

Saints of Ill-Repute

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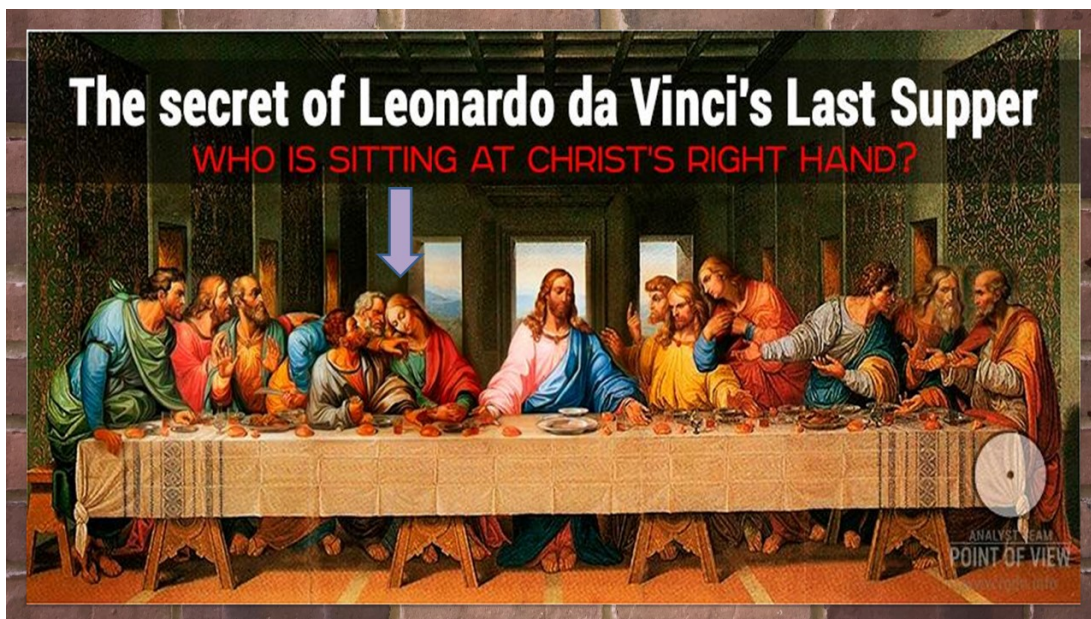
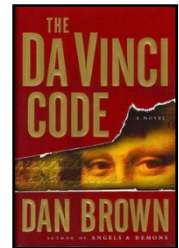
Sunday, July 22, 2018

John 20:1-16



I'm not sure I've ever preached about Mary Magdalene. She makes a cameo appearance on Easter, of course, but, because her feast day falls on this Sunday, I thought we should look at her story a bit more closely. Saints like Mary Magdalene have a great deal to teach us.

Legends about Mary abound, but she may be best known for false details and unproven facts about her. If you have read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or have seen the movie of the same name starring Tom Hanks, you may recall that a pivotal point is that Mary from Magdala and Jesus were married and had children and, therefore, heirs. She has been thought by some to be the "beloved disciple" to which the Gospel of John refers.



On the other hand, Mary also has been identified as a former prostitute, though there is nothing in the Bible to back up that rumor. It seems to have been started in a sermon by a sixth-century pope (making it the one time a congregation actually paid attention to something in a sermon!). Andrew Lloyd Webber included it as a plot point in *"Jesus Christ Superstar."* She frequently is identified as the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment and then wiped them with her hair. Again, there is nothing in the Bible that says this unnamed woman is Mary Magdalene, and, again, Webber reinforces this idea in the song "Everything's Alright," our modern lesson.



In literature, and in history, women have been marginalized and disempowered by making them only harlots or mothers or someone's wife. That seems to be the only way male authors have been comfortable dealing with the power of women.

Although this continues to this day, movements like #MeToo have begun to call attention to the pernicious abuse of women by men in power. As the father of two daughters, I was shocked as they were growing up by how often I had to correct the false impression made on them by society that they were less than or limited in what they could do or be.



Some Biblical scholars have suggested that Mary Magdalene was the first feminist, but I don't think that is true. There were women before her, like Sarah, and Deborah, and Ruth, and there have been millions of women since whose names have been forgotten.

There is an African proverb that says, "Until the lion learns to write, every story will glorify the hunter."

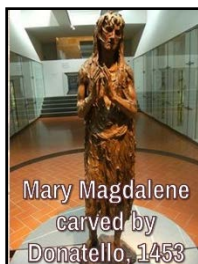
The heroism of women and people of color often has been ignored or forgotten by the men who write history, which makes it even more remarkable that Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all four Gospels. She must have made an undeniable impression with the power of her faith.

There is much we do not know about her, but we do know she was a follower of Jesus during his life. Mary is listed in Luke 8 with the other generous women who used their resources to fund the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. That trend continues to this day. While the super-rich philanthropists we read about are almost all white men, women are the ones who fund most charities and churches, not with their wealth but with their faithful gifts.



