

Wangaratta Wesleyan Methodist Church Easter Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2015

## The Greatest Love Story Ever Told

Bible Passages: John 3:16-17; 15:13; John 20:1-18

### What a big week we have had...

**Intro:** You know there is nothing more powerful than the testimony of a transformed life. Explain. It testifies to the message and agent of change.

#### 1) Who was Mary Magdalene?

Have you ever wondered why Mary Magdalene was the first person to meet the risen Lord Jesus? I mean why wasn't it Peter, after all he was the one whom Jesus said the church would be built on and Peter was one of Jesus closest friends who probably spent the most time with Jesus in his three years of public ministry.

Or why wasn't it John for he was often referred to as the disciple that Jesus loved; he obviously had a very special bond with Jesus. Both Peter and John were the first of the 12 disciples to discover that Jesus had disappeared from the tomb. Jesus could have chosen to greet them first but no he waited till they had gone.

Why not Mary the mother of Jesus. Surely as his mother she should have been the first to meet the risen Lord. No it was Mary Magdalene.

Now I'm not trying to suggest that there is a huge theological reason behind Jesus choosing Mary Magdalene to be the first to witness his resurrection but it is interesting and I want to explore it this morning.

So who was Mary Magdalene?

Throughout history she has endured...

##### a. An unfair association

Some have wrongly speculated that she was a prostitute, the same women who in Luke Ch 7 washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair then anointed Jesus' feet with perfume. It seems that because Mary Magdalene was mentioned in the next chapter of Luke as one of the women who was traveling with Jesus that she was the un-named prostitute from the previous chapter. There is no reason to link the two together.

Mary was...

##### b. From the town of Magdala

... a thriving town on the shore of Lake Galilee only three km from where Jesus spent most of his time in Capernaum. According to the Jewish Talmud Magdala was known for its prostitution and so the assumption was also made that Mary from Magdala or Mary Magdalene as she was known was a woman of suspicious character.

Again this was a wrong and unfair association. Magdala it seems was a wealthy town whose dye works and primitive textile factories added to the prosperity of the community. Maybe Mary was connected with the industry of the town for to be able to follow Jesus around and

help support him and the disciples she would have to have had substantial means behind her.

Most of the references to Mary Magdalene in the bible are recorded around the death and resurrection scenes. The only mention of Mary in the body of the Gospels is in Luke 8:1-3. Here she is...

### **c. Healed from past affliction**

Read from Luke 8:1-3. 'After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him,<sup>2</sup> and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; <sup>3</sup>Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.'

Comment on what Mary was healed from. Seven is a sign of completeness in the bible so we could say that Mary was completely dominated by the demonic. It possibly could not have been worse for her.

There is a saying that rings true in the bible...

## **2) Forgiven much – love much**

Let's look at...

### **a. What Jesus taught about this**

As Jesus was at the home of Simon the Pharisee a sinful woman came and washed his feet with her tears and anointed him with perfume. As she did Jesus turned to Simon and told a story.

Two men owed money to someone but they had no means to pay it back. One of the men's debts was ten times that of the other yet the moneylender cancelled both of their debts fully. Jesus then asked Simon which of the men would love the moneylender the most. Simon said the one whose debt was the greater.

Jesus commended him for getting the right answer then turned to the sinful woman and made the point that she had showed extravagant love toward Jesus in comparison to Simon because she had been forgiven much more.

Jesus summed up this story by saying: "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

This was also true for Mary Magdalene as she had been healed, set free and forgiven for much.

### **b. (Mary Magdalene is set free)**

We have already looked at what she was healed from but let's try to piece together what this change must have been like for her.

We don't know what caused Mary to be vulnerable to demonic possession but the fact that she had seven demons cast out indicates that her state before this deliverance must have been horrific. Was her mind deranged, was she violent and aggressive, was she dishevelled in looks? Maybe, we can't be sure but we can be sure that she had no peace, no contentment, no sound mind and ability to love and be loved. She was bound and controlled by the demonic within her and powerless to do anything about it.

Fortunately the very reason Jesus came was to break the power of the enemy over people's lives. He came to set the captives free to deal with sin and place us on a course for eternity with our risen and victorious Lord.

We see another striking example of this release from demonic captivity in the healing of the demonic man from the Gerasenes. This man was violent towards others and himself, mentally disturbed, and living alone, like an animal in the hills outside of the town. But when Jesus came and entered his world he set him free from the demonic. The transformation was immediate as he became peaceful with a sound mind, clothed like a human and sitting content before Jesus. What a story he had to tell!

It is interesting that his desire, like Mary's, was to follow Jesus immediately. Why? Because he had been set free and forgiven from much and much was his love for his redeemer. Jesus denied his request to follow him in person rather he sent him back to his own people to tell them what Jesus had done. I wonder what the impact was in his town as this man who had been forgiven much and now loved much told his story.

What is your story? Have you been forgiven much therefore love much? Or maybe I should ask, do you only love a little because you have, by the world's standards, been forgiven little?

