beautiful man. A group of every possible kind of person – fishermen, and tax collectors, and doctors, and revolutionaries – and they had all attached themselves to Jesus. And they had opened their arms to Mary Magdalene too. Despite her past, despite her personal history of anguish, and debasement, Mary Magdalene had been embraced by this wonderful man, accepted as a full and welcome member of His loving family.

She had finally found her place in the world, had Mary Magdalene, a real family to which she could truly belong. And then... and then, in the course of a single 24-hour period, she had seen all this amazing acceptance come crashing down around her head. This wonderful man whom Mary Magdalene knew loved her despite everything; this wonderful man had been betrayed, and arrested, and sentenced, and condemned, and nailed to a cross where he had bled out his lovely life.

And this beautiful, loving family had scattered to the four winds, some running naked into the night, others cursing and denying the very one who had come to save them and gather them to Him. Mary Magdalene had lost everything that meant anything to her in just 24 hours. Why, it almost sounds like something they could make a hit TV series about! Can you put yourself in her shoes? Can you, just for a moment, can you try to imagine Mary Magdalene's desperate anguish? What gave her the strength of body, mind, and soul to gather together what was left of her broken self and go to the tomb on Easter morning? Why, this almost sounds like Garrison Keeler's advertisement on *A Prairie Home Companion* for Powder-Milk Biscuits that "give a shy person the strength to get up and do what's got to be done!" ☺

So, truly, what must it have been that led Mary Magdalene to the tomb where her lovely Lord had been shrouded and laid out after his horrible death? How her heart must have wrenched within her! And yet, that Easter Sunday morning, she got up even in her anguish, her eyes sore with weeping. Maybe she was one of those two women who went out to the market place and spent money they probably didn't have to buy some costly spices and balms in order to bathe the body of Jesus one final time. What gave this wretched woman the strength to do something like that?

Part of this kind of strength of witness, I am convinced, comes from a place of utter desperation. It is in our moments of complete loss that God moves so wondrously in his people. When we have come to the very end of our earthly resources, **that** is God's time to act.

When our souls have really emptied themselves of all deception of earthly remedy, it is then that the Creator God fills his people with the clear understanding of his grace and the measure of his saving power. Because the greatest witnesses for the Gospel have always been the ones who do live at the edges of our community. These are the people who have already walked through the valley of the shadow of death; people who know you don't have to wait for the next life to be in Hell.

These are the lost, the hopeless, the destitute, the betrayed, the abandoned, the orphaned, the addicted, the imprisoned, the homeless, the violent, the impoverished, the emigrant, the refugee, and all those who the "quality folk" would really rather not keep company with. And it is when God moves among these lost sheep of his and fills them with the redeeming joy of his wondrous love, these are always the ones who move mountains with their faith. Because they know, in the very bedrock of their souls they **know** that their help is and will only ever be in the name of the Lord.

Another reason these who live on the edges of our community are often the greatest witnesses for God's grace is very simple. Because for you and me of privilege, the full and sincere witness for the Gospel is so very difficult. And that leads me to talk about gardens for a moment.

I find it rather whimsical and decidedly wonderful that so much of the Salvation account happens in a garden. Jesus struggled in a garden on Maundy Thursday night. – And, this morning, when the Resurrected Jesus meets Mary Magdalene, this garden encounter is really the antidote for the poison consumed in another garden so long ago, where there resided a certain man, and a certain woman, and a certain snake. I'm convinced that the real poison on that awful day which led to the fall of man, the real venom in Satan's tooth was pride. It was the arrogance of believing he was somehow entitled to a share of "God-ness" that led to Adam's doom. And you and I are no different. Deep down, we all share Adam's bane; at some point in our days we all come to harbor the secret belief that we are somehow the fairest of them all, and we are entitled to special love.

So, it falls to those among us who are so emptied of any sense of entitlement; it must be those people who know they come to God without anything worthy to offer who are struck like thunder with wondrous gratitude for the amazing thing that God, and God alone has done in their lives.

You see, we cannot reach out to walk with God in the cool of our evening until we first make sure our hands are completely freed from any of the clutter of self-entitlement this world tries so hard to convince us is our due. No, we must reach out with uncluttered arms and empty hands to truly grasp and hold tight to God's goodness.

And, did you notice the clarity of this woman's vision there at the tomb? It only took a single word; all that was needed was for Jesus to whisper her name "Mary," and she knew, **she knew** it was her Lord. I wonder: How often in my life has God placed me in the position to be Jesus to someone? And on those occasions, how often have I withheld even a single word of encouragement, comfort, or loving concern that would have directed that lost soul to the love of God? When we encounter the lost in the gardens of our own lives, do we call to them? Or do we withhold even a single word which might unlock for them the door of their torment, and lead them to the light of God? Yes, Easter is a morning of victory. But Easter is also a time to contemplate our own brokenness, and make amends to walk more faithfully and humbly with our God.

What was it that gave Mary Magdalene the conviction and strength to go to the tomb? Well, it must have been something strong, stronger even than death to lead her to that awful place of death. It must have been something that is not proud, to go to that place and be heckled by the guards and skeptics, knowing how humiliating this was likely to be. It must have been something born of great patience, that gave her the strength to go to that dreadful place and just wait, if need be, wait for The Lord to act. It must have been something that was founded on a bedrock of absolute and unshifting truth that made her go to that tomb on Easter morning. It must have been something that always protects, that always hopes, that always perseveres. Why, you know, the thing that enabled her to go to that place of awful death and defeat, and face up to the situation at hand, hopeless though it seemed, why the thing that led her, and which leads all of us to that place on Easter Morning... why it must have been love.

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