

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

October 4, 2026

The Call of Mary Magdalene

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Mary Magdalene**
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Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, quiet the voices that compete for our attention. Speak to us through your Word, that we may hear the good news anew:

Christ is alive and with us, calling us still today. Amen.

Scripture: John 20:11-18

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, 12 and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13 They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Who was Mary Magdalene?

Don’t worry, you didn’t accidentally time-travel and drop into an Easter Sunday service.

You likely recognize this text. John’s telling of the resurrection is perhaps most popular to preach on Easter Sunday. At least in terms of the lectionary, it comes up the most often. But surprisingly, it’s more subtle than the others. No earthquake. No Roman guards fainting. No cliffhanger over whether word will spread. Not even any, “Do not fear,” from the angels. Just a woman weeping at an empty tomb. Unable, it seems, to even register the heavenly creatures in front of her or the appearance of the risen Lord.

That woman is in every Gospel account of that first Easter.

Mary Magdalene, every writer agrees, was at that empty tomb. She was the first to hear the good news of Christ’s resurrection. She was the first to proclaim it.

From early on, fathers and mothers of the church called her, “Apostle to the Apostles.”

But like a 2000-year game of telephone, much of what we know about Mary has been distorted, confused, and has echoed our cultural assumptions more than what’s actually in Scripture.

Who was this woman Jesus entrusted with the gospel message?
Let’s dispel the rumors.

She was not a prostitute. There's no word of that in Scripture, no hint of it reading between the lines. Jesus likely would have called her, anyway, but that's simply not who she was. Mary appears in every Gospel, and we get glimpses of her story in each. She was healed by Jesus of seven demons. I have follow-up questions, but Mark is not one to give extended details.

She helped fund Jesus' ministry, according to Luke, meaning she had some kind of financial independence.

In every Gospel, she remains with Jesus as he is tortured and executed on the cross.

In every Gospel, she returns as soon as the Sabbath ends to Jesus' body.

There is a theory that Magdalene, rather than referring to her hometown (Magdala), referred to her character. Magdalene means Tower. Like Peter is given the name, "Rock," by Jesus, perhaps Mary was the Tower. She stood strong, steadfast, faithful. She was a pillar of the early Church, a beacon of the gospel message.

To dispel another rumor, she was not all these things because Jesus was her boyfriend, or husband, or romantic interest. Sorry, Dan Brown—though it makes for fun fiction.

I had a Religious Studies professor in college bring in a copy of The DaVinci Code. Now, I loved the book, and I was preparing myself to feel very stupid as my professor would undoubtedly tear it apart for all its historical inaccuracies and flights of fancy. But instead, Dr. Denova, slammed the book on the table, paced a few times behind the desk, looked up and said, "I am furious I didn't come up with this myself."

It's a good story to imagine a conspiratorial cover up of Jesus' wife, who he considered second-in-command to this movement that became the Church.

But that's not who Mary was.

Though not a conspiratorial cover up, she is still too often ignored as a disciple of Jesus Christ. As arguably, his most faithful disciple, chosen to proclaim the resurrection—the most important message of our faith—to the Apostles themselves.

At a time when a woman's word wouldn't have held up in court, let alone the court of public opinion—a time that we might too easily understand still today—Jesus called Mary Magdalene to be the first witness and preacher of the gospel. Jesus called her to the vocation of an apostle and evangelist, to share the good news, “I have seen the Lord.”

Friendship Community Church

I had the opportunity to worship from a pew last week. It was a real gift to be with Friendship Community Church as they celebrated their 70th anniversary.

Friendship Community Church is in West Oakland. Their history is inspiring. In the late-30's to early-50's, Pittsburgh's housing authority experimented with intentional integration in the public housing project of Terrace Village. They created a checkboard of homes. Quite literally there would be a square of black residents, square of white residents, on repeat throughout the new development.

The Pittsburgh Presbytery took notice. There was a Slovakian Presbyterian Church located in the area with very few members left. The Presbytery came to the Slovakian Church to work out their closure. They said a new congregation would be placed in the neighborhood and that they were welcome to

stay, but it would be an intentionally racially and ethnically diverse community. Half—that's to say about five—left. One left in such a huff that he took the electric organ on his way out. The other half stayed and became devoted members to what would become Friendship Community Church.

In 1957, seventy years ago, a pastor with a passion for urban ministry and racial reconciliation was called and began gathering people in homes. Black folks in the homes of white folks, white folks in the homes of Black folks, to pray, study the Bible, eat together, have their children play together, and share about their lives. This was three years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was six years before Dr. King would declare that he had a dream that “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” It was just two years after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus and the Montgomery Bus Boycott propelled the Civil Rights Movement into the mainstream.

Friendship grew and the people hoped to build a sanctuary to place as a second floor of the building given to them by the Presbytery. Westminster Presbyterian Church, only a decade old itself, responded with openhanded generosity to that dream. Our congregation in the late 1950's gave over \$10,000 for the construction of a sanctuary where black and white Christians would worship together.