I don't think it should matter how much we have been forgiven, our love still should be extravagant toward God after all it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus we are saved not by our own efforts. We all like sheep have gone astray and find ourselves lost completely except for the grace of God. Yet if we are honest how many of us hold a sense of entitlement towards our salvation because we haven't sinned as much as others?

May we regardless of the 'size' of our sin ask God for deep humility and the capacity to love him extravagantly?

As Mary's love for Jesus was so desperate it seemed her...

**c. (Mary's) need was greater**

It is interesting that in most of the places that Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the gospels she is listed by person and with only one exception is listed first among the other women. These women had left their jobs and family connections and responsibilities to devote themselves to taking care of the needs of Jesus and his disciples. Because she always headed the list of godly females caring for Jesus we can assume that no other woman superseded her in her devotion to Jesus.

No wonder Mary was present right throughout the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. No wonder she was there watching as Joseph from Arimathea took Jesus' body off the cross and quickly prepared it for burial in a new tomb. No wonder Mary was one of a few woman to arrive at the tomb before dark on the first day of the week to place spices on the body of Jesus.

So no wonder Mary was the first one to greet the risen Lord. Her need was great and I wonder if that was the reason Jesus chose to greet her first.

### **3) (The risen Lord)**

So what difference did the risen Lord make in Mary's life?

Firstly her...

#### **a. Grief turned to joy**

Mary had given up all to follow Jesus. She had devoted the past year or two to care for his needs. She as well as the other women must have had finances behind them to have done what they did.

What would they do now that Jesus was dead? Go back to their home towns and former way of living? But nothing made sense now. Why had this journey gone so horribly wrong? Was Jesus simply not powerful like he indicated?

How could we identify with Mary? Have you ever been 'living the dream' and then suddenly the carpet is pulled from beneath your feet and all that you hoped in has disappeared?

I'm sure that Mary in her grief had little sleep in the past three nights. How could one sleep carrying such disappointment and grief? Well the least she could do in honouring Jesus was to give him a decent burial. So off she went before dark.

So then can we somehow imagine her joy when with spices in hand for a corpse she hears a most familiar voice calling her name. There through the tears of grief her eyes finally focus enough to realise it really was Jesus calling her. Jesus is standing before her the very one she saw with her own eyes beaten and nailed to the cross, crying out his final breath and which she witnessed the soldier pierce his side. Jesus the same limp body that was carried to the tomb and encased in the side of the hill.

No wonder she found herself prostrate before him clinging to his feet in disbelief and adoration.

Secondly meeting the risen Lord meant her...

**b. Eternity was secured**

Jesus resurrection from the dead changed everything. Mary was soon to learn that Jesus didn't intend to hang around on earth but 40 days later was to ascend to the Father. Despite not having the physical Jesus around she discovered like we also realise that Jesus' resurrection paves the way for our resurrection from the dead.

So now Mary not only had a Lord who loved her and set her free from the bondage of sin but a Lord who defeated death also paving the way for her complete salvation. Her eternity was secured. Now she could be loved and love Jesus for eternity. You and I also have that privilege.

Thirdly she now had...

**c. A testimony to tell!**

Mary couldn't wait to tell the story to the disciples. I wonder what she was thinking as she ran back through the gates into Jerusalem early that morning, past the familiar sights that only a few hours ago had looked so grey and uninteresting. Now everything seems to appear different as the sun beamed across the waking city.

She had a story to tell that would bring gladness to the hearts of any who would listen. She was the first to announce the good news that Jesus has risen. A testimony that has continued to be announced ever since in every nation and language known to mankind.

Just seven weeks later as the disciples, their wives and friends and the women, who had supported Jesus in his ministry, gathered together praying all of a sudden the Holy Spirit descended in power upon them, now there was even a greater urgency to tell the story of Jesus' resurrection. Now not only did they have a story to tell but the power to deliver it.

I wonder how many times Mary told her story and how many times people were blown away by her testimony? I wonder how many times the healed demonic man also shared his amazing story? Have you a story to tell? Well if you know the healing and restoring power of the risen Lord Jesus then you have a story to tell and others need to hear it. I have and I trust you do also.

And just like Mary we could say along with her about the transformation that has come over us: Jesus saw beyond the mess, beyond the sadness beyond the addiction, loneliness and depression, beyond the rubbish that we take on board to the person that was made in the image of his Father God.

We can say He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. He sacrificed himself for the rubbish in my life and then rose again to secure my eternal salvation. He saw beyond to what was possible; a person set free to love and worship God for ever.

This has to be the greatest love story ever told! A love so great that would cause a Father to send his only son to save a world that is rotten in sin.

**Conclusion:** We have looked at what difference the risen Lord make in Mary's life? What about you, what difference has the risen Lord made in your life? Or what difference could the risen Lord Jesus make in your life? Explain.

Message by: Pastor David Lloyd