



CHRISTIAN
WOMEN
CONNECTION



THE WOMEN AT THE END

A LENTEN JOURNEY
By Rev. Dr. Kimberly Majeski

THE MAGDALENE.

Demons. That's what they say were cast from her, seven to be exact (Luke 8.13). Seven, the biblical number for perfection, demon the moniker for any and all unexplainable ills in the ancient world; she was one perfect mess.

She is misremembered and maligned, her story repressed and all but stolen from us, except she's still here. Mary Magdalene is the patron saint of everyone who has nothing left to lose, for those who have come to the end of the rope, the icon for those who have lost all hope. She holds high the lamp for women forgotten and left by the side of the road, her life shines the way to the empty tomb.

She's remembered as the Magdalene possibly because that's the town she hails from in the Galilee. In Hebrew, it's Migdol, a fishing village near Tiberias known for the towers *migdolim* from which they hung, dried and salted fish. We are unsure if she is known as Magdalene because of her hometown, or because Jesus gave her this as a sort of nickname, much like he did calling Simon, Petros, in the Greek, Peter -the rock. Did Jesus see her as a tower of strength, a beacon of hope, a symbol of resurrection? This seems fitting since when Mary meets Jesus, she's a perfect wreck and he raises her chin up to the light and she is forever changed.

A few years ago, I was being interviewed for a documentary on Jesus' life and discussing some of his closest relationships. When I was asked about how I explained the closeness of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, I thought before I answered.

In my mind I envision her at that first meeting, informed by medieval artwork no doubt, her hair disheveled, her rich robes in tatters, resources spent, all other options gone, utterly broken, clamoring through the crowd, scraping through the dust just to get to him---that's how I see her. Desperate. Spent. She crawls on busted hands and sore knees begging for intervention, aware her survival was entirely dependent upon his grace and power.

"He literally saved her." I answered, "She was lost, she was destitute, she had nothing left, her dreams were stolen, her bank account was overdrawn, her friends had left her alone, her diagnosis was death, and he---in the way only that only he can ---he set her free from whatever it was that had kept her bound. There is no other way to understand their relationship, no other terms to illustrate their fierce and forever bond... he was, in every sense of the word, her savior."

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And this, their relationship I believe is essential and integral into the fact of the matter of her being the first herald of the resurrection.

It's hard to understand this connection, this total dependence unless you've been there yourself. Unless you've had the cancer ravage your organs and then got the call with the all clear, unless you've wept over betrayal and watched your marriage be raised to new life, unless you've lost a child and then held an unexpected blessing smelling sweet and fresh from heaven in your arms, you cannot know. Until you've been in that place where if he does not come through you will not survive, unless you have seen dry bones live, you will never know how and why she loved him. To her, he was deliverance. She was sick, he made her well. She was bound, he set her free.

So she followed him, and she served him, and if early church sources are right, she helped finance his ministry. She is named more than any other disciple in the four gospels, she is there when he agonizes on the cross, she watches his life ebb away with every crimson drop, she washes the blood and sweat from his lifeless body, she screams in disbelief, her hope is dead (Mark 15.40; John 19.25).

Have you ever been there? Are you there now? Wondering where God is? Unsure of the break through? Standing in disbelief of the circumstance of wreckage that is your life? Having placed all your hope in Jesus the tragedy has still befallen you, having put your trust in God you still stand over the grave, clinging to the Holy Spirit you are left breathless in the wake of the reality of all your fears coming to pass in real time.

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This. This is where the story of the Magdalene meets us all.

And yet, **while it was still dark**, she rose and made her way to the tomb. She went to anoint his body, and one last time, to hold his hand, and to give him back to God (Mark 16.9; John 20. 1).

It makes sense doesn't it on some cosmic level, she's there for his raising because he had been the source of hers. She is the first witness to the resurrection, the first herald of the gospel because she had been the one who had looked to him for life. She tells the story first because she had lived it once before, she could proclaim his resurrection because she too had been raised. This was good news for her to shout out loud because she knew the darkness had been beaten, and that he had made a way through for everyone for all time.

Her story rings out to us, as we are anxious and depleted, overwhelmed and exhausted, watching the chemo drip, the search for a cure delayed, our relationships in shambles, loved ones fighting demons they cannot cast out, our children unsafe in their schools. Mary Magdalene whispers ... when you have lost all hope, you can hope in him, when all seems lost, you have not lost him, when you stand in the valley of the shadow of death, you are only awaiting the rising.

