22 July 2018: Choral Eucharist
Mary Magdalene

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

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Jesus said to her, ‘Mary’. She turned and said to him, ‘Rabbouni!’

What’s in a word? Well, in today’s Gospel, everything! Mary Magdalene stands distraught and confused in the garden by the tomb. She has seen the empty tomb, with its great stone rolled away, encountered the two angels robed in white, but her heart is filled with grief; and the loss of her Messiah has been compounded by the loss of even his body, as she says over and over, “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him” (Jn. 20: 2, 13; cf. 20: 15).

In her weeping she does not recognise Jesus’ face, nor his voice, until he says one simple word, ‘Mary!’ And in that moment of being known and recognised, she knows and recognises too and cries out, ‘Rabbouni!’, which means not just teacher but my teacher. He is hers and she is his. As Jesus himself had said earlier in the Gospel, he is the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10: 11), he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out (Jn. 10: 3).

Names are so important. We all probably know what a difference it can make when someone calls you by name, particularly unexpectedly; when we feel that we belong because we are known. And conversely just how hard it can be when someone gets our name wrong or continually calls us something that’s not quite right.

Malcolm Guite catches the moment of Mary in the garden quite beautifully in his poem, Easter Dawn:

“He blesses every love that weeps and grieves
And now he blesses hers who stood and wept
And would not be consoled, or leave her love’s
Last touching place, but watched as low light crept
Up from the east. A sound behind her stirs
A scatter of bright birdsong through the air.
She turns, but cannot focus through the tears,
Or recognize the Gardener standing there.
She hardly hears his gentle question, ‘Why,
Why are you weeping?’, or sees the play of light
That brightens as she chokes out her reply,
‘They took my love away, my day is night.’
And then she hears her name, she hears Love say
The Word that turns her night, and ours, to Day.” (Sounding the Seasons, Canterbury Press, 2012, p.44)

A word that “turns night to Day”, not just a moment of recognition, but something much deeper – a giving, a confirming, of identity, of relationship.

Sadly, the Western Church has done Mary Magdalene few favours over the years. Seeking to cut down the number of players in the Gospel stories, she has been all-too-readily conflated with the nameless prostitute who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears in Luke 7 and with Mary of Bethany from the earlier chapters of John’s Gospel who anointed Jesus’ feet before his Passion. In fact, the Scriptures make no such suggestion, rather Mary is marked out clearly by all four evangelists as the Mary from the little town of Magdala, near Capernaum; the Mary whom Luke 8 tells us had seven demons cast out from her and from that moment followed Jesus, supporting him and his ministry with her money and resources.

Mary the archetypal fallen woman, the seductress of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical or Dan Brown’s fantastical novel, owes far more to Pope Gregory’s understanding of these demons as representing all the seven deadly sins, and most especially lust, along with certain misogynistic stereotypes, than anything we can find in our Bibles. Truth be told, it wasn’t even the first time Mary had been re-cast to suit the needs of church leaders as some second century writers had presented her instead as a mystical guru and ecclesiastical opponent of Peter, with just as little sense of historical fact.

In Scripture we are given a much clearer sense of a woman healed, a woman who finds her identity restored by a prophet from Nazareth, as the casting out of those demons, whatever they may have been, gives her back her life. But whereas others healed in such a
way went back to their homes and lives, Mary stayed with Jesus. In making her Mary again, he became her Rabbi, her Teacher. She travelled with him throughout his missionary journeys, financing them from her own wealth like Joanna, Susanna and the others; and like many of the passed over patronesses of the early church, such as Chloe, stayed faithful when others faded away. Mary was there at the Cross, she watched Jesus’ body be taken by Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb and she went early in the morning to anoint him and, as we heard today, had the first encounter with the risen Christ, becoming Apostle to the Apostles – a key idea symbolized in many an Eastern Orthodox icon by her holding a red Easter egg.

It is one of the great ironies that a disciple given back her name, given back her identity by Christ, not once but twice – first in her healing from the demons and second in her raising from despair to joy by the simple speaking of her name – has had that name twisted and taken from her by the Church, even as it has sought to honour her.

It is a danger, not just in our historic projections into the gaps in the Biblical story, as generations have sought to fill in the detail of what we do not know with guesses and speculation, well-meant perhaps but ultimately distorting and dangerous. It is a real and present danger for us too today as we group people together in our social commentary, in our politics, even in our prayers – the poor, the unemployed, the refugee and the asylum seeker.

Love needs a name. Love needs a story that honours the uniqueness of the person, that recognises the fullness of all they are and all God is calling them to be. Christ does not call us as just ‘disciples’, nor even as ‘people of Oxford’ or ‘worshippers in Christ Church’, he says, ‘Martin’, ‘Janet’, ‘Emma’, ‘Glynis’, ‘Laura’, ‘Rosemary’.

We may never have been so far from ourselves that we have needed seven demons casting from us. But we still need to be, long to be, known by name and that is how our Good Shepherd calls us. And if he calls us that, then we must follow his example and learn each other’s true names, each other’s heartfelt stories, with all their light and their shadow.

One of the great privileges of being a priest is walking alongside God’s people, being let into the joys and sorrows of someone’s life in a way few strangers are; but this is a calling not just for priests but for all Christians – to learn one another’s names and guard one another’s stories.
It’s not quite the Christ Church way but I’d like to encourage all of us to take a risk today after the service: to turn to the person next to us and introduce ourselves; to find out one another’s names and perhaps our stories.

So as we celebrate Mary of Magdala today, let us not call to mind a mythical archetype of a fallen woman, nor project onto her ideas of a different age. Let us know her by her name, Mary, and let us seek to know one another just the same.

“And then she hears her name, she hears Love say

The Word that turns her night, and ours, to Day.”