

Feast of St. Mary Magdalene - July 22, 2009
Reflection offered at Mass by Rita Houlihan

Readings for the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene, July 22

Galilee from her own funds; but when your best friend suffers and dies that isn't enough. He had to have a proper burial.

So there it is; I think it was the unremitting kindness that Jesus had shown to her and to so many others; the guidance, the prayers He had taught them, the example He had set – this could have kept Mary of Magdala at the tomb. But on the other hand, she may not have been thinking of all those memories – yes, they were in her soul, a deep part of her experience. But maybe on this first Easter she was simply being present; something foreign to us but that the mystics, prophets and teachers of contemplation urge us to do. There she is showing us how to be present to God's presence in the face of our own powerlessness, helplessness, fear, confusion and overwhelming sadness. Her love for Jesus empowers her to stay and propels her to act, to give Jesus a proper burial and to insist that someone tell her where He is!

There she stayed - Unlike Peter and the other disciple - she didn't leave when she did not understand or when sorrow overcame her. She was staying here at the last spot where she had seen her best friend. A gardener appears; he asks as the angels did, **“Woman, why are you weeping?”** He adds, **“Who are you looking for?”** She's very clear and for the 3rd time asks for Jesus; **“Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.”** And so here she is - the witness Jesus needs and maybe waited for – a woman faithful to her duty, who knows Him, who wants to be with Him and is not afraid to let others know she is looking for Him. He calls her name, **“Mary”**; she knows Him immediately, even with her back to Him – as a true disciple, ‘she knew Him when He called her name.’ (John 10:3-5)

Mary wants to hold Jesus here on earth as if her salvation is just being with Him again – but it is not enough. Jesus, now the Risen Christ tells her she cannot hold onto Him **“... for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my (*adelphoi* – siblings) to my sisters and brothers and tell them, “I must ascend to my Father who is now your Father, to my God who is now your God.”** (20:17) Full of new hope and strengthened under his wing (as the soul in Psalm 63), Mary goes and announces this Good News to the disciples, **“I have seen the Lord, He must ascend to his Father who is now our Father, to his God who is now our God.”**

Sandra Schneiders* (see note at end) offers a potent analysis of this radical statement Jesus

and Mary, a woman did not. But Jesus did not appear to them – did they leave too soon? They were silent. Do we need to call out so Jesus and others can hear our voices?

So who did Jesus select to carry this message: what were her characteristics and how can I model them?

First - A disciple faithful to her duty - Mary went to the tomb to fulfill a responsibility to give Jesus a proper burial. She went as early as possible – no hesitation.

Second - A disciple who insists on seeing Him; a disciple who calls out, making it clear she is looking for Him.

And Third - A disciple who stays, watching, remembering his kindness, being in His presence. Seeing her love I realize I want to know more about the Jesus she saw in action. Her relentless seeking makes it clear that He was remarkable and much loved and that I would benefit greatly from getting to know him better.

When I see St. Mary Magdalene as this model of a true witness - it is clear that the only barrier to being a 'witness' is within me. There aren't any external barriers, just internal. I have no excuses – we can all be complete witnesses in the way we live our lives; do our work; pray and most of all treat our friends, families, colleagues, enemies, and strangers. This is St. Mary of Magdala's gift to us – may we celebrate now the Eucharist she did so much to prepare for us.

*Sandra Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church". Biblical Theology Bulletin, 12 (1982), pp. 35-45.

This reflection was inspired by FutureChurch's St. Mary of Magdala celebrations; Chris Schenk's, csj. pamphlet on this wonderful saint; my Aunt, Sr. Rita Anne Houlihan, rc who helped me begin this exploration of early Christian women leaders; my sister, Barbara Houlihan Hecht's love for the contemplative; and my mother, Kathrene B. Houlihan's enthusiastic support for women finding their place in the church. I hope you found some challenges as well as comfort in it. Please copy and share with anyone who may be interested and may you also experience God's healing presence. Rita L. Houlihan, Newton College of SH (1970)