THE MAGDALENE.

SALOME.

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Dust. Tiny, infinitesimal granules that are the smallest foundation of everything and—nothing at all; they are here and gone. Our beginning and our end yet forgotten like the ashes I wiped from my brow. This dust forms us, claims us, and yet, we brush past it, wash it away.

The dust and the stories of biblical women have much in common. They were there-- first person witnesses to the holy miracles of Jesus; they birthed him and held him, reared him and taught him about God. They told him not to slump over, not to be too uppity about his lordship with the neighbor boys, let him know that his heavenly power was needed when the wine ran out at the party.

They fed him, sat at his feet and learned from him, walked every mile with him just like the men who are named, they endured with him, they remained until the end and were the first to see him return, and yet...we do not remember them well.

Salome. It was a common name in the Hellenized Jewish world of the first century. Herod's sister, and daughter, also a Queen Salome of Alexandria who was the last of the rulers during the Independence of Judea. Salome is also the name of the daughter of Herodias who danced for Herod Antipas and pleased him so much that when he offered to grant her anything she asked, as directed by her mother, she called for the head of John the Baptist (Mk. 6. 21-8, Mt. 14.6-11).

There's a woman in Jesus' inner circle called Salome (Mk.16.1) too, in some traditions she's remembered as Jesus' aunt, a sister to Mary and daughter of Ann. In other stories she is the family member who performs the test to confirm the virginity of Mary after she explains the predicament of her pregnancy by the Holy Spirit.[i]

Can you imagine, a woman this close, perhaps knowing Jesus intimately from womb to new life, and she is not remembered well, her story is not preserved with care, her contribution is not held with holy awe, her words and deeds not passed down through the ages so that we might too learn from her life of service to him. Everything, it was all for him.

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Sister, do you ever feel this way? Like you will never leave a mark, like you have to strive to earn, achieve, do everything right. You show up early and stay late, you cut the peanut butter sandwiches in shapes with cookie cutters, you manage your home and office and teach the little ones at church, but –you wonder—does anyone see you? You have worked hard and long for that promotion, for that pulpit, you've been trained and tested, and yet will your breakthrough ever come? Are you like the dust...here today, gone tomorrow?

Yes...you are. And, so am I, and so was Salome. So much to give, a story written by the finger of grace, and yet, what will be remembered—what should be remembered when those who come after us call our names from the ash heap of history, is that all that we were, all that we did, everything our lives pointed to; it was all for him.

"DID YOU NOT KNOW WHAT THE HOLY ONE CAN DO WITH DUST..." [II]

Salome's contribution is like yours and mine; it was both great and small. She was there...from the announcement of birth, holding forth in agony at the foot of the wretched cross, and she was there when new life was won for us all.

I wipe the ashes that mark my brow from my face. I wash and dry my face. I notice tiny lines at the corners of my eyes. I also see that those eyes are bright and clear, certain about call and the vocation of my life, weary and invigorated, filled with loss and fierce new dreams, and I remember. It is all for him.

Let this be the song of our lives this Lenten season and across the epochs of time.

[I] TO READ MORE ABOUT SALOME, SEE BUCKNELL, BRAD. "ON "SEEiNG" SALOME." ELH 60, NO. 2 (1993): 503-26. WWW.JSTOR.ORG/STABLE/2873388;

RICHARD BAUCKHAM, THE TESTIMONY OF THE BELOVED DISCIPLE (BAKER ACADEMIC 2007, ASBN 978-0-80103485-5), P. 175; JACOBUS (DE VORÁGINE) (1973). THE GOLDEN LEGEND. CUP ARCHIVE. PP. 8-. GGKEY: DEIHSY5 K6AF

[I] SEE "BLESSING THE DUST, JAN RICHARDSON"

SALOME.

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JOANNA

Risk. I am anxious, my nerves red raw, I am acutely aware of our own mortal fragility more today than I can remember in some time. I watch the news cycle on my phone, babies fleeing the scene--again--as a crazed gunman fires shots into a school, a church school. The horror, the fear, the dread. I feel angry, and scared, powerless, and ultimately incapable of protecting my own child. Sending my child to school each day now feels more risky than sending him into the oncoming traffic to play.

Do you feel it too; the tenderness of our existence in these present moments? We have come through a global pandemic, live now in a world divided and turned in on the other, the weight of these present moments and the import of the imprint of our lives feels at once like it will cost us everything and is worth no less.

