

Rabboni

by the Rev. Geoffrey Childs

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Mary Magdalene was among the most highly chosen of women, for she was the first to see the risen Lord. She was privileged to witness an event of the greatest magnitude, one that will never be forgotten. Yet we know almost nothing of the personal history of this woman. It was only at the time of the crucifixion that she stepped into the light of the greatest event in the history of the world.

We are told one thing about her life before this. The gospel of Mark tells us that "out of Mary Magdalene Jesus had cast seven devils." Spiritually speaking, these words are the key to Mary's character, for they explain why she was chosen. "Seven" represents all, or completeness; and the "devils" represent the heinous qualities of hell. It is clear then that at one time Mary Magdalene was evil, and at that time she represented a completely depraved state. Before her liberation by the Lord, she depicted humankind—unliberated humankind—in our native evil.

It seems unfair that a woman who had been so degraded was permitted to see the risen Lord first. Yet there was nothing degrading in it. For all of us, at one time in our lives, are potentially in that state represented by Mary Magdalene. We are unregenerate. And the promise of this story is that, even as such, we are actually able—if we will it—to change, and to see the risen Lord. There is no one who cannot change. At some point in life, the Lord gives all people the temporary ability to see ourselves as we are. And then He gives us the strength to change, to ascend that path that leads out of self-love. We can actually, as it were, rise out of ourselves. To respond to the Lord is to understand and live that first teaching of the Word, that to shun evil is to find heaven.

The name "Mary" is derived from the Hebrew word "Miryam," which represents charity (*Arcana Coelestia* 8337). "Magdalene" is thought to come from the Hebrew "migdol," meaning tower. These words disclose the inner representation of Mary *after* the seven devils were cast out: she represents a tower of charity. After our proprium has been rejected, a tower of charity is raised up, taking the place of the rejected evil.

The experiences of Mary Magdalene early on Easter morning reveal what happens when charity first begins to rule. "On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, when it was still dark." The first day of the week for the Jews was Sunday, our sabbath. And the sabbath day represents peace—peace that follows the agonies of temptation. However, when Mary came to the sepulcher, it was still dark. Darkness is a state of obscurity in the understanding, when the light of heaven is absent. Up to the time of His crucifixion, the Lord on earth represented the faith of people who have not yet "cast out the seven devils." That is, He depicted faith that is not yet truly eternal or our own. As long as evil is a dominant force within us, this faith cannot really be living. However, it is an obvious truth that we must have some

faith, some guide, during the time that we are repenting and beginning reformation. If we are ever going to reject evil as the dominant force in our lives, we must have *some* faith that enables us to fight, even though this faith is not yet alive in itself.

This faith is the love that we have for the teachings of our church, even though, for the most part, we believe them without clear light. It is also the affection we have for the simple truths of the Word—truths we have resolved to follow regardless of the difficulty. Such faith is affectional, yet lacks the light of heaven. It is a faith that rules both with the simple and the intellectual, as long as we are beginning to shun evil. With most New Church people, it is a faith that believes that the Writings are the Lord speaking to us but which, at the same time, involves little understanding of many of His teachings.

The crucifixion of the Lord is the death of such a nearly-blind faith, a faith that sees so little. For the time comes when what is inadequate must die and what is immortal and alive must take its place. This occurs when charity begins to rule and be the dominant force for the first time. Then faith that is not truly alive must perish, as the Lord was crucified. At this time we seem to be left alone, in darkness, as Mary Magdalene was alone at the Lord's sepulcher in the early morning.

When Mary saw that the stone was rolled away and the body gone, she "stood outside by the tomb weeping." For a while, at this stage of regeneration, we feel alone—without any guide. The faith we had believed in has died and disappeared. We don't know where to turn or what to do. And so we mourn, as Mary wept, for the complete loss of the only guide we have ever known.

As Mary wept, "she stooped down and looked into the tomb. She saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain" (John 20:11-12). In our bewilderment at this time, we go to the Word—to the two Testaments, and the Writings—to see what has happened. But these Divine revelations seem like a sepulcher to us, because we can no longer find any life within the Word. It is then that the angels are seen. The angel at the head represents the truth of the Writings; the angel at the feet, the teachings of the two Testaments. We suddenly become aware of a new light in the tomb of revelation. When we read from the Testaments and the Writings, we are aware of an inner light that we can't explain or understand.

The two angels said to Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When we become aware of the new, mystifying light in the revelations, we are filled with a sense of wonder and of bewilderment. This new light is unexplained. We are still not sure where the Lord (whom we formerly followed) is. And this light within revelation, though it is an awing thing, is not enough to satisfy the yearning of our hearts. Even after she saw the angels, Mary still mourned that the body of Jesus had been stolen away. So we still mourn the loss of our dead faith.

Mary turned back, away from the sepulcher, "and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking? She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, 'Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him.'" The vegetation in a garden represents rational doctrine within our understanding. Until we progress in regeneration, the rational teachings of our faith are only intellectual ideas in our minds—ideas which we believe, but don't really see spiritually. Rational

truths aren't really alive to us; they are simply ideas, enjoyable to contemplate. The Lord is the gardener of such intellectual concepts in us. He cares for them and aids their growth. Therefore, it was correspondential that Mary thought Jesus to be a gardener.

It was then that the supposed gardener said: "Mary." And "she turned and said to Him, 'Rabboni!'" For years we have been hearing the teachings of the Word and the Writings and have believed them intellectually. But these same teachings may never have affected our inner heart—they never really moved us with unbearable joy. But now, suddenly, these same abstract teachings become profoundly alive. We find them touching us, overwhelming us with delight. Our whole heart experiences a complete change, so that the truths that formerly only pleased us *mentally* now move our hearts to joy. We suddenly realize fully that truth is immortal and alive. We see that the caretaker of these truths is not a mere gardener. The affection and joy Mary expressed in the word, "Rabboni!" *are* Easter. With charity, the Lord is alive—forever. For in charity the resurrected Lord stands surrounded by a garden of living truth. He then speaks directly, clearly, and lovingly, as Jesus spoke directly to Mary, saying her name. Our reaction has the same joy within it: "Rabboni! (which is to say, Teacher)." At last we have truly found our eternal Lord.

Within this miracle are all the other miracles taught indirectly by the Easter story. In Mary's word "Rabboni" there is recognition of life after death, of peace after temptation, of spiritual spring after winter. All these things are ours because the Lord arose from the tomb on Easter morning. Mary's recognition of the Lord is the human heart making its greatest discovery. The Lord Jesus is not just a name, not just an ancient figure out of childhood church stories. Rather, He is alive! He is our the Teacher of our heart's inmost loves and tenderest affections. And so it is our hearts, our repentant hearts that first make life's most poignant discovery when we turn to the Lord and recognize Him as our living God.

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Amen.

Lessons: John 19:1-18; John 20:1-31, *Doctrine of the Lord* 35:9, 10:36