

Mary Magdalene, The Unexpected

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August 25, 2002

Exodus 4:10-13; John 20:11-18

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, the Bay Area writer Anne Lamott describes her winding and unexpected journey toward faith. A former drug addict and alcoholic, single mother of a son, and member of an African American church and successful author, Lamott brings together the diverse patchwork of her identity in a disarmingly funny writing style.

She describes a desperate time in her life when she was nearly broke, living at a friend's house, having harmful and fleeting relationships with men, overdosing on drugs, alcohol and food, and feeling consumed with fear. She was nearly beyond the point of being able to help herself. During this time she serendipitously discovered St. Andrews Presbyterian Church by way of the Marin City flea market. Too repulsed by Christianity to go in, she stood in the doorway for months just to listen to the rich and moving gospel music inside. About this time she became pregnant by a married man with whom she had been having an affair. One night she went to have an abortion, and afterwards, at home, overcome with sadness, she drank a pint of Bushmills and swallowed some codeine given to her by the nurses at the clinic. She repeated this routine every night for a week. On the seventh night she discovered at one point that she was bleeding heavily and she became terrified, too ashamed by her behavior to call for help. After several hours the bleeding stopped and she turned off the light and huddled in the corner of her room. It was then that she became aware of the presence of someone with her, and after a while she recognized beyond a doubt that it was Jesus.

"I was appalled," she writes. "I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'"

Over the next week she started to have the feeling that she was being followed by a little cat who wanted her to open the door and let it in. She writes,

"when I went back to church [the next week], I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I thought was just so ridiculous... but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

"I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, 'Forget it: I quit.'" I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

She concludes: “So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.”

Alcohol, drugs, abortion, bleeding.... These aren't exactly the words we normally associate with the holy. And yet, for Anne Lamott, it was exactly all of those things, mixed together with some divine transcendence, that led her to God. It was unexpected.

Twenty centuries ago, Mary Magdalene may have been a woman like Anne Lamott. She had been possessed by demons but Jesus had exorcised them. She became a loyal and devout follower of Jesus throughout his ministry. In fact, she is with him as the critical events of his story unfold: she is there as he dies on the cross; she is there when he is buried in the tomb; and most remarkably, she is the first to recognize the resurrected Jesus, who has become the Christ.

Mary Magdalene was not one of Jesus' twelve male disciples, and yet she has a much more important role than most of those disciples. Her role is unexpected. She was a woman with a difficult past, a woman who had probably committed all kinds of sins, and who, like Anne Lamott, had probably survived through periods of intense fear and crippling loneliness. This is the lone character who participates in the defining moment of the Christian faith: this is the woman who recognizes the Jesus who had lived in a body as the Christ who has now become transcendent and available to all. It is unexpected. What's further remarkable about Mary's role is that she then goes to the twelve disciples and tells them what she has seen. And they believe her. Mary Magdalene is the apostle to the apostles, and what she sets in motion, according to the gospel of John, is the unfolding of Christianity itself. This is unexpected.

To really understand how surprising Mary Magdalene's role is, it is necessary to understand the place women had in Jewish society around the first century. The Jewish culture of Palestine was one of the most patriarchal in the Mediterranean world of that time. Women were under the control of their fathers and then their husbands, and marriages were transacted by these heads of households who would make agreements and settle on dowry prices without the woman's consultation. Women were not entitled to inheritance of land or money, they were not permitted to divorce, and they had restricted ability to pursue religious education. They were not permitted to lead or to participate in the religious rites of the synagogue. There is no evidence that prior to Jesus' ministry, Jewish women were ever allowed to be disciples of a great teacher, much less to travel with such a teacher.

Given this background, it is startling indeed that Mary Magdalene had such a prominent role in Jesus' life, as affirmed by all four gospel writers. And it makes Mary's witness of the resurrected Jesus even more arresting. Why is it that *a woman* was placed in this role? What is the significance of the resurrection witness being female?

As a woman in the Christian tradition, I am particularly interested in the roles women play in the Bible. The Bible was written in a patriarchal culture, and the Christian religion has grown and been passed down through centuries of patriarchy. As a woman, it is sometimes hard for me to find my experience reflected in so many stories about men, and in so much male religious language—in Jesus, in God the Father, and even in Swedenborg. And yet, I find that my Swedenborgian Christian faith is liberating and empowering to me. So I want to find the correspondence between this faith as it is

lived out, and the faith as it is articulated in the texts of our tradition. And sure enough, I have found that a Swedenborgian understanding of the role of Mary Magdalene is quite enlightening.

