

Mary Magdalene - The Da Vinci Code - Resurrection of Jesus

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 28th of November 2004. The preacher is Bishop Paul Barnett.

His sermon is entitled Mary Magdalene, The Da Vinci Code and the Resurrection of Jesus. It is based on John chapter 20 verses 1.

John chapter 218. Well, the tide has gone out as far as it can. It now starts to come in or there's a wind shift or something like that.

I think a number of people, including myself, have a sense that there's a wind shift, a change of tide, a change of some kind happening out there in a wider world and it may represent a time of opportunity for us as Christians.

I'll come back to that a bit later on. From the passage in John chapter 20, I want to direct our thoughts to three consecutive scenes as the story of John unfolds.

[1 : 09] The first relates to the morning of Easter Day. And we see here the dedication of Mary of Magdala. Magdala is a fishing town on the north western shore of the Sea of Galilee between Tiberias and Capernaum.

And Mary of Magdala was apparently a woman of means, a woman of wealth, according to Luke's gospel. She was a number of women who provided financially for Jesus and the disciples.

And she is celebrated, really, in the gospel of John, along with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, for seeking to rescue the honour of Jesus, who had been humiliated both in death, but also in the disposal of the body.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus intervened. The disciples are nowhere to be seen. They have fled. And had it been left to the authorities, the body of Jesus simply would have been dumped in a pit somewhere for criminals and malefactors.

Somewhere as far from the holy city of Jerusalem and its temple as practical. And it was these two men who were eminent, wealthy, significant men in their day, who really risked and probably suffered excommunication from the synagogue and from their place in the society, as it were, to do something, to intervene, to take the body of Jesus down, to see to its proper anointing and wrapping and then burial.

[3 : 01] And Mary has to be attached to those two men in this continued care for the body of Jesus. Her reason for coming to the tomb, it would appear, is to ensure that, in fact, he had been properly laid to rest.

And it was with some concern, apparently, that she finds the tomb unsealed. And the likelihood that the authorities have, in fact, removed the body and dumped it in some distant place.

So she is a person, I believe, who is to be honoured, as the Apostle John, in his Gospel, does indeed honour her, along with Nicodemus and Joseph, for the concern that she showed.

It's a matter of regret, to me at least, therefore, that her name has been muddied over the centuries. In the first instance, it has been calumniated by a Pope, Pope Gregory, famous for his work on the calendar, the Gregorian calendar, which we substantially use.

But Pope Gregory, in a sermon that he preached in the year 590 AD, really portrayed Mary Magdalene in a very bad light. He said she was the sinner of Luke chapter 7, which, of course, is pure speculation and completely unfounded.

[4 : 22] He said that that woman, indeed, was likely a prostitute, he said, which is, again, not stated in the text. He said that the seven spirits passed out of her by our Lord really were the seven deadly sins that that world was interested in.

And that, therefore, she was as guilty as guilty could be about every conceivable vice. And, therefore, she had the very bad name. Indeed, our word, maudlin, which is a negative word, is derived from her name or the place that she comes from, Magdala.

And the bad name that she had until, in the Roman Catholic Church, at least until 1969, I think it was, when there began to be other statements that rescued her name from the calumny that she suffered for all those years.

More recently, though, in the Da Vinci Code and a book before that, Holy Blood, Holy Grail, again, without any historical basis at all, she has been linked as being sexually intimate with Jesus.

And, between them, the parents of a daughter named Sarah. And, according to Holy Blood, Holy Grail, and now the Da Vinci Code, which is piggybacked on the same idea, that this daughter, Sarah, became the foundation of a French dynasty of kings.

[5 : 49] And, hence, the conspiracy theory that underlies the Da Vinci Code, which is still, after two years, I believe, the number one bestseller, and a movie soon to be made with Tom Hanks, I understand, as the leading character in it.

The Da Vinci Code, apart from being a fairly racy and readable novel, really has got a major conspiracy theory running through it, which appears to have influenced many people.

It is based entirely on a series of speculations and conjectures, which have no basis in history or in fact. The book itself is marred by a number of significant historical errors.

Let me mention some of them. It mentions, it says, for example, that there was no assertion of Jesus' deity as the Son of God until the time of the Nicene Creed, A.D. 325, which we have just joined in confessing together.

That, of course, is untrue. This very Gospel, as well as other parts of the New Testament, make it abundantly clear that Jesus is the Son of God, and indeed, fully God.

[7 : 01] The Da Vinci Code claims that Judaism forbade male singleness at that time. Again, completely untrue. The Da Vinci Code claims that the Bible that the Emperor Constantine authorised censored out any references to Jesus' humanity.

There is no evidence that the Emperor Constantine decreed such a Bible. It makes simple mistakes about the dating of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in 1947, but Da Vinci Code says 1950.

Da Vinci Code says that Jesus has thousands of disciples. In fact, there are numbers in hundreds at most, and so on and on and on. I think there are 14 or 15 major errors of fact in relationship to biblical matters and historical matters, let alone other errors that might be there in the book.

