

A Red-Letter Day

John 20:11-18; I Corinthians 15:12-22

Given at the Union Church of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, NY, Easter, April 4, 2010 Rev. Mary B. Speers, Pastor

Today is a red-letter day!

Ever heard that expression? Ever wonder where it came from?

Well, a few weeks ago I decided to re-read *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, mostly because I heard it was John Irving's tribute to my favorite novelist, Robertson Davies, and there, right near the beginning, was the following:

"That was when," says the main character, "I first began to think about certain events or specific things being 'important' and having 'special purpose.' Until then, the notion that anything had a designated, much less a special, purpose would have been cuckoo to me. I was not what was commonly called a believer then, and I am believer now; I believe in God, and I believe in the 'special purpose' of certain events or specific things. I observe all holy days, which only the most old-fashioned Anglicans call red-letter days."

Hmmm, I thought, and went and looked it up.

Sure enough, right in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, that font of knowledge of all things Anglo-Catholic, that's what it said. In the old ecclesiastical calendar, it goes on to say, festival days had their titles printed in red ink, hence the idea that a day for celebration is a 'red-letter day.'

There, I said: *Aha*, I said—because preachers are always on the lookout for something fresh for Easter—*yippee! there's the sermon for Easter!* and, well...

If perchance your imagination led you straight from the red-letter day and Mary Magdalene to Hester Prynne and Nathaniel Hawthorne and the *Scarlet Letter*, I have to confess, so did mine.

Because, well...what do we know about Mary Magdalene, after all? Everything you can remember, quick now: Dan Brown, *The da Vinci Code*, scarlet woman, Bette Davis, *Jezebel*, you get the picture. The Devil with the Red Dress On.

Now in the beginning, Mary Magdalene had a better reputation. The early Church fathers called her *Apostola Apostolorum*, the Apostle to the Apostles, because she was the first to see the risen Lord, and the first one he "sent" to spread the Good News of the Resurrection (*Apostle* means "somebody sent"). For all their differences, all four Gospels actually agree on that—and it was a *woman, sent by Jesus, teaching men*.

Did you know that according to a very old legend from the Eastern Church, we have Mary Magdalene to thank for Easter Eggs? It seems Mary Magdalene was having dinner with the Emperor Tiberius (unlikely, but that's how legends go), and at the dinner, she recounted to the Emperor the Good News of the Resurrection of the Lord. The emperor scoffed at her, saying, "a man could no more rise from the dead than that egg in your hand could turn red." And of course, the egg turned red. And that's why Greek Easter eggs are always red. On your

bulletin cover today you have an icon, from the Orthodox tradition, of Mary Magdalene, and when you get a chance, have a look to see her holding her glowing red egg [scroll down]. It's so vibrant, it's like the sun rising to dispel the darkness.

And it seems that along with several women in the New Testament who the Gospels say supported the ministry of Jesus, she must, like them, have been wealthy in her own right, probably in the town of Migdal, or Magdala, not far from Nazareth on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. So where does the "sinner" stuff come from?

"Mary Magdalene," say the Gospel writers, "out of whom Jesus had cast seven devils," and then your mind goes immediately—doesn't it? Be honest!—immediately to the Seven Deadly Sins.

Well, some of you, if you've been studying the Bible at all, *you* know that it wasn't really devils or demons, at least not the way we think nowadays. We don't say "demon" anymore, we say "disease" instead. We don't talk much about evil, but instead we'll say something, or someone, is "sick." We talk about health or illness in exactly the same way the ancients talked about salvation or the forces of evil—and as you remember, "Salvation" comes from Latin *salvus*, which actually really means "health," not "immortality."

Oh, *no!* Whether we like it or not, if Jesus healed poor people and rich people, people he knew and people he didn't, the bleeding woman on the street and Mary Magdalene, the man at Bethsaida and the young man the middle-aged Roman officer loved so much that Jesus' only comment on their relationship was "not even among the faithful have I found such faith," well then, apparently he thought healing wasn't something you *deserved*: healing, or salvation, is God's free gift to all of us, none of us deserve it, and if salvation means healing, then apparently *Jesus practiced universal health care*. But hippity hoppity hoppity, it's Easter and I wasn't going to talk about politics...

So then, if, like mine, your mind went immediately from seven devils, or seven demons, to the Seven Deadly Sins, there, too, you're in good company.

By the Middle Ages, that's what *everyone* thought: in fact, like Mary Magdalene, and Peter and John, on that first Easter morning, I went on a treasure hunt, this time hunting through the literature on Mary Magdalene, and yes, there are all manner of legends about her in exactly that fallen-woman vein, and Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, and Davies's Mary Dempster, and Irving's Tabitha Wheelwright, for that matter, all fit in there nicely. Early on in medieval exegesis—Pope Gregory put the *imprimatur* on it, so to speak, preaching about it in the 6th century—Mary Magdalene gets conflated with the Woman Taken in Adultery, *and* the woman with the alabaster jar, the one who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume, who washed his feet and dried them with her hair. (John's Gospel starts the confusion by identifying this woman as Mary sister of Martha, although his is the only version to do so.) But you do remember her, she's the woman who, Jesus says, "loved much because she had been forgiven much."

