

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 8th April 2018

Acts 4: 32 - 35; 1 John 1: 1 - 2:2; John 20: 19 - 31

A film called *Mary Magdalene*¹ was released this year in time for Easter. *Mary Magdalene* is a film about Mary Magdalene that attempts to restore her place at the heart of the Christian story. Wrongly, in the Middle Ages she was believed to be the same woman as the unnamed woman in the Luke's Gospel who is described as a sinful, and who washes Jesus' feet with her tears. That association between Mary and the unnamed sinful women - and because she was a close follower of Jesus - led to the Mary Magdalene's enduring reputation as at best promiscuous, if not a prostitute.

In fact, the New Testament shows no evidence that she was either. It describes her as someone from whom Jesus cast out demons, and - presumably as a consequence of that healing - the New Testament also describes how Mary was one of a number of women who accompanied Jesus during his ministry in Galilee.

It is good to see a film about Mary Magdalene that attempts to set the record about her straight, and part of it's attempt to do this is in the very timing of the film's release, just before Easter. After all, Mary was there at Jesus' crucifixion, which she watched, and rather than one of Jesus male disciples, it was she who was the first person to see and to speak to Jesus after his resurrection.

One of the ways the film attempts to resurrect, so to speak, the character of Mary in the 21st century is to emphasise a contrast between her and Jesus' disciple Peter, one that continues to reveal gender stereotypes: Mary's female character is portrayed in the film as having unique spiritual talents, and is played by a dreamy, brooding Ronney Mara, while Peter's male character is wayward and impulsive.

It is also unfortunate that the contrast is between Mary and Peter at all, because in the Gospel of John it is not Peter, but Thomas - the famous Doubting Thomas - whom the Gospel writer brings together with Mary, and it is not a contrast that he sets up between the two of them, but a parallel.

Jesus' encounters with Mary and then afterwards with Thomas appear in the Gospel of John side-by-side in the same chapter. To fully understand the encounter that Jesus had with Thomas, in which Thomas expresses his doubts, we really need to read and understand the earlier encounter outside the tomb, early in the morning, between Jesus and Mary. These two events throw light on each other, and they help us, hundreds of years later, to understand the significance of the resurrection for us today.

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5360996/>

Like Thomas, Mary is at first doubting. Here is John's description of her arrival at the tomb, the first person to do so, on that first Easter morning.

She saw that the stone had been moved away from the entrance, and ran to Simon Peter, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,' she cried, 'and I don't know where they have laid him.'

Other disciples arrive, and then leave, while Mary remains at the tomb where she encounters two angels. To them she again voices her doubts, 'They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him,' she says.

However, her doubts are overcome when Jesus himself appears and calls her by name, "'Mary!'" She turned to him and said, "Rabbuuni (which is Hebrew for 'My Master')." Then, importantly, in response Jesus does not offer her words of comfort or reassurance, instead he rebukes her, 'Do not cling to me...' he says.

Like Mary, Thomas initially has his doubts. Like Mary he too needs to see Jesus in the flesh in order to believe. He tells the other disciples,

'Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'

Jesus then comes and stands before him and, like Mary's encounter, that appearance facilitates Thomas' belief and subsequent faithful declaration, 'My Lord and my God!' Then, as in Mary's encounter, Thomas immediately is the subject of criticism from Jesus, 'Because you have seen me you have found faith,' says Jesus, 'Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith.'

Thomas and Mary overcome their doubts, and believe, because they see Jesus' physical reappearance, but Jesus points out to them both that faith should not, rely on his physical reappearance: 'do not cling to me,' he says to one, and to the other, 'happy are they who never saw me.'

These similarities between Mary and Thomas' encounter with Jesus tell us much about the nature of Christian belief. The parallels are emphasised also by the only contrast between their encounters. This contrast emphasises the physical nature of Jesus' appearance and thereby the power of Jesus' rebuke that they should rely on his physical reappearance.

Mary was told by Jesus not to cling to him, thereby implying that there was a physical body to cling to, but on the other hand Jesus invites Thomas to do more than just cling to him, 'Reach your finger here and put it into my side,' Jesus commands.

John, the gospel writer, uses both Mary and Thomas to describe how those who saw Jesus crucified and saw his body entombed needed also to see and touch his physical body, resurrected, in order to believe that Jesus could live on in their lives. But, Thomas and Mary's experiences of the risen Jesus are also the way John makes clear that the presence of Jesus' body, the physical person who lived back then, should not be necessary for faith. Indeed, he suggests that the desire to

believe in a physical body resurrected may even be a stumbling block to faith: do not cling to me.

Do not cling to his body; do not worry about whether Jesus was bodily resurrected. You do not need to see his physical presence in the world in order to believe for it is his life, his ongoing life in the world, not his ongoing physical presence in the world that is the important thing for faith. Doubting Thomas may have needed to touch Jesus, but after doing so, in order to find faith, like Mary, he has to let go of Jesus' physical reappearance: 'do not cling to me... happy are they who never saw me...'

The person who wrote the Gospel of John was almost certainly the same person who wrote the epistle First John, from which we also read this morning. It is there that we discover just how unimportant Jesus' physical body is with regard to our faith. In that letter John describes more fully the importance of believing in Jesus' ongoing life in the world rather than his ongoing physical appearance in the world,

It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands... Our theme is the word of life. This life was made visible... What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life...

For John what was important about Jesus was that he lived in the world, and that after his physical crucifixion, after his body was killed and entombed, he continues to live in this world. He is alive in the world, and that life is made manifest in the world through the common life that those who believe in Jesus share together. Let go of the image of Jesus' bodily resurrection, don't cling to that, you do not need to see it, but believe in his ongoing life in the world made manifest in the common life that believers share together.

For those who first believed, whether because they had seen the resurrected Jesus or whether they had not, the first Easter inspired them to continue to believe that through their fellowship Jesus was spiritually present with them, alive in their community, and that they could thereby continue his work on earth. There were many different ways by which they continued to live as a fellowship community after the resurrection. We read one example in the Book of Acts this morning, a Christian communism that was short lived. There were others, and as they searched for ways to live in a community of fellowship, they found that disagreement and division sometimes beset them.

This letter, First John, which we read from, was one attempt by John to reconcile a community of believers who had been beset by division. Reconciliation was important because, as he said, his theme was the word of life made visible in the world through a shared common life. For us today, many hundreds of years after the resurrection, these words remain the basis for our faith. We cannot see Jesus bodily in this world, but it is our mission to make Jesus' life visible in the world today through our community of fellowship.

Whether it is in this congregation or in our homes or in our communities or in our country Jesus lives in this world by how we come together in fellowship: by how we treat each other; by how we overcome our differences; by how we help, support and care for one another; by how we seek and find forgiveness from each other for the wrongs that we do. When we try to do these things in the way that Jesus showed and taught us to do then a Holy Spirit is present in our congregation, in our homes, in our communities, in our country, and we, in our common life together, become Jesus' body on earth loving and caring for the world.

On Easter Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus' body witnessed by those who saw him killed, crucified on a cross, and entombed. But, in these weeks of Eastertide following Easter Sunday we today are called to proclaim our belief in Jesus' ongoing life in the world, made manifest through our common life together. Despite the fact that he was killed in the world, by the powers of the world, back then, nevertheless today, through our common life, he is alive in the world, and that is why he is Lord.