

We are almost near the end of a sermon series called, *Ordinary People: Extraordinary Callings*, as we have been learning that God calls ordinary people to do God's extraordinary work. We have talked about Abraham and Sarah, Samuel, Esther, and Jonah so far. We have learned that we are never too old nor never too young to be called by God. We've also learned that when God calls, it's never the right time nor is it ever our desire. God calls us to work that we need to do more than what we want to do. Today, we learn that when God calls, it's never what we expect, and we'll learn this through the biblical character, Mary Magdalene. God calls Mary to be the first person to see the risen Lord and to proclaim the gospel message. We are here today, still talking about Jesus, because Mary answered her call.

When we hear the name Mary Magdalene, many different images come to mind. Some may imagine the song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," from *Jesus Christ Superstar*.¹ If you were raised in the Catholic church, you may think of her as a Saint. "Others may recall an image of a prostitute or a woman possessed by demons."² Scripture never says Mary is a prostitute. Pope Gregory the Great in AD 591 distorts Mary's image.

Pope Gregory was studying the passage in Luke of the unnamed woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, kisses them, and dries them with her hair. The woman is only described as a sinner. It would have been scandalous for a woman to have her head uncovered during that time

and to show such extravagant affection, especially in public, so the woman's sin was interpreted as physical sin.

The passage that follows this story in Luke mentions that Mary Magdalene joins a group of women who were followers of Christ. Pope Gregory made a leap that Mary and the unnamed woman were one in the same. What added to this interpretation was her name Magdalene. Most women were identified by their male relationships: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Magdalene does not refer to a male, but a place. Magdala, a fishing village on the sea of Galilee, was where Mary was from. So, since Mary was single, and some scholars believe she left her family to escape an arranged marriage, Pope Gregory alludes that a single woman in this time can only survive by one means of employment.

Scripture also tells us that Mary was a woman of means who shared her resources to support Jesus' ministry. The Bible never says how she obtained money, but if she is single with no children and is traveling around, following Jesus, she wouldn't really need a lot of money for herself. This detail suggests that she was an important supporter to Jesus' ministry. She was generous. She was "all in" with her life and her money. But her devotion and generosity are misinterpreted. When a single woman is described as wealthy and allows her head to be uncovered, it was assumed that she obtained that money in a sinful way.

¹ Susan Robb, *Called: Hearing and Responding to God's Voice*, 105.

² Ibid.

Historically, Mary Magdalene has gotten a bad rap.³ She's mentioned in scripture about a dozen times, but all four gospels say that she was a follower of Christ, supporting Jesus' ministry, and that she was present for his crucifixion and resurrection. When most of the other disciples were hiding, she never left Jesus' side when he was on the cross. She watched him die, she brought spices to honor his body, and she was deeply grieved of his death.

She devoted her life to following Jesus, and Jesus calls her to be "the apostle to the apostles."⁴ As the scripture describes, Mary was looking for Jesus and was weeping. She turned around and saw Jesus but did not know it was him, until he spoke her name. Jesus calls Mary to "go" and tell the disciples that she has seen the Risen Lord. He entrusts this most important message, that will change the world, to Mary. She never expected this! She never expected to see Jesus again, much less be given a call as important as this. Jesus says to her on that Easter morning, "Do not hold on to me...Go, and tell the others" (v.17). And, she did.

Mary's call is our call. We all search for Jesus. Through tears, we look into the tombs of this world. Even when we find him, we may not realize it's him at first. We have seen the Lord through many people and situations, through kind words and deeds, through healing and hope. We have felt the Lord through prayers, God's presence, and peace. But, it's not until Jesus calls our name, that we know for sure it's him. After Jesus calls our name, he calls us

to go and tell others. We don't hold onto Jesus or keep Jesus for ourselves. We release the message of hope and love to the world.

God has a way of calling people who seem the least likely to fulfill God's purposes. Many people, along with many biblical characters, feel that we are not good enough or worthy enough to answer God's call. We make excuses – I'm too old. I'm too young. I'm too busy. Or, in Mary's case, I'm too female. God empowers and equips at each step, and we are worthy because God is worthy.

Some may think that Mary wasn't worthy of her call because of her reputation, a reputation that probably wasn't true. The Catholic Church did recant this depiction of Mary in 1969, but there are people, who still hold on to this misrepresentation. However, Jesus deems her worthy, and that's all that matters. When Jesus calls us, it is never what we expect, yet with every step, Jesus takes us beyond our expectations. Amen.

³ Ibid., 106.

⁴ Vatican 2016.