

Mary Magdalene¹

John 20:1-18

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one 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 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" 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 Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for 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 that he had said these things to her.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do you remember where you were and what you were doing on July 20, 1969? I do. I was a Navy ROTC 3rd class midshipman assigned for summer training aboard the World War II aircraft carrier, the USS Wasp, CV9. The other midshipman and I were assigned to the Supply department bunkroom. The ship was pier side at Quonset Point, RI. We had just returned from several weeks in the North Atlantic, looking for Soviet submarines sailing through the Greenland-UK gap. We had ventured far enough north that we crossed the Arctic Circle and received our Blue Nose cards.

¹ Adapted from a sermon by Rev. Reed Lessing. Lent 2022. "Seven Witnesses to Christ."

On July 20, we were stuck in our bunkroom preparing for a compartment inspection. We had scrubbed the tile deck and shined the floor with what we thought was floor wax. The floor glistened but would not dry. We discovered that what we thought was wax, was actually an oily disinfectant. It was never going to dry out. We had to re-strip the floor and re wax.

Why recall that night? It was the night the first man, Neil Armstrong, stepped onto the moon. We all watched the event on the compartment's black and white television. It was an unforgettable event. We witnessed it. However, fifty-three years later there are still people who believe it was a hoax, staged on a set somewhere on earth. I saw it with my shipmates. I believe it; some don't.

The same is true about the resurrection of our Savior. There were witnesses – an empty tomb, Mary Magdalene, Peter and John, two angels, and the risen Savior himself.

We have spent seven weeks this past Lenten season learning about people who were witnesses to Christ. Today we learn of a very special witness to the resurrection, Mary Magdalene. We know her as the troubled woman from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. She followed Jesus to the bitter end. She was the first to see the resurrected Savior. She testified to him. Eventually, so did all the disciples. What a motley crew of misfits. And there are still people who deny the resurrection in the face of history, God's Holy Word, and the witnesses.

When I say the word *orchestra*, you probably picture strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. But one orchestra is made up of children who play instruments made of trash. It is called the "Recycled Orchestra of Cateura" (Paraguay). Cateura is not really a town. It is a slum built on a huge landfill.

Every day, about three million pounds of waste is dumped in Cateura. Many families eke out their existence by scavenging trash from

the landfill to resell, and children get pulled out of school to help. “To be honest,” violinist Noeleia, age 16, said, “there was nothing in Cateura. What there was most were drugs.” Her violin, like many in the orchestra, is assembled out of cans, wooden spoons, and bent forks. One of the orchestra’s cellos uses an oil drum. Another teenager plays a saxophone made of a drainpipe, melted copper, coins, spoon handles, cans, and bottle caps.

Several years ago, a short video was made. The hope was to raise \$175,000 to make a full-length documentary. Not only did they raise the money, but also the video went viral. Since then, the Recycled Orchestra has performed all over the world. The group plays Mozart, Paraguayan folk music, and even Frank Sinatra.

God makes music with misfits! We have talked about some of them this morning. That is what Easter is all about! God loves to make music with misfits, with a motley crew. I am a misfit. You are a misfit. We are all misfits! We all fall short of God’s will and ways. But fellow misfits, it is time to make music.

What do I mean? The biblical orchestra is comprised of the most unlikely musicians. Peter is a first-chair trumpeter. He denied Christ – three times. Paul plays the violin. But there was a time Paul, then Saul, played a religious thug and persecuted Christians. And the guy on the harp? That would be David. Womanizing, bloodthirsty – yet repentant David. Today, on this Resurrection Day, we add another person to the misfits who make music. She is the lead vocalist. Her name is Mary – Mary Magdalene.

Mary begins as a mess. “Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out (Luke 8:2). There are five Mary’s in the New Testament, which is why this one is identified with “Magdalen.” It isn’t her last name. Magdalen refers to her hometown – a little fishing village on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee called Magdala.

Luke tells us that Mary had been demon-possessed – with seven demons, the biblical number for a complete set. Can you imagine being that messed up?

Here is how it happens. *The compulsion to prove.* We begin a job or a task or a class with high hopes and high endeavor. “I’ll show them. I will be the best!” *Intensity.* We arrive early. We stay late. We give it all we’ve got. Yep, that is me alright. *Subtle deprivations.* To keep up the pace we begin to deprive ourselves. Maybe we stop exercising, stop eating a proper meal, stop getting enough sleep, or stop reading our Bible and attending worship. *Distorted thinking.* We tell ourselves, “Things will get better after I finish this project.” “I’ll get back on track with my family after the business trip or next promotion.” *Heightened denial.* People close to us begin to see what we cannot see. We have less joy at work, or relaxing, or time with the family, or in general. We are often tired. We want to be left alone too often.