So it's a great shame, I think, that Mary Magdalene has been dragged through the mud post-mortem. I hope my name isn't dragged through the mud after I'm no longer here and gone, and I'm sure all of us hope the same things about ourselves.

The remarkable thing is that it is to this woman, this woman, underline the word woman, that the greatest of great honours could have been bestowed, namely that she is the first person on this planet in history to have been given the indescribable and incomparable honour of being the first person to see the risen Christ.

[8 : 36] Think about that. What greater honour could there have been? And not only that, she is actually given a commission to go and instruct the disciples about some very important things that he has to say to them through her.

So I offer this brief attempt to rehabilitate the name of this woman. Certainly had she been the kind of woman that has been said about her, she would not have been celebrated as she has been in the Gospel of John.

But that is all the first scene on Easter Day morning and the scene of Jesus and Mary at the tomb. The second scene occurs on the evening of the same day, namely Easter Day.

And the disciples are in hiding behind closed and likely locked doors. As such, they stand in contrast to the brave Joseph of Arimathea and the brave Nicodemus and the brave Mary of Magdala.

And so these ten men are there in their fear, understandable, in the circumstances, lest they be rounded up and be crucified as associates of the treasonable Jesus, whom they said claim to be king of the Jews.

[9 : 57] And in a remarkable description in the Gospel of John, which is characterized by simplicity of language, naivety of speech, and yet utterly profound theological statement, we are told by John that Jesus came and stood among them.

The standing is a striking detail, I think, in comparison with the humiliation of the limp, dead figure of Christ removed from the nails and taken down and that he is now standing among the disciples is a beautiful picture.

Whether it's pure coincidence or not, the same author in his book of Revelation makes several references to Jesus standing in the book of Revelation.

For example, in Revelation chapter 1 we see Jesus standing among the seven lampstands, the seven churches, just as he is standing, invisible but real, among us today.

We see him in Revelation chapter 14 standing on Mount Zion, the Lamb, standing with his people, surrounded by his people in triumph after their travels and his at the end of history standing on Mount Zion.

[11:24] Again, a majestic picture. So he comes and stands among them and he blesses them with a word of peace. Peace be to you, he says, which is surely not merely a Middle Eastern greeting as in Shalom or Salam, but as in earlier chapters of the Gospel, my peace I give unto you not as the world gives give I unto you.

Let not your hearts be troubled. I have overcome the world and so on. And then he says, I send you as the Father has sent me, so I send you, send you forth.

The Father has sent me into the world and now at this point in history I am sending you out into the world. And then the Gospel tells us that he breathed on them except the text does not actually say on them.

It simply says he breathed and said receive the Holy Spirit. And so the likelihood is that the gift of the Holy Spirit in this particular passage is not at all thought to be confined to just those who were there, the them, but is an absolute statement.

Just as the Gospel of John in chapter 7 had said that out of his innermost being would flow rivers of living water which John says is in reference to the Holy Spirit.

[12:50] That is an absolute statement that subsequent to his death, resurrection and ascension Christ will give his Spirit to all of his people not just to the immediate disciples and apostles.

And so we are the recipients of that same Spirit. And there's a sense in which we also are being sent into the world. And we are being sent with the same mission that those original disciples were given which is to remit and retain sins.

Positive statement, remit, retain, the negative statement. Making an absolute statement that God will himself forgive the sins of those of those who we assure whose sins are forgiven as we do through the gospel based on the word of God.

Roman Catholic thought of course that is an activity which is limited to the ordained priesthood.

That is not the idea I think at all in John chapter 20 where the absence of a pronoun where it simply says he breathed without there being any reference to on them.

An absolute action I think gives us the idea that the people of God generally are being given the mandate and the authority to actually declare sins forgiven.

[14:11] And so whether we are mums and dads ministering to our children or whether we are Christian folk ministering to one another or whether we are folks who are in a domestic situation or a work situation or some other situation sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ whoever we are we have the authority of the Lord Jesus himself and the power of the Holy Spirit to assure people that their sins are forgiven as they turn to Christ and turn away from their sins.

I think we need to be reminded that the relationship between ordained and non-ordained is not an absolute one it is a relative one. Between shall we say professional medical people between doctors and lay people there is indeed a gulf rightly so and it would be quite wrong for those who are not professionally recognised to be offering medical services.