I feel at the end of my own capacity, and unsure of where the future leads, and in the midst of it all, we are confronted with the story of Jesus, and the mounting tension from Galilee to Jerusalem that led to the final days of his life. The white, hot, pulse of fear and anger grip me as I remember what the women who walked with him then risked, and consider what is being called forth from us now.

When I think about the Women at the End with Jesus, and all they risked it is Joanna who comes promptly to mind. For some she is a bit player, a foggy character in the background, but if we press in just a bit, we see the contours of her person and learn how pivotal her role was and how important her story is still.

He had healed her of a disease or an evil spirit, or both, reached down and raised her up. He had made her well, made her whole. Joanna is named with Mary of Migdol, Susanna and others whom Jesus had touched and made well (Luke 8.2). These women who, because of their time and place lived without any hope of relief, find Jesus and their lives are changed forever. Jesus met them in that space where it is either a miracle or misery. He was the answer or there was no answer. You don't forget this kind of touch. You remember the one one who raises you from the dust to life brand new. You can only know the kind of love and fierce devotion they had for him if you too have been healed, set free, delivered at the hands of Jesus when all other hope was lost.

Maybe this is why she risked everything...

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What we know of Joanna is that she was the wife of Chuza, a steward in the household of Herod Antipas. She was a woman who not only held sway in the palace courts, she is also named among those in the earliest Jesus Movement hailing from the Galilee.

It cannot be overstated, the import of women who are remembered, named and recorded for history by their male counterparts who scratch out the earliest autographs. The mere mention of Joanna's name tells us she was significant in the story of Jesus and the Movement he brought into the world.

Because of her husband's position, Joanna would have been a woman of means (Matt. 20.8) and likely one of the women who underwrote the travel, food, lodging and meals of the entourage who traveled with Jesus as they traveled across Galilee and to Jerusalem thereafter. We are talking about a large number of folk traversing the region and being sustained as they follow Jesus from one location to another.

We cannot forget the threat that Antipas, and his father King Herod posed to Jesus and his followers, There is a fair amount of palace intrigue to mention as it relates to Joanna and the household of Herod.

First, it is Herod the Great who calls for the slaughter of innocents incited to put an end to the Messianic claim (Matt. 2). We must also note the beheading of John the Baptist at the hands of Antipas at the behest of Herodias, who had been his brother's wife (Matt. 4.12; Mark 1.14). Antipas had actually feared that Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected. It is Herod Antipas who questions and mocks Jesus and sends him back to Pilate, potentially to improve relations with his Roman governor.

Is it possible that we have this information about Jesus standing bare before Herod, about the insecurities of the Tetrarch because someone on the inside was hiding in the shadows and relaying the intel? How else do we come to know what Herod Antipas was thinking, or what he said to Jesus on that fateful night as he stood silent in Herod's chamber? Was it her? Was it Joanna, the woman Jesus raised to new life, doing what she could to listen in and report back to the others what was happening to her Lord?

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Can you see her, lifted up from the dust and made whole by the Galilean preacher and then following him, supporting him, serving him until the end. And then, in those terrifying hours lurking in dark corridors of the Herodian compound to listen in on conversations and smuggle critical information to Jesus and his followers, like the warning that her boss was out to put an end to Jesus' life (Luke 13.33)?

Luke tells us that the women from Galilee stand "at a distance" from the cross, witnessing the final brutal hours of Jesus' life, and then Joanna returns on Sunday morning to complete the preparation of the body for burial.

"IF I WERE GOING TO BEGIN PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD FOR THE FIRST TIME TODAY. IT WOULD HELP TO BEGIN BY ADMITTING THE THREE MOST TERRIBLE TRUTHS OF OUR EXISTENCE: THAT WE ARE SO RUINED, AND SO LOVED. AND IN CHARGE OF SO LITTLE."-ANNE LAMOTT

She is there. All the way to the end, doing what she can to serve him, love him, honor him, repay her debt. It might have cost her everything; imagine Herod's response when he learned members of his own household were followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Though we don't know for sure, it seems that any fear of Herod's retaliation was overcome by her own love of Jesus.

These are troubling times and anxiety laden days, as we feel our own lack of control, the airy vapor of our lives, may we allow this Lenten season to remind us we are united with the human family in our vulnerability and may our risks be measured and poured out in service to the one who raised us up.

JOANNA