Swedenborg believed that the Bible was full of correspondences—that is, that the people, animals, vegetation and objects correspond to a spiritual reality. Swedenborg also believed that the essence of God was divine love and divine truth. He believed that the actions that flow forth from this union are charity. Swedenborg also believed that women and men had correspondences. I still haven't made up my mind about how fully I accept Swedenborg's idea about men and women, but let's look at it anyway in light of Mary Magdalene. Swedenborg wrote that women, as compared with men, correspond to loves and affections, and that men correspond to wisdom and truth. One way of understanding this is that the male and the female are distinguishably part of one whole, as love and truth are distinguishably part of the whole that is God. They are different and yet they are both intrinsic parts of the whole.

Swedenborg believed that a person must have love before she or he can understand truth. Love for God, like Mary's love for Jesus, is what is necessary for the understanding of spiritual truth. Mary, being love, understands the greatest spiritual truth of all: that Christ has risen. But that is not all: she immediately runs to the disciples and tells them what she has seen. The love that Mary represents is united with the truth that she proclaims to the disciples when she says, "I have seen the Lord!" What we have, then, in this story, is a reflection of the Swedenborgian trinity in the character of Mary: love united with truth leads to a way of living that is powerfully inspired by God.

Mary Magdalene has become an inspiring character for me. For centuries she has been seen as the minor character in this narrative. Because of her demon-possessed past, she has been presumed to have been a prostitute, and yet there is no evidence in the text to support this. Instead, I see her as a woman who had purified her soul through her love of God and who had set her demons behind her. She was the woman who understood the risen Christ as he called her by name. She was a woman who did not hesitate to speak the truth about what she knew in her heart, no matter how unlikely it seemed.

Mary Magdalene provides a model for us all, but especially, I think, for women. Love by itself does not do any good. Love must find its expression, must find a way to live in the world, for it to become good. This is one way we grow in our spiritual growth process: love takes form and this union is recognized as a complete whole. This wholeness naturally gives way to a life that draws its energy from God.

In my experience, many women—and many men—struggle with bringing love into form—that is, with the truth half of the love/truth union. So many of us doubt ourselves and deny our passions that we close the door on living out the life we deeply yearn to have. If instead, we could give voice to our greatest loves and then bring them into being by way of acting on them in our lives, we would experience the wholeness of love being united with truth. We would experience ourselves as known and affirmed and powerful. Like Mary, we would be called so intimately and specifically by name by a power that is at the same time vast and stunning. And this living would give us the power to set history in motion towards an everlasting good.

Buried away in a box somewhere, there is a photo of me taken on my first day of kindergarten, when I was five years old. It is a picture of a little blonde girl with bangs and a blue check dress. I am not smiling, and my big blue eyes look up at the camera

with an expression that is tentative yet ever so slightly hopeful. It is as if I am thinking, “I’m not quite sure about this new experience; I might like it, but I’m going to wait and see.” Much of the time, that little five-year-old girl is still living inside of me. Over the years, I have spent more time than I care to contemplate holding myself back, convincing myself that I had a thought that was not worth voicing, believing that I needed to follow certain expectations about how to live-- frequently regarding the world from those tentative blue eyes, and waiting. Waiting to create form out of my deepest loves.

But something unexpected happened to me about six years ago. I discovered this church, and then with frightening speed I decided I had to go to seminary. This was unexpected for an up-and-coming young internet professional with a salary. For the next three years while I was in school I agonized over the question of whether I could be an ordained minister. This was an unexpected prospect for a woman who had not grown up in any church, had never read the Bible, known a minister or gone to Sunday School. I graduated from seminary, had a baby, found an inspiring job working for the church, and decided, finally, that I wanted to become an ordained minister. This is unexpected for a woman who has everything, including a child.

What I have found is that one of my deepest and driving loves is for the church, as unlikely as that has seemed at times. I have needed to name this love, to recognize this love as true, and then bring it into being by acting on it. When I do this, my life becomes energetic and dynamic, infused with joy, beauty and humor. And the work that I do then becomes a force of goodness in this world.

Anne Lamott didn’t expect to have Jesus plunk himself down in her room on that dark and desperate night and to squeeze his way into her life. But in the middle of all those drugs and all that alcohol and self-abuse, Lamott wanted to heal. She was looking for God the way Mary was looking for Jesus in the empty tomb. Her longing for wholeness led her to let God into her life, and the union of that love and that truth changed her life.

Mary Magdalene, the unexpected. We may not have expected her to play the role she did, the woman who encounters the risen Christ. We may not have expected her to have so much to say to us. But let us all, male and female, live like Mary Magdalene— with a fervent and unceasing love, a courageous ability to name the truth, and a way of living that is at once divinely, humanely and transcendently empowered. Amen.