After the service, I quickly looked up an inflation calculator and was shocked. Our congregation gave the equivalent in today's dollars of well over \$100,000 for this ministry to exist in Oakland. That same sanctuary is where I sat on Sunday, among a diverse body of believers, hearing the gospel message anew.

Friends, I see the Lord in that story.

In the darkness of segregation and racial discrimination, Christ was alive.

In the grief of a closing church, Christ was alive.
In the uncertainty of an economically depressed area, Christ was alive.

And I can tell you definitively, in that body's worship, Christ is alive today.

Witnessing to the Darkness

I need to back us up in John's Gospel a bit, to a part we did not read this morning. When Mary left to go to the tomb, John tells us it was still dark.

Go back a little further, and we find John begins his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Go back further, and we find in Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...darkness was over the surface of the deep...God said let there be light."

This is intentional writing from our Gospel storyteller. New life comes from darkness. Seeds sprout under the earth. Babies are formed in the womb. It is always darkest before the dawn.

Mary walks in the darkness of pre-dawn, just as she walks in the darkness of her grief, her fear, and her trauma. Mary had been in darkness for three days since she stood steadfast at the cross, watched Jesus take his last breath, and witness him carried to the tomb. Mary remained in darkness as the sun rose because the body of her Lord was gone. Humiliation upon humiliation for this man who had shown her the depth of God's love. It was too much to bear.

She ran to get Peter and John, and they raced into the tomb, confirming what she already knew—Jesus was not there. They quickly returned home. But she stayed, where else was she to go when the world had lost all its light and color?

It is in this state that two angels appear one where Jesus' head should have been, one at his feet. Unlike any angel encounter in just about all of Scripture, they don't tell her to not be afraid. It isn't fear she's hanging onto. They ask her, "Why are you weeping?"

A gardener, it seems, soon appears next to the tomb. He asks here, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Maybe Jesus is asking us the same. Not in a patronizing, eyerolling tone—like you just don't get it, do you, Jesus is risen, get over it. No, not like that. Sincerely, gently, God-with-us asks, "Why are you weeping?"

Why are we weeping?

Because there is darkness still. Because we are stumbling, unable to see clearly in the pre-dawn of our newsfeeds, our social media scrolling, even our reading of the physical daily newspaper. There is darkness still.

There is still a young woman from Cornell crying out for justice. Many more women joining to call for greater cultural change.

There are still over 60,000 people held in immigration detention¹...70% of those folks have no criminal conviction and 95% of those have no violent criminal conviction.²

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-administration-has-detained-400000-immigrants-what-do-we-know-about-their-children/>

² <https://www.cato.org/blog/5-ice-detainees-have-violent-convictions-73-no-convictions>

There are still over 10 million children living below the poverty line.

There are still landlords and employers legally discriminating against LGBTQ people in our state.

Gun violence is still the leading cause of death for children and teens in this country.

There are still people who believe there is little hope for their lives, who feel no one cares about them, who are lonely or listless or without purpose and anchoring in something bigger than themselves.

You can fill in what breaks your heart. Why do you weep? Because of course, we weep. Of course, Mary wept. Where is Jesus?

“Mary,” Jesus says.

And through her tears, she sees clearly. He’s there. Alive.

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Can we see clearly? Are we sticking around long enough in places of darkness, grief, uncertainty, death to see Jesus there?

As has been spoken by preachers before, “Tears are the lens through which we see Christ clearly.”

Church.

Do we see the Lord, and do we hear him calling us by name? Telling us not to cling to him, not to keep him here within our walls, for our benefit. Telling us to go, to share the good news.

Sharing the Good News

There’s a church in Charleston, South Carolina who have a simple tagline, “Share Good News; Be Good News.” Shout out to Parkside Church. Share good news; be good news.

We have good news to share. We have good news to be in our community, in our city, in our country, and in our world. As Westminster Presbyterian Church, called by the living Christ, that is our vocation. Share good news and be good news.

We did cool stuff in the past, and that's to be honored and celebrated, but not clung to. Because God's calling us now. Do you see the Lord? Do you hear him calling?

Our extravagant generosity is not behind us.
Our social activism for the sake of justice and peace for all people, that's not behind us.

Our bold proclamation of Christ as Lord and Savior is not behind us.

Our courage to take a moral stand is not behind us.
Our commitment to upholding the dignity of those with whom we disagree is not behind us.

Mary might tell us, though, to be ready when we follow Christ's call:

There are people who will misunderstand who we are. There are people who will not believe the hope we profess. There are people who will respond apathetically or with snark or in opposition.

In our time, we might be named partisan for seeking justice; we might be named heretical for who we include; we might be named exclusionary for proclaiming Christ...but Jesus calls us by our true name.

We are his Church.

Called to walk in places of darkness. Called to weep for the brokenness of this world. Called to share that even so, Jesus is

alive. Our vocation is to share that good news and to be that good news to our neighbors.

And who knows? 70 years from now somewhere in our city or somewhere in the world people might gather and name the ways that this community was good news to them, how this community was part of how they “saw the Lord,” how our church shared the good news and was the good news of Christ to them.

Friends, may it be so. Amen.



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