The women disciples of Jesus, like Mary Magdalene, can be found at the foot of the cross, while the men whose names we know have scattered in fear. Mary was there until the bitter end as they took Jesus' body down from the cross.

The sun was sinking in the west, and there was no time to do the proper ritual. All she could do was wrap his bloody body in linen and put him in a borrowed tomb.



We all have had love ones die. Hopefully not the violent torturous death that Jesus suffered, but still we all know how Mary must have felt the next day. All of the busyness and the routines suddenly stop. Now what? Many people stay busy by making arrangements, but, still, there is an almost embarrassed awkwardness. What do you do with yourself, especially if your

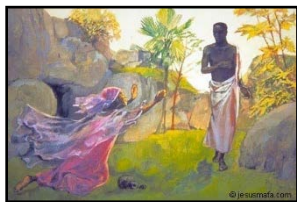
days have been spent caring for someone? I think Mary Magdalene should be the patron saint of that helpless feeling.

Perhaps that is why the Gospel lesson describes her as getting up a great while before day, taking the spices of burial and going to the garden where the tomb was. She simply couldn't sleep. She had to do something.

The four Gospels each offer different, and sometimes conflicting, details about that first Easter morning. The one we read today has Mary going alone to the tomb; others say three women went. Sceptics argue that these conflicts undermine the validity of the reports of that day, but, if you've ever heard four witnesses describe a traumatic or dramatic event, you know conflicting stories actually lend credibility to the incident.



The one thing on which all four Gospels agree is that Mary Magdalene was there. She was not there to greet Jesus; rather, she was there to do one last act of love, one final expression of faithfulness and devotion. Mary had watched Jesus die, and, like everyone else, she was grief stricken. Not only was Jesus gone, his death also had taken away all her dreams of God's promises.



It was not because of Mary's great faith, but because of her great faithfulness. Mary was the one to first learn of the resurrection. Notice that, even after she encountered Jesus, she still didn't believe him. She thought he was the gardener. That may seem odd to you, but that is why the Gospel makes a big deal that it was a great while before day. Dawn is the light in which Easter gets painted, but, for Mary, it was still dark. In the darkness, she couldn't recognize the answer to her prayers until he spoke her name. "Mary."

Dawn always breaks out of the night. God can send you all the stars in the universe, but, on bright shiny days, we simply cannot see them. The resurrection witness at the heart of our faith is that darkness is real, hate is damaging, and death is devastating, but, out of those things, we discover that light is stronger than darkness, love defeats hate, and, ultimately, life triumphs over death.

"Mary," Jesus said, and she was the first to learn that faith is not a creed nor a doctrine. It is a relationship. It calls our name in the night and beckons us into the light.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux called Mary Magdalene "the Apostle to the Apostles" because the word "apostle" means "One who is sent." Jesus sent her to tell the disciples of life. I'm surprised they believed her at all.

Although we have no evidence that Mary was a prostitute, the Gospels do say that Jesus delivered her from seven demons. Today, we are not sure what that means, but, during the time in which the story was written, it might have given the disciples an excuse to doubt her as a witness. Heck, in that day, women weren't allowed to be witnesses in court, and, in ours, they often are dismissed as emotional or unreliable. A dozen women can accuse a man of abuse, and, still, he can be believed over them.

Nevertheless, it was to Mary of Magdala that Jesus chose to reveal the greatest good news of all. Why not Peter or to his own mother? If I had been Jesus, I would have appeared to Pilate or Herod just to see the look on their faces!



No, Jesus picked Mary. Maybe it was simply because she was there, which is not a bad reason. I wonder how often God tries to speak to us, but we just don't

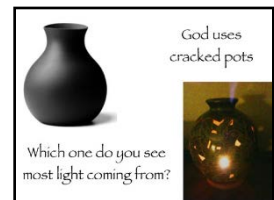
show up. I've learned never to think of someone who "needs" a certain worship service or sermon because that is the surest way to ensure they won't be a church that week. We are too much like Jacob who awoke from his dream to discover that God had been there, and he didn't even notice.



Even in her pain and grief, Mary showed up. She was there, available to encounter life and light and love again. Believe me; I know from personal experience that doing that is hard. In grief, you want to run away, to hide, to medicate, or to distract yourself from light that seems too bright for how you feel.

Mary was there, but I wonder if that wasn't also the way Jesus wanted it. Sure, Mary had her issues, and maybe she had a bad reputation, but think who Jesus liked to hang out with most days.

Ultimately, God seems to prefer filling cracked pots with light and love and grace. Perhaps that is because it is our cracks that let the light out and let the love leak into a world. **Mary's lesson to us is that we all are called to be God's cracked pots.**



Amen.