St Mary Magdalene 22 July 2018:

Song of Solomon 3: 1-4; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-17; John 20: 1-2, 11-18

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I will seek him whom my soul loves…. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them…. Then the disciples returned to their homes – (the passage we heard today is somewhat truncated and that phrase is from the bit that was omitted by today’s lectionary) – But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

One little snippet from each of this morning’s readings, which seemed to me to be relevant to my thoughts on the feast of Mary Magdalene, celebrated today in the church’s calendar.

My year at senior school had far too many Janes in it: ten percent of the sixty girls who started with me at Dame Allan’s Girls’ School in Newcastle were called Jane. Similarly, the Bible has way too many Marys…. Whether Mary Magdalene is the same woman as the prostitute in chapter seven of Luke’s gospel is unclear. She is also occasionally associated with the Mary who lived in Bethany – the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We know very little about her, which is probably why we and others make these attempts to identify her with other known characters–we want to expand her; to understand her character and to place her more clearly within the context of Jesus’ life and ministry.

What does appear to be clear is that Mary Magdalene has been healed of some mental disorder, but despite that healing, she still shows some signs of it – certainly in John’s account of her witnessing to the resurrection, she is flapping around a bit ….

What is also clear though – and actually much more significant – is that Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection in both of these versions of the gospel. In St Mark, she is a witness alongside Mary the mother of James, and Salome, while in John, she is alone at the empty tomb and alone in the presence of the risen Christ.

But, whichever account we look at, in both of them Mary Magdalene is sent away – by a young man, the angel, in Mark, and by Jesus himself in John – sent away to tell the disciples that the scripture had now been fulfilled. Sent away – the very meaning of the word ‘apostle’. This woman, Mary Magdalene, stands on the threshold of the apostolic ministry, the being-sent-out-to-share-the-Gospel ministry, at a time when the men – the disciples whom Jesus breathed on and sent out – had gone…

So then, where are the disciples in this story? (*In Mark’s gospel, it straddles the join between chapters 15 and 16 if you want to go away and read it to compare them later).* Little care was normally taken over the corpses of the crucified but it is a respected member of the Council, Joseph of Arimathea in Mark’s version, who bravely asks for the body and provides Jesus with what is effectively a rich man’s funeral. This was, after all, the eve of the Sabbath and, as such, the nicer points of the funeral rites like the anointing of the body had to wait until the day of rest was over.

Where are the disciples? At the earliest possible opportunity after the Sabbath, three women come to honour the dead as best they can with spices, in the way that we might now bring flowers to lay on a grave.

Where are the disciples? One biblical commentator suggests that they were simple, practical-minded men who just couldn't see the point.

I believe we are incredibly fortunate in +Stephen, our diocesan bishop, here in the diocese of Chelmsford: he is a man unafraid to speak the gospel and to speak the truths that are difficult to hear, and today, as we look forward to the installation later this afternoon of a new Area Bishop of Bradwell, we pray for him, that he too might be a disciple unafraid to stand up and be counted. But how many other bishops and members of General Synod might that be said of?

I don’t believe that Synod and the House of Bishops today is generally populated by judgemental people but I do wonder if it might be populated by people who are afraid of judgemental people – which might be part of the reason why the Church of England sometimes seems devoid of energy, imagination and guts. Because to be afraid of judgemental people – of the judgment of others - is, by definition, to exercise bad judgement.

The one who is a woman and used to persecution on her own account is the hero of today’s story. A woman – a woman with some sort of mental health issues, past and maybe also ongoing – a woman who might have been a prostitute – a woman who was but human and prone to further sin beyond the encounters we read of her – is chosen by God to be the first witness to the resurrection. And the Church spends endless amounts of time debating what to do with people who don’t conform to some Anglican stereotype which in real life doesn’t actually exist anyway.

The feast day of Mary Magdalene is a day when judgement is to be put aside: a day to celebrate the apostolic ministry of all women, indeed all minority apostles, a day to question whether practical-minded men and imagination can ever be reconciled, a day when we must all stand at the mouth of the empty tomb regardless of the baggage we come carrying.

But don’t come if you aren’t willing to take risks; don’t come if you fear the judgements of others: go home, along with those practical-minded men, and try to work out what the point is. For myself, though I do fear the judgements of others at times, and though I have gone through depression too, it is still better to just head for the tomb and have done with it.

It is there at that tomb that we discover that life is for living and that the judgement against us has already been taken away. Mary Magdalene is there – and so are a whole host of tax collectors and sinners just like us.

Just as a sort of footnote: much is sometimes made of the hints at Mary Magdalene’s mental health issues. I don’t want to let them define who she was – today or any day – but at the same time, neither should mental health be something that we ignore or sweep under the carpet. It might be seen as a platitude, but I prefer to see it as a truism, that depression is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign that you have been strong for too long.

Let us all continue to seek him whom our soul loves; let us remember that he died for all, so that we who live might live no longer for ourselves, but for him; and let us not be the ones who return to our homes, but who remain seeking him at the tomb. **Amen**