Disengagement. Life becomes a checklist of things to do. One thing after another. We live for the vacation, and then the vacation never lasts long enough. *Observable behavior changes.* People who do not know us recognize that something is wrong. Our survival strategies become unhealthy: too much social media, too much eating, too much sleeping, too much caffeine. *Depersonalization.* We become robotic. We just go through the motions. We play the part, we put on a face, but we have nothing remaining in the tank. We hit rock bottom. We internalize everything. We talk to no one. And we feel like we have at least seven demons.

We can all get in a mess like Mary, or maybe, we are in a mess like Mary. Did you just put a checkmark next to anything I just said? We can all get down, depressed, and hit rock bottom. Did you know that 20 percent of all people on disability are on it because of severe depression? Did you know that despite being the richest nation on earth, the United States is, according to the World Health Organization, also the most

depressed on earth? Did you know that in the last decade, depression among American teenagers has increased by 200 percent? And I don't think we have even factored in the effects of the pandemic, the disease that keeps on giving.

For many years, the Chevy Nova was a successful American car. But the Nova did not sell well in Mexico. For a long time, there was a myth that it was because in Spanish the word Nova means "no go." Now though, the myth is used as an example of marketing folly. It sums up life sometimes, doesn't it? No va. No go! We hit bottom with no way up. No va. No go! That is Mary's mess and ours as well. And music? Music? We have no song to sing.

Mary was down, but her Savior had lifted her out of the pit. Jesus lifted Mary up from her captivity to seven demons. Who knows how they got there? But they did! Jesus lifted her up. That is why Mary Magdalene follows Jesus all the way to the cross to watch her Savior bleed, die, and cry out in agony.

Mary's Messiah is our Messiah too. His face is caked with spit and blood. His throat is so dry he cannot swallow. His voice is so hoarse he can barely speak. To find the last time significant moisture touched Jesus' lips, we need to go back at least twelve hours to the Passover meal in the Upper Room. Since drinking from the Passover cup, Jesus has been betrayed, condemned, mocked, beaten, and crucified. No liquid has quenched his thirst. The Savior has no song to sing!

But Pastor, you may be thinking, that was Holy Friday; this is Easter Sunday. Why the doom and gloom? The doom and gloom, the horror is the background for today. That is how things stood just before dawn on Sunday.

There had been such hope, such promise. But now, it had all come to what? Nothing. The famous Rabbi? Dead! His disciples? Hiding! Other followers? Scattered! And one – Judas Iscariot – suicide!

However, things are not what they appear. God is moving in the background, unnoticed at first. Mary Magdalene gets up early on Sunday to anoint Christ's dead body. But the body is **not** in the tomb! Mary breaks out crying. She tells her story first to Peter and John, and then to the angels, and now, for a third time, to a man she mistakes as the gardener. "Sir, if you have carried him away, [please] tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:15).

"Mary." The voice is unmistakable. "Mary." No one ever said her name with so much tenderness. "Mary." She looks up and in sudden recognition, cries out, "Rabboni!" It is Jesus. It is Jesus! He is not dead. He is risen from the grave. He is alive!

Emotions overwhelm Mary – can you imagine? – as she transitions from the depths of grief and sorrow to the heights of ecstasy and joy. Just when it appeared as though it was all over, finished, the end – to the shock and surprise of everyone – the Father raised Jesus bodily from the dead. Mary's song – better, her symphony of celebration – commences with great joy!

Mary's music is a five-word song: "I have seen the Lord" (John 2:18). "Lord" is not just a polite way of talking about Jesus, like "Sir," or "mister." With "Lord," Mary is stating, "I have seen God, the King of the universe." "I have seen the One through Whom and for Whom all things were made." I have seen the One who is coming again, riding on the clouds, as King of kings and Lord of lords!" That is why Thomas' parallel confession, in John 20:28, has these words: "My Lord and My God!"

What does it all mean? It means that there is more to our story than what we see. It means that there is more than just death and taxes. Christ's resurrection means that, just like Mary Magdalene, we have a song to sing!

Remember! God loves to make music with misfits! It is time, it is high time, for all of us misfits to make some music! I'll take the trumpet. Pastor Anderson can take the guitar. Pastor nickel would be great on the bass. You take the violin. You take the clarinet. You take the chimes. And you? What instrument will you play today?

One thing is for certain. We have a song to sing! And we sing it with our lips and our lives. What is the song called? The title has six words, "I Know that My Redeemer Lives."

Now, maybe you do not believe that Neil Armstrong stepped on to the moon on July 20, 1969. But, believe this. Jesus is risen! (He is risen, indeed). The witnesses leave no doubt. Amen.

May the peace of God, that surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Dei Gloria!