

22 July 2018
St. Mary Magdalene
The Holy Baptism of Henry Walther Sigismund Powers

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Holding on for Dear Life!”

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

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

Of all the saints days that we commemorate in the church, *Saint* Mary Magdalene sounds the most jarring, doesn't it? Seems the most unusual, the most unlikely, the most out of place, the most . . . well let's just say it: *wrong*.

But that's what makes this day so *right*! Mary reminds us that we are all unlikely saints. That saint isn't something we do, but what God does for us, as He did for Mary. That a saint isn't someone who has taken such a strong hold of God and made himself an exemplary person, someone the world points to and says: good, holy, saintly! A saint is someone God has taken hold of and says: *forgiven, free, mine!*

And that makes Mary Magdalene the perfect saint. It's as if Jesus is the exact opposite of the reading from Proverbs we heard today. He doesn't look for the most excellent to be His bride, He finds the worst - and *makes* her excellent.

I'm mean . . . really . . . think about who God finds and picks. Abraham was an idolater. Jacob was a heel whose life was littered with bad decisions. David was an adulterer and a murderer. Peter put his foot in his mouth so often it's a wonder he didn't have “athlete's tongue.” James and John kept wanting to be the greatest, some of the other disciples seem to have more rocks than brains in their heads, Paul (then Saul) was the church's enemy number one, and many of those we now call early church fathers were rascals early on. And if you put all those people and all those sins together and mused them into one person, you'd get . . . no, not Mary Magdalene. *Me!* And, maybe, I suspect, you, too.

It's what our Lord does. We saw it again with little Henry this morning. God doesn't find saints, He makes them. He makes saints out of sinners. He grabs hold of us and says *forgiven, free, mine!* He cleanses us with water and the Word to be His holy bride. And that's true no matter who you are. Whether you were born a Jew or a Gentile, on the right side of the tracks or the wrong side of the tracks, even if you were one of the soldiers that brought the hammer down on the nails that pierced His hands and feet - Jesus wants you as His Bride.

And as Mary learned today, not just till death do us part! For death had indeed parted them, but now death had been defeated.

Now, to be clear, the Bride of Christ is the Church - the whole Church. The world often takes what the Scriptures say and what the Church says and misunderstands it and twists it. And so there are books and movies and articles that claim that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife in an earthly, fleshly sense. But not so. Mary was not Christ's Bride by flesh, but by faith. As are you and I and the whole Church. Christ has made Himself one flesh with us and has given us all that He is and all that He has. There was no prenup! For God's love for us never ends. Jesus took all that is ours - our sin, our death, our condemnation; and gave us all that is His - His forgiveness, His life, His Sonship, His kingdom. He took us to be His own, not just for this life, but forever.

So Mary goes to the tomb that morning feeling every bit the weeping widow. Before Jesus, she had been possessed, held tight in the grasp of seven demons. Her life was - *literally!* - a living hell. Hell living in her and through her. Until Jesus took hold of her. Until Jesus expelled those seven demons and gave her new life. But now . . . how hell won? Had hell conquered the conquerer and enslaved the one who had set her free? A bloody cross and a sealed tomb loudly shouted *Yes!* in her heart.

So when Mary got to the tomb and found it empty, that shouting didn't stop - it just got worse. And the tears more bitter. It wasn't enough that they took His life, now they had to take His body too? And do what to it?

Why are you weeping? they asked her. The two angels in white, ***sitting where the body of Jesus had lain.*** Maybe through tear-blurred eyes, she couldn't tell they were angels.

Why are you weeping? the gardener asked her. Such inane questions to ask outside a tomb! So she doesn't answer. Just tell me where you put Him, please.

Mary.

The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name. And the sheep know His voice (John 10:4-5). Nothing further is needed. Mary now knows who this gardener is - *the divine gardener!* The one who planted Eden. The one who planted the people of Israel in the Promised Land. The one who had taken her, a dried up, dead, hell-bound plant, and given her new life. He had taken hold of her, now she would take hold of Him, and *never* let go.

No Mary. Not by flesh, but by faith. Jesus isn't done. He must ascend. Not to leave His Bride, but to prepare a place for her. So, He says to Mary: ***Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'***

Yes, by faith, joined to the Bridegroom, we have a new Father. And we have a new Spirit. For Jesus ascends not just to prepare a place for us, for His Bride, but also to send His Spirit. And that is better, He says (John 16:7). Better for us as we await the time when He will come and take home His Bride, the Church. When not just He, but all the dead, are raised. And the marriage feast of the Lamb, which will have no end, begins (Revelation 19:7, 9).

So no, Mary. It is still not your taking hold of Christ. He who took you will continue to hold you through His Spirit.

And again, that is exactly what we saw again this morning, as Jesus took hold of Henry through water and the Word, forgave his sins, set him free from death and hell, and said *mine!* Like with Mary, the unclean spirit was forced to depart, and Henry was given a new Spirit, a holy one; and with it, the gift of faith. Jesus has withheld nothing from Henry. All that's Henry's is His, and all that's His is now Henry's. And so Henry has a new Father, a heavenly one. A new brother and Saviour. And a new Spirit. He is part of the Bride of Christ, the Church. By faith, all this is His. Another sinner has been made a saint.

Though, like us, Henry will still be the sinner. He'll pick on his brothers, aggravate his parents, fail to do what his heavenly Father asks him to do, and sometimes just be plain ornery and rebellious. Like the rest of us. He'll need forgiveness for the rest of his life. The daily washing that all saints need. And the feeding, too, of His Lord. The bread of life, the Body and Blood of His Saviour. He'll need that, too. And get it. For the Lord who has taken hold of him today will not let him go, but will continue to care for him and keep him. And discipline him when necessary. But all in love. That Henry not cling to the things of this world, but only by faith to His risen Saviour.

So today, Henry takes his place with Mary Magdalene and the rest of us strange and unlikely saints. And also like Mary, the Lord will use him as His blessing to others. Mary proclaimed the resurrection to the disciples. How will He use Henry? Maybe in a similar way, maybe in a way none of us today can imagine. But just as Mary's life and all of our lives have taken twists and turns that were unimaginable, so too Henry. And though there will be both weeping and joy, the Lord will be holding on to Henry through it all. Henry may not know it; he'll maybe even doubt it. But Jesus made a promise today to Henry. He said: *forgiven, free, mine!* And He meant it. And that's a promise to cling to! All of us.

So July 22. The day we commemorate Saint Mary Magdalene. The day that has changed Henry's life. And so how appropriate to sing:

My song is love unknown, - unfathomable!
My Savior's love to me,

*Love to the loveless shown That they might lovely be.
Oh, who am I That for my sake
My Lord should take Frail flesh and die? (LSB #430 v. 1)*

But He did!
Thanks be to God!

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.