



Auckland Community Church

Easter 2007

Given by Liz Nicholson on the 22nd July 2007

Readings : Song of Songs 3:1-4 2, Corinthians 5:14-17, John 20:1-2 11-18

At the beginning of the service this evening, I alluded to the fact that I had my Mary's somewhat mixed up - shocking thing to admit, being steeped in the church for all of my life!!! But there you are, I DID have them mixed up and will certainly apologise from the bottom of my heart when I meet the esteemed Mary of Magdala one day!!

Some of you, like Peter Lineham, will know quite a bit about Mary of Magdala (but its Peters job to know about her, so he doesnt really count, does he?). Let me tell you, she is fascinating, and the issues that her personality raises are totally relevant to us here, today! Her hometown is Magadan, or Magdala, on the West shore of the Sea of Galilee.

How did she encounter Jesus?

Did she, like Celine Dion sang during our meditation, feel that all the fight had gone out of her wounded heart? Did she feel that all the tears she cried would not bring her sense of wholeness back? Did she hear about this man who dealt with love beyond repair?

Luke 8, tells us in just a few verses:

After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: (Mary - called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna - the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Their own means - hmm - I wonder how they created their own means?? Joanna, the wife of Chuza might well have had a substantial household staff and it would have been easy for her to arrange meals for the disciples - picnics and so forth!! But Mary - what was her means of income?? Pope Gregory I, in a sermon in 591, came to the conclusion that this Mary of Magdala, and Mary, the prostitute who washed Jesus's feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, were one and the same, which would have clarified how she made her money.... But all the Protestant churches have stayed away from that identification. Remember that there were at least two other Mary's - one being Jesus's mother, and the other the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

But back to our Mary Magdala was a fishing village, and perhaps, through her family, she owned boats, or perhaps she was the wholesale agent at the fish market!! Its not clear, so we can only guess how she had her own means of support.

The point is, on one fine day, she and Jesus came face to face. She looked into his eyes and was changed forever!!! We are told that she was released from seven demons. How are we to understand what that means?? In Elaine Wainwright's book *Women Healing/Healing Women* (thanks Mark.....) she explains very clearly using many Greek words (thats why it was all greek to me.....) that seven was the optimum number, and that whatever Mary's issues were, they were extreme!! There is alternative theological thought that this was not the case, and that Mary Magdalene was first named among groups of women and a leader even among the male disciples. However, Elaine Wainwright goes on to explain what the cultural label of being demon possessed means and says that it was unexplained behaviour and was attributed to outside power, namely an evil spirit.

We do know that it must have been really difficult being a woman of independent means in that time, and any woman in that position would have encountered opposition from many sources.

To say the very least, Mary, when she met Jesus must have needed a new dynamic in her life and she surely found that new dynamic in Jesus. She found the unique. In fact, had it been Jesus birthday, Mary might well have sent him the same birthday card that Desmond Tutu's wife Leah gave him one birthday - on the cover was a content-looking man and woman and the words we have a beautiful and unique relationship - inside the card it said - I am beautiful and you are certainly unique!!

The encounter with Jesus was so unique that it turned Mary's life upside down, or should I say downside up!! Joan Chittister, who preached here at St Matthews two Sundays ago, said in her book Friendship of Women that Mary understood who Jesus was long before others did, and devoted her life to supporting him in his wild, free-ranging, revolutionary approach to life, along with a few other women. Mary never left Jesus side for the rest of his life.... She was there through the best of times with Jesus and certainly through the worst of times!!! She witnessed miracles, no doubt, and also how deeply deeply exhausted Jesus was at the end of the day. She was there when he was cheered by crowds and then when he was arrested and through the trauma of the trial and subsequent crucifixion.

Can you imagine for a minute what that must have been like for her (and others of course....)? The person whom you trusted most, the one you loved most, the one who gave you reason for waking up in the morning, being stretched out on a wooden post to die??? Her friendship with Jesus gave her something very unique indeed - the revelation of His divinity on Easter morning was to Mary Magdalene first of all!!! I am sure now that this was part of the plan, part of Jesus consolation for her unconditional support and love, that she would be the bearer of His resurrection and glory to the other disciples. This, also, throughout history, would elevate women to an equal status with men without any dispute whatsoever.

There's another quote from Desmond Tutu that I cant resist using at this point: Theologically, biblically, socially, ecumenically, it is right to ordain women to the priesthood. The most radical act that can happen to any human being is to become a member of the body of Christ. If gender cannot be a bar to baptism, which makes us all representatives of Christ and partakers of the only priesthood there is - his royal priesthood, then gender cannot be a bar to ordination.

So how does all this apply to us here this evening?? The quality of the friendship Mary extended to Jesus was totally unconditional, she knew everything about Jesus, stuck by Him through thick and thin and did not flinch from walking into the tough stuff. The intimacy of the friendship she gave said, I know it all, I know all about the depression, the hardship, the exhaustion at the end of the day, the uncertainty of the future, the feeling of rejection, the pain, etc and yet she stayed. She offers a model of friendship that exhibits respect, warmth, hospitality, value of personhood and deep integrity.

I ask each one of you to look into the face of Jesus and see how He can change you, or continue to change you. I ask you to consider Mary's model of friendship for this community and the world we live in. And let's remember which Mary this special person was!!!