



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“What’s it all about?”
Easter Day Yr. A, April 9, 2023
Matthew 28:1-10

A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

Happy Easter! Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia! It is Easter Day! And we are here to celebrate this joyous day together. Of the notable days in the Christian calendar, and certainly in our lives, dare I say in the whole world, Christmas and Easter are the two most important. Even in the secular world, everyone recalls Christmas because of its memorable images: a young couple, him leading a donkey, her heavy with child, not-so-welcoming innkeepers, bright angels, the baby being lulled to sleep by animals in the stable, shepherds, the manger, three wise guys, as well as, Christmas trees, beautifully crafted ornaments, holly wreaths, and mistletoe. People know what Christmas is all about. But what about Easter? What is Easter all about? What symbol do we have that defines Easter? My friends, all we have is the empty tomb. The definitive image for Easter Day is the empty tomb – empty tomb. When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary got to Jesus's tomb, he was not there. And without the empty tomb today would be just a sweet spring holiday with little more meaning than bunny rabbits and colored eggs and Easter egg hunts, and families gathered around the dinner table with wonderful holiday food.¹ To be sure, Easter is all that, but those things are not what today is all about.

As I was studying the gospel reading for today, I focused on Mary Magdalene. I keep hearing “I don't know how to love him” from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I have seen the show on stage several times – and on film, but really, what's it all about? “What's it all about?” is a line from one of Mary Magdalene's songs. What was her relationship with Jesus before he died and was raised from the dead?

What do we really know of Mary Magdalene? Much of what we think we know is based on legend, some are even long held beliefs of the church that are fiction at best and disinformation at worst. One of the stories we think we know comes only from some traditions that are NOT found in Scripture; it is the story of Mary Magdalene as a tainted lady turned disciple of Jesus. Can that be the same Mary to whom Jesus first appeared in the Gospel according to Matthew that we read today? To be clear, there is no Biblical foundation for the portrait of Mary Magdalene as a sinful woman. Many writers use this patristic and medieval version of Mary of Magdala that began with the church fathers: they wanted to discredit a woman follower of Christ. Indeed many artists and playwrights have done the same, including Sir Andrew Lloyd Weber of *Jesus Christ Superstar* fame.

The Easter story in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew was written for Jewish Christians of the 1st century, but it is just as relevant to us post-Easter people. And it is the empty tomb that is so important. Most of us conflate all the versions of the Gospel. It is natural to do that. But I find it best to stay with one version at a time, particularly if we want to identify with Mary Magdalene. It is my prayer that we do just that – that we come to understand what it is all about – that we find out how to love Jesus through Mary of Magdala and how to express that love in our world today. In ancient Eastern Orthodox tradition we learn more truth about Saint Mary Magdalene than in the Western Church where she has been cast in a different light.

So before we go to the empty tomb with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary we should at least know a bit more about these two famous Marys and their relationship with one another. The other Mary most likely was Mary, Jesus's mother, for they had been together at the foot of the cross. Mary Magdalene was six years younger than Mary the mother of Jesus who loved her like a sister. It is not surprising that Mary Magdalene became one of her son's followers.

Mary Magdalene was a woman of some means. Her wealthy family was well known in the port of Magdala. Her family was very devout, and she attended synagogue and studied scripture. As an aside, it was not uncommon at the time for women to be educated and to read scripture at home. She was orphaned at the age of ten but grew up in her extended Jewish family. She is named as one of the several Myrrh bearers, those women who supported Jesus's ministry financially and was counted as one of the apostles, many say she was an apostle to the apostles.

So Mary Magdalene had been with Jesus throughout much of his ministry. In my sanctified imagination I see her with Jesus when Lazarus was raised from the dead. Later she had to have been with him in Bethany at the home of the other Mary and Martha when Jesus was anointed with spikenard – one of the oils used to prepare the dead for burial. Had Mary Magdalene accompanied him to Jerusalem when the crowds cried hosanna as he came into the city on a colt? I believe that she was. And she was close at hand when the authorities were looking for him after his triumphant entry into the Holy City. Then the Lord withdrew from them all. He knew that the time had come for him to go to his Father in heaven. He had tried to prepare his disciples. I wonder if Mary fully understood What it was all about? Her master, her teacher – her everything – had washed the disciples' feet and taught them to be a servant to others. Then perhaps Mary Magdalene even sat at table with the disciples to share the Passover meal – their last Passover together.

When Jesus gave them a new commandment, that they were to love one another as he loved them, Mary Magdalene must have thought: "I don't know how to love like he loves." Her friend and master promised her and the other disciples that he would not leave them alone, that he would send them the Holy Spirit so that they could continue his work of spreading God's love to all people. At the time,

did Mary understand what that was all about? No! Not yet! (I wonder if we would have understood.)

I see Mary Magdalene witnessing the mockery of a trial when our Lord was condemned to death for the crime of being more important than the Emperor. He dragged that cruel piece of wood to Golgotha where he was crucified on a cross like a common criminal. And Mary Magdalene, along with Jesus's Mother Mary waited, they waited at the foot of the cross for their love to die.

