

Homily – Mary Magdala

As I was preparing for the homily today, I read from a book by Michael Haag titled *“The Quest for Mary Magdalene.”* The book discusses Mary of Magdala’s life in the context of the political, geographical, and cultural influences of the time: the life and times of Jesus. Mary’s story is interwoven with Jesus in different ways: ways in which I’m sure many of us are familiar. Mary, and other women, helped to fund Jesus’ ministry. It is thought that Mary Magdala was the Mary referenced in John’s Gospel who anointed Jesus in Bethany. Mary was at the foot of the cross looking on as Jesus was crucified. Mary came to the tomb and found that it was empty.

“The Quest for Mary Magdalene” also discusses the many ways that Mary, and other women who followed Jesus, were essentially written out of the narrative because of patriarchal systems not only during the time in which the gospels were written, but for the decades and centuries that followed, up through modern times. It also discussed the mischaracterizations of Mary Magdala that have been perpetuated for the benefit of largely patriarchal Catholic Church.

One of the most interesting inaccuracies that I learned about was regarding the origin of Mary’s name. I, like many, assumed that Magdala referred to a place: a town or landmark on the maps of the Holy Land from the time of Jesus. What I learned, though, was that although there is some speculation that Magdala may have referred to “Magadan,” a town on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, the author of the book conjectures that it is more likely that Magdala was a nickname. He remarks that Jesus was known to provide his disciples with nicknames: Simon was nicknamed Peter. James and John were nicknamed Boanerges, meaning “The sons of thunder.” Peter was known as Cephas, meaning “rock.”

In Aramaic, the word “magdal” means “tower.” And, in the old testament, the Hebrew word “migdal” was used numerous times, identifying towers in the Holy Land that were either fortifications, high places used to overlook flocks of animals, or as lighthouses on the shores of bodies of water. Jesus nicknamed Mary: Mary Magdala. Mary the Tower.

This image and symbolism resonated with me. I don’t know if because as a New Englander, I grew up around light houses, or if because as a visual learner, imagery evokes meaning for me. But, either way, learning about this nickname was exciting and helped me to come to a new understanding and appreciation for Mary Magdala. Mary was a “visionary”: a lighthouse for women and people of all genders through the centuries and today, making us remember the ways that women were intimately entwined in Jesus’ ministry during his lifetime, and after in the spreading of the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. How many women have you known in your life who have been visionaries, towers of faith, witnesses to the hope of the resurrection? Some of them may be here in the church today.

One of these women for me was my Nana, Maria Lourdes Leite. She was named after our Lady of Lourdes, and obviously not named after Mary Magdala. But, she embodied some of the same characteristics and values as Mary Magdala, so much so, that maybe she was more akin to this Mary than Jesus’ mother.

Nana was a first generation American. Her parents were born in the Açores, Portuguese islands in the Atlantic. Nana was born in Lowell on October 5, 1925. She was the second child in her family: her older sister was 12 years older, and a younger sister and brother came along a little after. She met my Papa when he returned from deployment in the Army band stationed in Germany. He had met my Nana’s brother in the band and came home before he did to meet her. The rest is history!

Not all towers are tall. At 4 foot 11, my Nana's resemblance to a tower didn't have much to do with height. However, she embodied other characteristics that likened her to Mary Magdala, Mary the Tower.

Nana was a visionary, too. After graduating from high school, she wanted to fulfill her aspiration of becoming a secretary. She attended the Bradshaw Business College and worked as a secretary in the Personnel Office for the United Elastic Corporation for many years. She had an established career and was known in her family for her independence and reliability. She drove her parents and siblings around Lowell and was a caregiver to others. She got married at the "old age" of 30. She was an excellent typist and writer, inspiring her children, my father and aunt, to achieve their own goals and dreams of attending college. My Mary, my Nana, was a guiding lighthouse in my life: she taught me that working hard to achieve an education and career was worth it, and that good things, like a partner in life, were worth waiting for.

My Mary, my Nana, was a shepherd to her flock. After my Papa died in 1990, my Nana moved in with my family. I was a toddler. I never knew anything else. Nana found joy in playing school with my brother and I, and reading to us. She took pride in the achievements of her three grandchildren in music, dance, and education endeavors. She never said "no" to watching us so our parents could go out or get chores done.

My Mary, my Nana, was a woman of deep faith. Nana came to church with us every Sunday; or at least this is how I remember it. My dad says that it's more that we went to church with Nana. My dad remembers waking up as a child on Sunday mornings to Nana putting on his socks and saying, "We're going to mass." She modeled prayerful reverence for my brother and I, a few squirmy kids. When I would come into her room, when she wasn't catching a Red Sox game or reading,

she was praying. She prayed from the pocket prayer book that had belonged to my Papa. She prayed the Rosary. She showed me how to pray.

In the gospel we heard today from John, Mary Magdala finds the tomb empty and moments later, finds Jesus, resurrected. She had the assurance that the promise of eternal life was real and true. I learned though, that in Mark's Gospel as it was originally written, Mary came to the tomb and found it empty, but did not encounter the risen Jesus; that part was added later. Finding the tomb open and empty was enough to show to Mary, the other women, and Jesus' followers that he had risen.

Surprisingly, I like this version of the resurrection story better. I can get this experience. I wasn't there that third day. None of us were. We did not see Jesus standing there instructing us to go forth and tell others what we'd seen. My Nana had not been at the tomb either, but she never appeared to doubt her faith. She never once indicated that she feared she would never see her beloved partner, my Papa again. Her faith in the resurrection was certain.

We believe in the resurrection because of the witness of Mary Magdala and others who passed along the good news to us in our lives. These are our towers of faith. As a child, I asked my dad in a moment of anxiety, fear, and doubt, how he could be so sure about God. How did he know that Jesus was real? He replied that he knew because of the presence of his father, my Papa, the most generous, loving person he had ever known. Papa was my father's tower. Nana is mine. Who is yours? May we all be towers of faith for others, spreading the good news of Jesus' resurrection.