



**Reflection for July 22, 2020**  
**The Feast of St. Mary Magdalene**

**Propers: Judith 9:1, 11-14; Psalm 42:1-7;**  
**2 Corinthians 5:14-18; John 20:11-18**

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

[2 Corinthians 5:17]

*Mary turned and said to him "Rabbouni!" which means "Teacher." . . . Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me."*

[John 20:16-17]

*A student asked his spiritual teacher, "What is love?"  
The teacher answered, "The total absence of fear."  
"What do we fear," asked the student.  
"Love," said the teacher.<sup>1</sup>*

This fable by Anthony DeMello captures what Mary Magdalene has taught me. She was a woman who replaced fear with love. She allowed herself to become *a new creation*. She was the first witness to the resurrection, and on her word alone, the world changed. Her teacher called to her, and she was willing to listen and to let go of him.

The different stories about "Mary" in the gospels have been combined since the Middle Ages into a single story of a repentant prostitute who became a faithful, submissive, follower of Jesus. But there are only two references to Mary Magdalene in the gospels: In Luke (8:1-3) she is one of the women travelling with Jesus, "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out." This characterization signifies that she had been a woman without hope, an outcast, defiled. And while each of the four gospels gives a different account of the resurrection, all of them name her as the first witness to the resurrection. (For a cogent review and analysis of the ancient and modern development of stories about Mary Magdalene I recommend Bart D. Ehrman's book, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, Oxford 2006).

According to the Gospel of John, which we read on her feast day, the Easter story is a love story. It is a story about God's love for us: a life-giving love that both challenges and comforts us; a love that calls to us and sends us away; a love that is patient with our fear, our sorrow, our blindness, our stubborn willfulness; a love that transforms us, if we will allow it.

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<sup>1</sup> This fable is found in Anthony de Mello, S.J., *One Minute Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 203.

And it is the story of Mary Magdalene's love for Jesus--a passionate, faithful, single-minded love that frees her from abject silence and compels her to speak, to listen – and to let go.

It is also the story of Jesus' love for Mary: A love that compels him to wait for her--physically, until she returns in the dawn; compassionately, while she weeps; and patiently, until she recognizes him.

The wonder of the resurrection, according to John, is shown to us in the transformation of Mary Magdalene from being someone consumed by her own love into being someone who knows, without question, that she is loved; from someone who faces down her fear by courageously seeking Jesus' tomb, and then transforms that fear into love when she encounters Jesus. When she faces the empty tomb, Mary sees only the emptiness and meaninglessness of her life. Surely she remembers the darkness of the days before Jesus healed her, and surely she is tempted to reclaim it as a place to hide, as a place perhaps more real than the place of hope and light to which Jesus had led her. Yet, in the light of that early morning, she *turns* and listens to Jesus--Her Teacher. She is free to speak, and she is free to let him go.

Mary Magdalene has often been identified as a model for women who are leaving behind a criminal history of prostitution and the abuses that are associated with it. But she speaks more widely to all of us who have faced a darkness that we know we must put behind us, who have sought to transform our fear into love. In this beautiful moment in the Gospel of John we see paradigm for a life of faith: *to turn, to look, to listen, let go.*

*God, set me on the path again.  
Turn me to the rising sun  
when I need to be inspired.  
Turn me to wilderness  
when I need to be lost.  
Turn me toward the business of the world  
when I need to work.  
Turn me toward the mountain  
when I need to be refreshed.  
Then turn me toward the sunset  
when I need rest. Amen*

- "A Prayer for the Journey,"  
by Becca Stevens, *Hither and Yon*, p. 33