

The Witness

1. Warm-up Question: Our Gospel passage this week features one of the most amazing women in the Bible, Mary Magdalene. Who is a woman, either from the Bible or from history in general, that you greatly admire? Why do you admire her?
2. Jeff began Sunday's sermon by illustrating the level of discrimination against women in ancient culture. For example, women were considered "incompetent" to testify in Jewish courts of law. They were banned from the courtyard of the temple that contained the altar. They were regarded as the source of evil in the world. They were prohibited from studying the Scriptures. What thoughts do you have about any of the following questions:
 - a. What explains the prevalence of such profound and almost universal discrimination against women in the ancient world? Where did that come from?
 - b. Why is it changing now?
 - c. What can/should we do to further that change?
3. When we understand the level of ancient discrimination against women, especially the idea that women were not "competent" witnesses, our Gospel passage takes on a whole new light. Read John 20:1-18, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. How do you think the male disciples felt about Jesus appearing first to Mary Magdalene?
 - b. Why do you think Jesus appeared first to Mary? Do you think it was coincidence or deliberate? If deliberate, what was Jesus trying to accomplish?
 - c. Mark 16:11 says, "When [the male disciples] heard that Jesus was alive and had been seen by Mary, they would not believe it." Luke 24:11 adds, "These words seemed to them an idle tale." How do you think Mary felt when her testimony wasn't believed? How do you imagine she reacted to their disbelief?
 - d. The Mercer Bible Dictionary says, "In a culture where the word of a woman was not considered a trustworthy witness, how amazing that Jesus would entrust the climax of the Good News, God's power to overcome the power of sin and death, to [a woman]." If one of the most important messages in the Bible was entrusted to a woman, what are the implications for women who feel called to be preachers, prophets, or other types of spiritual leaders? Why are so many churches in our world today still so resistant to allowing women to follow in Mary's footsteps?
4. Mary not only is a role model for women in ministry, she's an example to us all of what it means to be a witness for Jesus. The Bible calls us all to follow in her footsteps.

- a. Right before ascending into heaven, Jesus appeared to several hundred of his followers and said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8. Do you think that instruction applies to you? If so, what does it mean to be a witness?
 - b. Witnessing has gotten a bad reputation because of some who are overly aggressive and obnoxious. Have you ever been the victim of overly aggressive witnessing? What happened? What’s the difference between being a good witness and being an obnoxious one?
5. Mary’s witness was not filled with theological doctrine or lots of Bible quotes. She simply told the story of her encounter with Jesus. Jeff suggested that’s all God asks of any of us. We let our light shine when we share the story of our journey to faith. To that end, Jeff challenged each of us to give some thought to how we would share our faith story. He suggested three questions that can help us flesh out our own personal testimony. In the time remaining, let’s share our personal testimonies by reflecting on those three questions.
- a. The Awakening. In our Gospel passage, when Mary found the tomb empty, she assumed it must be due to natural causes, i.e., someone stole Jesus’ body. Likewise, when Jesus walked up behind her, she assumed he must be the gardener. When she realized this was Jesus, it revolutionized everything. It fully awakened her to the fact that our natural world is suffused with Spirit. God is present everywhere and in everything. How about you? ***Who or what first awakened you to the presence of God in life?***
 - b. The Decision. When we awaken to the presence of God everywhere and in everything, that calls for a decision: am I going to embrace life in the Spirit or keep floating along with no real sense of spiritual direction? When Jesus encountered people, he constantly challenged them to make a conscious decision to follow him. ***Have you ever made a conscious decision to follow Jesus? When? What prompted that decision?***
 - c. The Payoff. When we share our faith with people, it’s important to emphasize why a life of faith is so sweet. When we embrace a life of faith as a follower of Jesus, we discover something beautiful and amazing: Now I will never walk alone. That’s what Mary discovered. She was at the empty tomb weeping, feeling alone and desperate, only to discover that the Risen Christ was right there with her. ***How has faith in Jesus changed your life for the better? Have you reached a place where you feel Christ’s presence with you in everything? Can you share a story or experience that illustrates what that feels like?***

Important Reminder

Our Church Family Thanksgiving Potluck will take place at 1:00 pm on Thanksgiving Day at the Church. Due to COVID precautions, reservations are required. If you plan to be there, make your reservations ASAP at <https://LifeJourney.church/links>.

John 20:1-18, selected verses

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because 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.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord;" and she told them that he had said these things to her.