There is a gap but no such gap exists between rank and fail Christians and those who serve them in the ordained ministry. We are in a sense all involved in ministry in that regard and so there is a sense in which we are all GPs but some are specialists and we honour them and grateful for their ministry but all of us as GP Christians as it were are all of us in ministry and all of us authorised and all of us empowered and all of us to be involved in bringing the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to other people with a gracious blessing from God that sins are forgiven by God based on the death of Jesus based on the fact that people turned to him and I believe that's a message that many people are waiting for somebody to tell them somebody to share with them that they can be free of the burden that they may be carrying because of the sins that we all of us commit acts of foolishness act of willfulness whatever and I know that when I've done things like that as I am reminded or am

told that I'm forgiven by God that is wonderful news it lifts a burden from the shoulders and I believe that there are many folks who want to hear that message and it's up to us and we have the opportunity quietly graciously lovingly to share that message with people that brings us to our third and final scene which is now a week later disbelieving Thomas not there on the first Sunday night is now there he had fixed views apparently understandable it was part of Jewish orthodoxy at that time to believe in resurrection but it would be at the end of history the idea of a resurrection occurring within history was unthinkable no no the game would the full time moment would come at the end of the game at the end of history and then there would be the resurrection then would be the judgment but what are you talking about you disciples in saying that resurrection is now there's no resurrection yet it's later there's some mistake surely and so he wants he wants tangible proof he wants to physically handle that that side of Jesus pierced with a spear which was the tangible evidence of his death

I want to see that side of someone who's now walking around says Thomas before I will believe his problem of course was that he's not prepared to accept the united testimony of ten of his companions about what he had seen he was locked into his fixed views of things and in a sense his mind wasn't open to the evidence that was being put before him the text doesn't actually say that he put his hand in Jesus' hands and touched his side that you may assume that he did that but it's interesting just a little side point that it doesn't actually say that that he did maybe just being confronted with the situation was enough but anyway Jesus says to him be not disbelieving but believing and that's a good word for us isn't it be not disbelieving if we are maybe having some second thoughts about the bodily resurrection of

[18:55] Jesus it's good to be reminded of that word and good to be reminded of Jesus' word to us be not disbelieving but believing and then Jesus gives this blessing blessed are those who have not seen and that's the rest of humanity really Thomas was a one-off a kind of lucky fluke for him but for the rest of humanity there will not be the opportunity to actually physically handle the body of Jesus no no we are all of us dependent upon the word upon the gospel the word of God and that's the basis upon which we believe and so Jesus says blessed are those who have not seen but have believed which of course all ties up with the question of remitting and retaining sins and the message of the gospel based on Christ's coming his teaching his identity his death his resurrection which of course is the testimony of the New

Testament and so those disciples and so we go forth into our ordinary lives our domestic lives our work lives our lives in the neighbourhood or wherever we are sent forth by our Lord Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit that he's given us sharing the message which he has also given us to declare sins forgiven to give people that blessed assurance of a relationship with God so I think about life and its brevity and it is very brief life passes by very quickly certainly mine has and I just don't know where the years have gone I know that's a cliché but I really believe that and life is very short but we are conscious within ourselves that somehow there is to be a permanency about ourselves and the idea of sort of not being here is psychologically and emotionally difficult and I think that's the sense that is generally there with people and my theory about life at one point at least is that many people seek some sort of permanency through celebrity as well marking their mark being famous in some way and that's okay and understandable sense but we Christians believe that our permanency is through relationship don't we we believe that our eternity our continuance as identifiably me is because we know God because we are in a relationship with God because we are God's sons and daughters which we are through our Lord Jesus Christ and through his death and resurrection and through the forgiveness of sins that we have in him and so you know this is the reality of what it means to be a Christian person so I finish with these four challenges for us number one learn from Nicodemus Joseph of Arimathea Mary Magdala who courageously sought to honour somebody who had been willfully wickedly criminally dishonoured and there are people in our community who you may know who have been wickedly dishonoured there's an example here of standing up for someone's good name and in particular of course the good name of our Lord

Jesus Christ which is continually being dragged through the mud as we know secondly I challenge and encourage each of us to be committed to the historical reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead if you stand back from that position in any shape or form you have abandoned historic Christianity you have abandoned Christianity in its absolute uniqueness so if any of us here today are weakening or faltering on that particular issue I do encourage you in strongest possible

terms to accept the testimony of the New Testament at this point thirdly I want us to understand that we are indeed empowered by the Holy Spirit and sent forth by our Lord Jesus Christ to share the blessed and wonderful news of the forgiveness of sins whether to our children our grandchildren our friends our neighbours or even strangers that great truth lies at the heart of the Christian gospel and so the fourth challenge to us is to be those who are involved in taking the word of God to other people

I said at the beginning that as one sniffs the wind or at least as I sniff the wind one can sense some kind of a change happening the phenomenal success of the Mel Gibson movie earlier this year the equally phenomenal success of the Da Vinci Code which is touching the whole question of Christian origins and Christian truth are all signs of an interest that is out there likewise the again the great interest in the purpose driven life by Rick Warren which again is the best selling book the social conservatism reflected in the Australian election results and ditto in the US whatever else might have been implied by those successes are all saying at least to me that there's a sea change a sea change a time of opportunity that the tide has been out for a long time so far as the western world and

[25 : 04] Christianity is concerned that this is maybe for us a time of opportunity a time to be encouraged a time to be even more committed a time to be bold time to be courageous a time to look at those three people Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and Mary of Magdala and to take courage by their courage we will be in wonderful company when we do may God bless us all amen in the name of Jesus for the ■ for the children Thank you.