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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
7/22/2007, The Festival of St. Mary Magdalene, Apostle
John 20:1-18

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”(John 20:17)

Strangers on the subway and teenagers on the sidewalk sometimes ask me what I am, seeing my black clothes and white collar. They say, “Are you a priest?” I answer, “Yes, I am a Lutheran priest.” And they often go on to ask, “What’s that? How is that different from a Catholic priest?” To which I answer, “I get to be married!” and I show them my wedding ring. To which they say, “Cool!”

And so it is: Clergy marriage is a notable difference between the Catholics and the Lutherans. Perhaps in another sermon, maybe on a Reformation Sunday or a Sunday near to Valentine’s Day, I will discuss the Biblical foundations of the holy estate of marriage, including, I hope and pray, the legitimacy of clergy marriage.

But there is another notable difference between Catholics and Lutherans. I am referring to the ordination of women. Catholics do not believe in this practice. Nor do the Eastern Orthodox. Nor do Missouri Lutherans, nor Wisconsin Lutherans. Here we are, standing almost alone, having broken ranks with two thousands years of settled practice when we began ordaining women, back in the 1970s.

So, let me propose part of the Biblical background concerning the ordination of women. I mean Mary Magdalene. Let us ponder and admire this saint. To a simple brain like mine, it seems full of meaning that Jesus commissioned Mary to preach to the Preachers. Would you not be willing for Mary Magdalene to be your pastor? I think I would be well content to have

Mary as my pastor, for if she preached to Peter, I’d be honored for her to preach to me too.

In sending Mary Magdalene to be the “Apostle to the Apostles,” Jesus was sending someone who was acquainted with suffering. She was no sheltered, sunny, innocent one, naïve about life, but rather someone who knew sadness of spirit and depths of loneliness I hope you and I will never know. She had been possessed of seven demons. They disturbed her, they troubled her, they cast her around like a rag doll in a hurricane.

Let us try to imagine the troubled earlier life of this saint of the church, Mary Magdalene. Judging by the Bible, it is the nature of demons to hurt those they possess by shattering and tearing them both physically, socially, and spiritually. Ahh, the misery the demons brought!

Recall the boy possessed of a demon — the boy whose father brought him to the disciples, only to be disappointed till Jesus came along and healed the boy. How did the father describe the suffering of his son?

³⁸And behold, a man from the crowd cried, “Teacher, I beg you to look upon my son, for he is my only child; ³⁹and behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him till he foams, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. ⁴⁰And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹Jesus answered, “O faithless and perverse generation, how

long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.”

⁴²While he was coming, the demon tore him and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. (Luke 9:38-42)

Hear the energy in those verbs: the demon “seizes him... convulses him till he foams... shatters him... tore him.” That child must have been bruised and cut, with a haunted look in his eye and misshapen limbs from having fallen, with bones mending as best they could.

So, demons take a toll on a person physically. But perhaps worse is the melancholy and loneliness imposed by the demons. Think of poor Legion. Perhaps his was the fate of many people possessed of demons. Where did he live? In a cottage, with a fireplace and a family gathered around? No. The man lived in the tombs. He felt more at home with the dead than with the living. He was driven to cut himself — to do violence to his own body, to a body meant to be the very temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16) — but even worse must have been his loneliness. Listen to the Bible’s description of the man:

²And when [Jesus] was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, ³Who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains: ⁴Because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him. ⁵And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones. (Mark 5:2-5, KJV)

Was he driven to the tombs by neighbors appalled by the man and entirely unwilling to endure him anymore? Or was he driven to the tomb by a sadness of spirit and a chaos of soul

that sought peace in loneliness? Either way, to be possessed of a demon meant to live a lonely life.

And spiritually, the demon possession took the form of a cry — a shout of rejection of Christ:

³³And in the synagogue there was a man, which had a spirit of an unclean devil, and cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art; the Holy One of God. ³⁵And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the devil had thrown him in the midst, he came out of him, and hurt him not. (Luke 4:33-35)

How could it be otherwise? If it be a “demon” that possesses a person, that person will be estranged from God, for the demons hate God.

