



The Inclusive Community

Theological Worlds - 3

May 9, 2010

Luke 8:1-3 Luke 11:24-26

Homily of Rev. Dr. George H. McDonald

Hello! My name, like a lot of other women who followed Jesus, is Miriam, or, in your language, Mary. To avoid confusion, people call me Mary of Magdala, or Mary Magdalene, because I was born in the village of Magdala, which is on the west bank of the Sea of Tiberias. This is my story.

I was a precocious girl, at least by my village's standards. Never before in the history of Magdala had a girl ever gone to school. Girls were supposed to stay at home, and learn how to be a wife and mother. But my father was a wealthy man, as well as the local teacher, the rabbi. When I was very young, he decided I was going to be an educated woman. So he taught me, first alone at home, then with the boys at the synagogue. My mother complained I would never learn how to take care of a home and children. My father didn't pay any attention to her.

When I was six, my mother died in childbirth. My father never married again. He hired one of his cousins to live with us and to take care of our home. So I remained an only child.

It was clear that, under his tutelage, I was to become the brightest student ever to come out of the synagogue school in Magdala. Under that kind of pressure, I studied. After all, I was my father's pride and joy. I learned the Torah and the Midrashim inside and out. Being a practical man, my father didn't neglect reading, mathematics, and as I grew older, a lot of practical business advice, too.

My mind was like a sponge. I soaked it all in. But something was missing. Full of knowledge, I still felt empty! I felt driven by a sense of always having to do more, to learn more. It was as though my father had taught me everything I needed to know, except how to live my life!

That's the one thing I remember about my life, a sense of being driven to fill the emptiness! It wasn't simply that I wanted to learn more. The slightest hint that I was inadequate, imperfect, threw me into depression and self-despite. I told myself I had to do it, to please my father. In reality, the demand came from deep inside of me. I did it to myself.

Other people saw me as stable, secure, serene, and very smart. In actuality, I was filled with fear - fear of failure; fear of being rejected by my father, and by others; fear of being rejected even by God, because I wasn't perfect. Always there was that sense that I wasn't doing all I needed to do to reach my own potential.

That impossible demand I alone put on myself made me miserable. Amazingly, as I grew older, I came to understand what I was doing to myself. I actually let up on myself. Call it a demon; call it a neurotic

behavior; once I understood it, I put all of my will to work to eliminate it from my life. It worked! I overcame my one final flaw, which threw me right back into my problem - of having to be perfect. And I was a failure again!

This time, however, it was seven times worse than before. When I was younger, I had been able to delude myself, to trick myself into believing that I was succeeding. With my new awareness, I was no longer able to blind myself to other related demons, other hurtful behaviors.

I was arrogant. I didn't listen to others, perhaps because I didn't care what they thought. I was self-absorbed, afraid that others would see through my facade, little suspecting that the only one I ever fooled was myself!

I was lonely. I had no friends, only a few people who put up with me, who actually loved me, in spite of myself. I had a lot of symptoms you might recognize today as psychosomatic. Slowly but surely, I was killing myself! I felt unfulfilled, incomplete, empty. And no one could help me.

Then there was the time I visited one of my country cousins, in Sychar, a village on the border between Judea and Samaria. My cousin laughingly told me of a woman there whose life was messed up almost as much as mine. Apparently, the woman couldn't stay married, and she couldn't stay not married. She was living with her sixth man, although they were not formally married. The women in the village shunned her, about the same way most people avoided me. Or maybe she just avoided them. I understood that behavior well!

About noon, she ran into the village from the direction of the well. She shouted for everyone to hear, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He can't be the Messiah, can he?" I went with them as everyone in the village rushed out to see that man. The man was Jesus. I became convinced he was the Messiah.

Everyone else straggled back to the village. I stayed to talk with Jesus. We talked for a long time. As we spoke, those seven demons in my life began to lose their power over me. Since then, one by one, they have gone away, never to return.

From that day, I followed Jesus. Of course, you'll never hear my name on any list of his disciples. Men are the only ones on that list! However, if you ever ask who paid the bills of that little group following Jesus, my name may come up.

You see, while the men got the glory, there was also a group of women, some of us fairly well-to-do, who also were Jesus' disciples, who paid the bills for that little band - Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward; Susanna; Mary, the mother of James and of Joses; Salome and some others. We followed Jesus, provided for him and his disciples when they were in Galilee. We were there at his last Supper with his disciples. With Mary, his mother, and John, his beloved disciple, we were there in the crowd when Jesus was crucified.

As I said, I followed Jesus. Just being near him seemed to fill the emptiness in my life. But every now and then, there still was an aching void deep inside of me. It was as though I still had not accomplished what my life was to be about! I felt undone, unfinished, fragmented, incomplete!

Then that night after we had observed the Passover, the authorities came and took Jesus away. They took the only one who showed me what real life, and real love, was all about. They crucified him. As we

watched from a distance, we cried, for our hopes and dreams were shattered.

And I was filled to the brim with emptiness again! I had wasted three years of my life following an itinerant preacher I thought was the Messiah of God! Ha! I had frittered my life away, again!

Joseph, a member of the council, asked Pilate for Jesus' body. The Sabbath was approaching, so we hastily wrapped the body and placed it in a tomb which Joseph provided. His servants pushed a great rock over the hole to seal it. Then we went back to that room where Jesus had celebrated the Passover with us. I remembered him saying something to us about dying as living and living as dying, but it was so confusing.

Sunday morning, I felt like I had to go to that tomb. When I arrived at the tomb, the rock had been rolled away. I was distraught! Why would someone steal a dead body? Especially his? I was angry! I wanted to know who had done it. The emptiness of my life ran like a chill up my back. I stood there, my body racked with sobbing. I screamed out at no one in particular, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." I sensed someone standing behind me. I don't know how long he had been there. I assumed he was the gardener. He asked why I was crying.

Through my sobs, I explained that I had come to Jesus' tomb, but it had been opened, and his body wasn't there. I said to him, "If you are the one who carried him away, please tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

He said, "Mary!" I recognized his voice! It was Jesus. "Rabbi!" I screamed!

I reached out to hug him in joy, but he stopped me. Then he said, "Don't hold on to me! But go to my brothers, say to them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

I did as he asked me. Of course, since I was a woman, they decided that I was hysterical and dismissed me. Wow! were they surprised when he appeared in that locked room later that afternoon! But that was all right! Because my life is now filled with meaning, filled to overflowing.

Jesus told me not to hold him. Momentarily, I felt shocked! rejected! Then I understood. As long as I held on to anything, even to Jesus himself, my life would always be empty. But, if, and when, I could let it go, let it all go --

the knowing - having to have all the right answers to everything, all the time - I let it all go!

the doing - having to do, or to give, or to care, or to get, or to use, all the time - I let them go.

the having - having to have things and rights and meaning; security or power or comfort, all the time - I let them all go!

the relationships - and having to have people like me, love me, need me, or to be used by me, all the time - I let them all go. Because when I am empty then my life can be filled, filled and overflowing with everything I needed, No! More than I could possibly need.

But there is still more! All my life, I had searched for fulfillment, to find my destiny. And there, that Easter morning, there it was! I, Miriam of Magdala, of all people, was chosen to be the first witness of Jesus - the resurrected Christ, and alive eternally. That was my calling. It is the calling of all of us. "Go!" he said to me, "Go and tell! If and when they believe is their problem. Your job is to bear witness of what you have seen, and what has happened to you. Go! Share what you have learned of life - that to die, is to find authentic life, now and eternally. For when we are empty, it is precisely then that these earthen vessels of our lives can be filled to overflowing with the transcendent power of God" Amen and Amen.