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St. Mary Magdalene

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“How Great Our Sin; How Great Our Saviour”

Text: John 20:1-2, 10-18 (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Mary Magdalene was given the honor of being the first person to see the resurrected Jesus. Others saw the empty tomb, the grave cloths, and the angels bearing the good news of Jesus' resurrection. The myrrh-bearing women (including Mary) had gotten there first; and at Mary's word Peter and John ran to the open tomb, even going inside. But it was Mary Magdalene who was *chosen* to be the first to see the resurrected Jesus. Chosen, for our Lord does nothing by accident or circumstance. This was His plan, for Mary – lowly Mary – to be so honored. For does not Jesus say the last shall be first? (Lk 13:30)

Now I say that about Mary not to denigrate her, but to exalt her, and to exalt the grace of God in her. For so the Church has always done. For though we are really not told much about Mary in the Scriptures, the Church has frequently associated her with the adulterous woman Jesus saved from stoning, and with the notoriously sinful woman who washed His feet with her tears, this woman probably being a prostitute. But the Scriptures do tell us that Mary was in serious trouble before Jesus found her. She was possessed by seven demons (Lk 8:2), and would no doubt have remained under their sinful and demonic influence had Jesus not driven them out. And with that, Mary, whose life had been taken away, was given her life back again. Therefore she would not leave her Lord, her Saviour. She followed Him, served Him, supported Him, and would not leave even the foot of the cross. (Mk 15:40)

But for none of that was Mary given the honor of being the first to see the resurrected Jesus. It was, like her salvation, pure grace. I don't think Mary even particularly cared about being the first – the other disciples fought over who was the greatest, remember? (Lk 22:24) Perhaps Mary, given her sinfulness and demonic

possession, learned something a bit quicker than the rest about the grace of God. To be first mattered not. To be there *at all* is what mattered. She did not deserve it, any of it, she well knew. But her Lord so loved her that He gave Himself for her. No one else would have. Society had shunned her, used her, chewed her up, and spit her out. She had no hope and no future. But Jesus saw in her what no one else could see: someone worth saving; someone worth dying for. A lost sheep whom He put on His shoulders and brought home. She knew how great her sin and how great her need, and so she also knew how great her Saviour.

So what about you and me? Do we recognize the depth of our sin and so recognize the greatness of our Saviour? Or do we belittle our sin and our need and so also belittle our Saviour? Do we see ourselves in her, or are we glad *we're* not a lowly, demon-possessed, idolatrous, adulterous, notorious sinner like her? **Can't you just hear the hypocrisy dripping from us as we say that, as we think it?** As we excuse our sin, or justify it, or rationalize it; thinking ourselves not so bad; our lack of love no worse than others; and our efforts worthy of at least a little recognition, right? And what of the demons of sin in your life? Of lust, of pride, of anger, of self-pity, of rebellion . . . what are they for you? And how numerous for you? Or, do we dismiss the demonic altogether today, thinking we know better; that we're not as superstitious as those ignorant folks back then? Perhaps that is exactly as satan would have it, so that he doesn't have to worry about us worrying about him!

Let us learn, then, from Mary Magdalene, and see in her a window into how great our sin and how great our Saviour. How great our need and how great His grace. How great our predicament and how great His salvation. Let us worry neither about being the first or being the last, but simply repent and receive the only thing that really matters: the grace and gift of God in the forgiveness of our sins.

For like Mary Magdalene, we have received grace, the forgiveness of our sins through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus. We get to hear those wonderful words here each week, and know that they are real and true: "*I forgive you all your sins.*" Not the words of the pastor, but the words of your Saviour, spoken on His behalf, with His authority. **But not only that.** We too have been exorcised of the unclean spirits that possessed us and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. We confess this in the baptismal liturgy, where it is proclaimed: "*Depart unclean spirit, and make way for the Holy Spirit.*" (LSB Agenda, p. 13) The same word that spoke freedom to Mary bespeaks

freedom to us. Then by the mouth of Jesus, here through the waters of baptism. But the gift is the same. The gift of the *Holy Spirit* to rule our hearts and lives in place of the unclean spirit of this world.

And thus by the grace and gift of God, truly we have received a new birth: from stained to holy and clean; from captive to free; from slave of sin to servant of Christ. We born dead in sin have been raised to a new life in Christ. His Father now *our* Father.

And by such great grace and gift was Mary raised and changed from a sinful woman into the virtuous woman we heard of from Proverbs. Yes, she now the *excellent* wife – not as Jesus' earthly bride, as so many sensationalistic movies and TV specials want us to believe! But as part of the bride of Christ, the Church. From self-serving and destructive behaviours was she raised now to a new vocation, to serve her Lord and others with His love. With not evil spirits, but the Holy Spirit now her guide.

And as that Bride we live also. Virtuous not in ourselves, but by the grace and gift of God, living as His Bride in all the many and various vocations He has given us. Serving Him by serving others, in the places we work, the schools where we learn, the neighborhoods in which we live, the stores where we shop, the homes we have been given. And we live as “Marys” – knowing who we are in ourselves, but knowing who we are *even more* in Christ. And that though we are deserving of nothing, our Lord has given us everything, and made us His own. Bought with His blood, and enlivened with His Spirit.

That same blood we will again receive here this morning – the body and blood of our Saviour, for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith. For we need it. For though forgiven, still we sin; though rescued, still we doubt. And so to this body we now cling, as would Mary after Jesus' ascension. *But not before!* For not to His body in the garden was attached the forgiveness of sin, but to His body here on our altar. His body and blood to feed us, and nourish us, and strengthen us. And so we cling to Him *here*, for *here* He has promised to be for us.

And so Mary was not so wrong is supposing Jesus to be the gardener – she just had the wrong garden in mind! For in His death and resurrection, Jesus has undone what Adam did in the Garden of Eden, and restored Paradise to us. And as Mary

knew, to be *there* is all that matters. Whether we are first or last, greatest or least, all will melt away in the presence of our Saviour, who put us lost sheep on His shoulders and brought us to His home. And knowing that makes all the difference in how we live our lives the rest of this day and each one of our days. For in Him we now have hope and a future. For yes, like Mary, great is *our* sin. But also like Mary we know, even greater our Saviour! And if God could take and use Mary, choosing her to be the first to see Him risen, so too can He take and use us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.