And so on the third day the two Marys went to the tomb together to complete the process of preparing the body of their beloved one since Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had hurriedly tried to do so on Friday afternoon before the sun set and the Sabbath began. It was the custom in Palestine to visit the tomb of a loved one for three days after the body had been laid to rest. It was believed that for three days the spirit of the dead person hovered around the tomb; but then it departed because the body had become unrecognizable through decay. The Marys could not come to the tomb on the Sabbath. But on the third morning they came. Dawn had barely broken the horizon, but they could stay away no longer. Then the earth shook and the stone sealing the tomb rolled away, and a bright angel appeared and told them that Jesus was not there, that he had been raised from the dead. And they were shown the empty tomb. They were to go quickly and give the happy message to the other disciples. As they ran to tell the others the news, Jesus himself appeared to them. They touched his feet. He was real. Imagine their joy.

Yet, even at the empty tomb Mary Magdalene was still wondering "What's it all about?" We who have entered the empty tomb narrative often wonder "What's it all about?" I wonder, do we want Jesus to teach us how to love? Are we to love like Jesus loved? He was the perfect reflection of God's love. Are we to love like Jesus loved his own, like he loved his followers, like he loved Mary Magdalene? Mary made that love known as one of the first evangelists, even taking the news of

the resurrection to the Roman Emperor. Mary of Magdala was called to spread the news of the risen Christ, traveling and preaching the Gospel. Her travels took her to Rome where, because of her family's standing, she was able to have an audience with the Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar. She went to protest that his Governor in Judea, Pontius Pilate, and his high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, who had conspired and executed an innocent man, Jesus. Everyone visiting the Emperor was expected to bring him a lavish gift. Mary Magdalene presented him with an egg. She held up the egg and said: "Jesus Christ is risen!" Caesar replied: "How could anyone ever rise from the dead? It is as impossible as that white egg to turn red." While he was speaking, the egg in Mary Magdalene's hand became bright red.² Eastern Christianity blended folklore with other legends and colored eggs became part of the Easter celebration.³ But as we know some myths are true. And truth need not be defined entirely by fact. There is truth in the story of Mary Magdalene's journey to Rome to announce the resurrection, whether her story is accurate or not.

The empty tomb was – and is – proof that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Alleluia! Today 2.2 billion Christians worldwide believe that to be true. For Mary Magdalene and Jesus's 1st century followers life was never the same. And for all believers throughout the ages life has never been the same. And neither has death. In the end Mary of Magdala did realize what Jesus was all about. She came to understand how to love him, by spreading his love. And we too are to make that love known as we will promise when we renew our Baptismal covenants in a just few moments.

Risen Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

1 Decorating and coloring eggs for Easter was the custom in England during the Middle Ages. The household accounts of Edward I, for the year 1290, recorded an expenditure of eighteen pence for four hundred and fifty eggs to be gold-leafed and colored for Easter gifts. Colorful wooden eggs offered by Monastery Icons were hand painted and engraved in the Ukraine and feature traditional folk and religious symbols and designs. Of course, the most famous decorated Easter eggs were those made by the well-known goldsmith, Peter Carl Faberge. In 1883 the Russian Czar, Alexander, commissioned Faberge to make a special Easter gift for his wife, the Empress Marie. This special Faberge egg so delighted the Czarina that the Czar promptly ordered the Faberge firm to design further eggs to be delivered every Easter. In later years Nicholas II, Alexander's son, continued the custom. Fifty-seven eggs were made in all. (The Story of the First Easter Egg <https://www.monasteryicons.com/product/story-of-the-first-easter-egg/did-you-know>) However, The Romans, Gauls, Chinese, Egyptians and Persians all cherished the egg as a symbol of the universe, of the earth's rebirth at springtime. With the advent of Christianity the symbolism of the egg changed to represent, not nature's rebirth, but the rebirth of man.

2 Caesar heard the formal complaint presented by Mary Magdalene, and also had received reports of soldiers under Pilate molesting and killing civilians in Judea. For this Pilate was exiled to Vienne in Gaul where he died an unpleasant death. Interestingly, Pilate's wife Procula Claudia, who had a dream about Jesus the night before he was brought before her husband for trial, had become a very pious and devout Christian, and died a saint of the Christian Church.

3 A Polish legend tells of when Mary Magdalen went to the sepulchre to anoint the body of Jesus. She had with her a basket of eggs to serve as a repast. When she arrived at the sepulchre and uncovered the eggs, lo, the pure white shells had miraculously taken on a rainbow of colors. One legend concerns the Virgin Mary. It tells of the time the Blessed Virgin gave eggs to the soldiers at the cross. She entreated them to be less cruel and she wept. Her tears fell upon the eggs, spotting them with dots of brilliant color. (See The Story of the First Easter Egg in fn 1.) I also relied upon the wisdom of an Orthodox priest: "The Life of Mary Magdalene" <http://www.denver.goarch.org> St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, the Rev. Zsis NTerekas, Newsletter Agios Nikolaos Volume 2, Number 2, 2016