Picture poor Mary Magdalene, then, in her earlier life. The boy who threw himself into the fire and into the water was possessed of one demon. At least that boy had the protection of his father. But Mary had been possessed of *seven* demons. But then, Jesus came along and cast those demons out.

And so it is that when Jesus chose this saint, Mary Magdalene, to go to the Eleven to preach the Easter news, he chose a saint who had first off all been a sufferer. This preacher knew something of the world. This preacher knew that it was extraordinary good news that Jesus was risen from the dead. This preacher knew something of the depths to which the soul can be thrown, and so this preacher knew something of the glories of the Gospel!

So, that is my first point about Mary: this saint had been a sufferer. My next point is that this Apostle to the Apostles, this Preacher to the Preachers, had not only suffered, but also, once saved by Jesus, remained true to him. At the

cross, where was Peter?¹ Where was Matthew? It was the holy women who were the truly loyal ones, the really courageous ones. As for the Twelve, they fled and abandoned Jesus, or worse: betrayed him – Judas – or denied him – Peter. Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the Mother of Our Lord and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, showed great steadiness and strength of character in their loyalty to Jesus. The fog of fear that descended on the Twelve and rattled their minds and broke their spirits did not descend on the holy women. Or if it did, they proved true nonetheless. Such a one was Mary Magdalene. The one Jesus chose to bear the good news of his resurrection was a person who had some personal experience with loyalty to him — loyalty even under stress.

And my last point about Mary Magdalene is probably the greatest point: Mary loved Jesus. She loved him, not simply with her mind, but also with her whole being. She loved him with the kind of love that cannot wait for the dawn, but rushes off even before daybreak simply to bring spices to what she supposes is his dead body. She loves him with the kind of love that weeps bitter tears, with the heart and a head that is heavy with sorrow and bent down. Why, she loves him with a love that is inconsolable, so that even the angels in the tomb cannot comfort her. She turns her back on them and pays them no mind: she seeks her Lord, not mere angels. And perhaps happiest of all, she loves Jesus with the kind of love that springs forward toward him as soon as she lays eyes on him again.

This will forever be the inclination of the true disciple of Jesus: she loves Jesus and dashes toward him.

In fact, she moves so quickly toward Jesus that he restrains her: Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me...” This whole scene puts me in mind of the longing of St. Paul to leave this world behind and to be with the Lord. After a lifetime of persecution, rejection, disappointments,

¹ This searching question about Peter was raised by Charles Spurgeon in one of his sermons on Mary Magdalene — a sermon from about 1868, if I remember right.

shipwrecks, and opposition, St. Paul shares with the Philippians his desire for heaven:

²³For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:
²⁴Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. (Philippians 1:23-24, KJV)

Something of this desire for heaven seems to have swept Mary along, for her highest desire is simply to be with Jesus, and what more do we mean by “heaven” than to be with Jesus? And so, Mary’s is the soul that can sing one of our favorite hymns here at Immanuel — “Love, Thee I Love with All My Heart”:

Lord, thee I love with all my heart;
I pray thee, ne’er from me depart;
with tender mercy cheer me.
Earth has no pleasure I would share,
yea, heav’n itself were void and bare
if thou, Lord, wert not near me.
(*Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart*,
LBW 325)

We can well imagine this in Mary Magdalene: Earth has no pleasure she would share. She would be off to be with Jesus.

But Jesus needs her here on earth. Jesus has work for her to do. And so, Jesus does not take Mary with him to heaven, but sends her off on a divine mission: the mission to preach the news of his resurrection to the Eleven Disciples.

Is this not what we would want in a preacher: that first of all, she be one who loves Jesus? It is good to preach about Jesus. It is better still to love him.

Mary Magdalene. I cannot match her. I cannot match her. She knew suffering, she knew loyalty, and she knew love for the One who deserves her love, your love, and my love, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.