And I even found, if you subscribe to the theory that the "much" she's been forgiven, the seven demons and all, means all seven of the Seven Deadly Sins, well, listen to this: do you

remember that woman with the expensive perfume in the equally expensive alabaster jar? Here she is, in a French medieval mystery play from 1486. The play uses Mary Magdalene to highlight the spiritual dangers of relative wealth and worldly preoccupations, and she has all seven Deadly (I won't read the medieval French, but here it is in English):

I am so haughty in my pride that I wish for no one to be superior to me, and I am so carnal and so vain that I spend the time in laziness; on the other hand, I fight and threaten, after which I abound in possessions, and I am happy when I hoard the great riches of the world.

So by the end of the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene has become, well, sort of a Lady Gaga figure, about as far from a powerful spiritual leader, or even the ideal of Virtuous Femininity, as you can get, and that's how you see her in the art of the day. They didn't have YouTube, but, well, think about it, as you can imagine, penitence was heady stuff, don't you know, you could feel pious all the time you were gawking at pictures of her with flowing hair and general *désabille*, and yes, always a red dress—see it there, or a kind of robe anyway, in your icon, and turn around and see it, rather restrained, but red nonetheless, in our Tiffany window, which illustrates this morning's story? That's one of the ways, when you're looking at art, you can tell it's Mary Magdalene; Mary the Mother of the Lord is always in blue. Blue like the sky, red like the earth, like blood, like passion: that's the idea.

Something about Mary Magdalene, patron of both fallen women *and* contemplatives—our shadow side and our highest aspirations, you see—appeals to us. She reassures us. And come to think of it, by the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is sought for her wise advice, and Mary Dempster—well, at least one man believes she's a saint, miracles and all. If there's hope for Mary Magdalene, you see, then there's hope for you and me, even as we pray that famous prayer with Saint Augustine, "O Lord, grant me chastity, only not just yet." (In the Middle Ages you had to make people laugh on Easter to drive the Devil away.)

That's the good news of the Resurrection, in fact, or part of it, anyway—the comedy that drives the Devil away: that *Mary Magdalene* was chosen by God in Jesus Christ to be the first witness to the Resurrection. That's right, at least in the traditional way of thinking: such a consummate sinner, chosen for such an honor! Everyone in the Middle Ages was anxious about Salvation. To those of us who are kind of medieval in our thinking, too, worried about our sinfulness: truly God is good, for no matter how sinful we are—those of us who, down through the ages, have sometimes felt that we are *so* bad that not even God can love us—no matter how low we have come, there is redemption for all, a place for all, a purpose for all, salvation, health, wholeness, healing from all our demons, in the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If there's hope for Mary Magdalene, you see, then there's hope for you and me.

That's why the Apostle Paul points out that, at the time of the crucifixion, Jesus was a convicted terrorist (trying to overthrow the government); a blasphemer, claiming to be divine ("son of God"); *and* the product of an illicit union besides ("Virgin birth? Humbug! Everyone in Nazareth knows Joseph isn't his real father!"). That's what Paul means when he says, "For our sake God made him to *be* sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." ¹¹ *Cor* 5:21 In other words, God was even willing in Christ to personify, in

people's minds, some of the worst sins they could think of—and all that for our salvation—indeed, for the salvation, the health, the fulfillment, the *shalom* of the whole creation.

But what about the rest of us? What about those of us who say, well, that's all well and good, but I'm not that big a sinner. I'm kind of an amateur in the sins department."

"What does all this have to do with *me*?" I'm hearing some of you thinking. "Rising from the dead? It's impossible!" you're maybe even thinking. "Sure, the preacher believes it, well of course she does, it's her *job* to believe all that crazy stuff, *somebody* should, I suppose, but that doesn't mean *I* have to! How many minutes till I can have some of Lorrie's lamb cake?" And maybe you're thinking, "Why, a man could no more rise from the dead than Ginny's Easter eggs back there could turn red!"

Well, the Apostle Paul had something to say about that, as well, and it's in one of the readings for today:

"If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead," he says, then "how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." **1 Cor 15:12-22**

(Hasn't there been such a time of darkness in your life? A time before the dawn when, like Mary Magdalene, you can't even recognize the Lord until, softly, he speaks your name?)

What a promise! If this man *has* come back from the dead, then that means *everything he did or said was, in fact, against all logic, actually OF GOD.*

Yes, **OF COURSE** it's impossible! That's the whole point! As Paul says again, "who hopes for what they can see?"

It's salvation for spectacular sinners, and for just ordinary, oblivious sinners like you and me. Salvation even for such a sinner Mary Magdalene has been supposed popularly to be. All of us, at least that's the hope; *everyone*—that's right, *all of us*; all our apathy; our lethargy; our cynicism; our simple-minded literalism that calls itself practicality; our prideful disdain for anyone, or any created being, we consider beneath us (including but not limited to anyone who we think doesn't deserve health care, stop it, Mary)...

The Resurrection of the Lord means ALL will be transformed, "we shall all be changed," says Paul, into what God intended us to be all along, the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ. And this is a promise not only for you and me, but for the whole creation! What a day for celebration! Can't you see the glorious sun, rising like a big red Easter egg on this glorious morning of the Resurrection! A red-letter day, indeed! *The* red-letter day, in fact, because, finally, *everything is the way it's supposed to be.* AMEN.

