

Sermon for the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene – John 20:1-2, 10-18

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Persons who lived in the company of Jesus are given special honor in the church. Mary Magdalene was one such person. And today, July 22nd, the church has historically celebrated this Mary. Besides the 4 feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene is only other woman honored with a festival in our hymnal's calendar. But just who was this woman? First, what can be speculated about this Mary Magdalene? Second, what do we know that has been said of her that is false? Third, what do we know that is the truth about Mary Magdalene?

First, what can be speculated about Mary Magdalene? St. Augustine and Gregory the Great identified her as the sinner who anointed our Lord's feet. Recall this story Luke's Gospel, the 7th chapter: "One of the Pharisees asked [Jesus] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.' And Jesus answering said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' And he answered, 'Say it, Teacher.' 'A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.' And he said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.' And he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this, who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'"

Western Christians have generally followed the belief of Sts. Augustine and Gregory in identifying this sinful woman as Mary Magdalene. And while it can't be proven beyond a doubt, a compelling case could be made. Reason # 1: The town of Magdala, a city on the southwest coast of the Sea of Galilee, presumably from where Mary hailed, had a notorious reputation for rampant prostitution. Early Jewish writings attest to this information. Reason # 2: St. Luke's account of the sinful woman completes chapter 7 of his Gospel. Immediately following this story, Chapter 8 begins with the account of the women who accompanied our Lord. Named first among them was Mary Magdalene. Finally, and perhaps the most compelling argument for this sinful woman being identified as Mary Magdalene is John's account of the resurrection: Jesus appeared to her first. The Lord's Resurrection, along with the forgiveness of sins earned by Him, was first and foremost for sinners! Much like Jesus' resurrection account in Mark's Gospel when the angel tells the women to tell the disciples and Peter especially since he had just denied the Lord 3 times and needed to hear the resurrection for the forgiveness of sins, so also Mary Magdalene, being the sinful woman of Luke 7 or not, needed to hear of this resurrection and forgiveness for her sins. Mary was a real sinner. Whether her sins were adultery, cheating, lying, gossiping, or secret guilt and shame she held, her

sins were real. So too our sins are real. We don't confess our general sinfulness, but the recognizable and concrete breaking of the Ten Commandments that each of us does. So we all must repent as she did. Mary's tears flowed outside the tomb for her Savior and Forgiver whom she thought was no more. But alas! He is not dead, but alive! Now tears of joy may flow forth for the Lord who has conquered sin, the death, and the devil. Jesus lives and the forgiveness of sins that Mary Magdalene knew, you now know as well.

But what of this Mary Magdalene has been said of her that is false? In author Dan Brown's historical fiction novel *The Da Vinci Code*, which also became a major motion picture in 2006, Brown adds a bit of information to the story of Mary Magdalene – an unbiblical bit of information, as you'll see. [Quoted from his novel, pg. 244:] "The early Church needed to convince the world that the mortal prophet Jesus was a divine being. Therefore, any gospels that described earthly aspects of Jesus' life had to be omitted from the Bible. Unfortunately for the early editors, one particularly troubling earthly theme kept recurring in the gospels. Mary Magdalene ... More specifically, her marriage to Jesus Christ ... It's a matter of historical record." [End quote] Besides author Dan Brown's claim that Jesus' Divinity was an invention of 4th century Christians, he attempts to make the case that Jesus was wed to Mary Magdalene. But the sober fact is, Jesus never wed anyone. There simply is no historical record to substantiate this supposed union. Even if there were a spark of evidence from antiquity that Jesus may have gotten married, we would have to weigh this evidence against the overwhelming evidence in the Scriptures and early church fathers to the contrary. One might expect to find the "historical record" to which Brown alludes in the fabricated and bizarre second-century apocryphal gospels, but even in these, there is simply no reference that Jesus ever got married.

Another fable strewn by Dan Brown in his novel was that Mary Magdalene, pregnant with Jesus' child, fled to France, where she gave birth to a girl named Sarah, who became the ancestress of the French Merovingian dynasty. This tale is not new, however, but first surfaced 800 years after Christ's death: hardly an early, original, or even a reliable source. In sum, if there were any evidence of a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, we could weigh this evidence with the other accurate sources. But the reality: there simply is no historical references or records.

We've seen what is speculated of Mary Magdalene and what has been fabricated about her. But now what is the truth about Mary Magdalene? Where do we find this truth? The inspired Word of God tells us what we can be certain about Mary Magdalene. As already mentioned, her name appears in St. Luke's Gospel, chapter 8. "Soon afterward [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." Mary Magdalene was among the women who provided for the Lord and His disciples through their journeys. She is also referenced as having been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: 7 demons, to be precise, were cast out of Mary by Christ. St. Mark, in his Gospel verifies this fact in his account of our Lord's resurrection: "Now when [Jesus] rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary, from whom he had cast out seven demons." The quantity of seven demons being cast out from her revealed that this was quite a bit more than the ordinary possession.

What else do the Scriptures tell us of Mary Magdalene? She was the follower of Jesus who was present more than any other through the entire events of the Lord's death and resurrection. She

tarried with that faithful handful of disciples at the crucifixion: "... [S]tanding by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." She was the first there on the morning of the Lord's resurrection: "Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb." She told Peter and John this news. They saw the empty tomb. "Then the disciples went back to their homes." But not Mary Magdalene. She stayed by the empty tomb. When the disciples withdrew, she would not. The fire of God's love was kindled and burned within her. Her love and devotion to the Lord was unmatched even among the chiefs of the apostles!

Tears filled her eyes. She looked into the tomb and saw the angels who asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She had to find His body: "They have taken my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Then the stranger said to her: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She had to find His body. Thinking him to be the gardener she asked: "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." This is, indeed, the Divine Gardener standing in front of her, the same one who planted the Garden of Eden in the beginning. But in this new garden, whose center is the empty tomb, Paradise is more than completely restored. The angels no longer close the entrance. Here, the cross is the Tree of Life, which has borne fruit after only 3 days. This fruit which the woman is eager to seize and eat, belongs to her by grace, for this woman is not Eve, but Mary Magdalene. So by the mercy of our God, all who eat the fruit of the Tree of Life are raised to a greater dignity than was ever known even before man's fall into sin.

The Lord whom Mary sought appeared to her. Through tears, she saw the Lord. He told her, "...[G]o to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.'" For this reason the ancient church gave her the Latin title *apostola apostolorum*, "the apostles to the apostles," or "the sent one to the sent ones."

Then there's a peculiar command our Lord gives to Mary Magdalene after she recognizes Him. Christ said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father." "Do not cling to me." Very likely, the first thing any of us would have done when we saw the Savior with whom we had walked on this earth, who died and now was risen—the very first thing we would have done would be to embrace Him. But Jesus said no, "Do not cling to me." Why would this be? Mary Magdalene would receive Christ in a far more intimate way: in eating His Body and drinking His Blood in Holy Communion for the forgiveness of sins, with all the other followers of the Lord. This is the Jesus to whom we cling. The Jesus we know is the one who comes in the Sacrament of the Altar for the forgiveness of our sins.

Persons such as Mary Magdalene and the disciples, who lived in the company of Jesus, are given special honor in the church. They are the saints. And today in the Divine Service, you are certainly no less. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