

BECAUSE OF MARY

I read and reread the Vatican's announcement looking for the real reason Pope Francis raised the celebration of the memorial of St. Mary Magdalene to the dignity of a liturgical feast, putting it on par with the celebrations of the male apostles.

In the news releases and news stories covering the event, I found the language both reverent and trite. It was certainly newsworthy in its official precedence but oddly meaningless, at least to me – a non-Catholic and someone who wasn't steeped in a lifetime of liturgies and papal decrees.

In a letter released with the announcement penned by Archbishop Arthur Roche, he noted: "Therefore it is right that the liturgical celebration of this woman has the same grade of feast given to the celebration of the apostles in the General Roman Calendar, and shines a light on the special mission of this woman, who is an example and model for every woman in the Church."

Every woman? Maybe every person.

Another story explained that in the modern Church calendar, saints may be commemorated with a memorial (optional or obligatory), feast, or solemnity. A solemnity holds the highest rank among Church celebrations, and there are 24 in the annual liturgical calendar, including Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and Ash Wednesday. How striking that the Feast Day of Mary Magdalene would forevermore hold the same esteem? Wasn't such a designation be cause for celebration?

It sounded impressive and yet.

In some mystical way, perhaps following some unknown and long forgotten ancient rite of passage, a woman had been moved or decreed to a place that, in many ways, was equal to or above the men. Surely something profound had happened in the Universe. I wondered if St. Peter was out there somewhere and once again questioning "Why all the fuss over this woman?" as he did in the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

And I had to smile.

Would Mary have wanted this recognition? Perhaps not.

Did she deserve it? Yes, a thousand times over.

Because at the end of the day, the truth is simple: without Mary Magdalene there would be no Easter.

Oh, sure the Easter story would have been told, and it would have been a fascinating story of a man who was crucified, died, was buried and who came to life again. A story that would have most likely become a legend, bordering on the status of fable or myth. After all, the Romans had *Attis* and the Persians *Mithra*— *born of virgins, sacrificed and rose again--god-men and saviors worshiped by many of that time.*

The Easter story would be an equally good story to any of the myths of the time. But it would have been a story built upon accounts of those who followed the procession or those who watched from afar the three men hanging from crosses. Much like day-old news, it would have been a story gathered from different people, obtained at different times, and from people of very differing views. And there is where the story could have ended.

The rest of it, the basis of Christianity today, the tomb, the stone rolled away, the body gone—would surely have been reduced to little more than a fairytale, changed in each retelling and most certainly embellished or worst, totally forgotten through the ages.

But because of Mary Magdalene, we have an eyewitness to it all. She was the only eyewitness. It was her account of what happened that has stood the test of time and somehow survived. While all else of her has been systematically erased, clouded, conflated, her account of the Easter story remains.

Mary followed him to the hill. At the point where the angry crowds would have fallen back and where the disciples disappeared to hide in fear, she continued. She and a handful of women, ever faithful, ever-present, refused to leave.

As she watched Jesus lifted on the cross, endured his agony, witnessed his transition, would not his words from the last supper have echoed in her mind? "This is my blood..." Standing at the foot of the cross, a hands length away, close enough to touch his body, close enough to smell his pain, was she not participating in the first communion?

She heard his last words, watched him take his last breath.

She watched as his arms were unlashd and his body taken down from the cross.

She saw his lifeless body. She watched hands hastily wipe away the dried blood and wrap it for a final journey.

She followed the men who carried the body to the tomb.

She didn't 'hear' that he had been buried. She was there.

There was no question in her mind that he had died. She watched as the body was laid inside and saw the stone moved over the opening.

And then she stayed throughout the night, a dangerous vigil but one required of this disciple.

In the early hours of the morning, she leaves to gather the precious burial ointments and returns. Most versions list the other women; in others she runs to tell the male disciples.

It is they who become the first to see the empty tomb. They all marvel that the stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. The linens folded.

But they all leave.

It is the Magdalene who stayed. She alone searches for him.

Mary was the first person to speak to him, weeping and pleading for help, blinded by grief to the gardener's real identity.

Mary was the first to hear his voice and the first to recognize him.

Mary Magdalene's name was the first name spoken by him.

I've mused often about why, upon hearing her name, she didn't respond with his: Jeshua! or some other endearing term. But no, she responds with Rabouni and at that moment, the man's identity is made clear for all ages. Teacher!

It was the Magdalene who first reached for him, ready to touch him. She was rewarded by his words. to go "unto my brethren and say to them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, my God and your God." *My God and your God.* The same God for all, Mary and the brethren. The Great Commission was first given to Mary Magdalene.

And Mary obeyed. She ran to the disciples and said: "I have seen the Lord."

Her words announced the first Easter and in those words, she became the "Apostle to the Apostles." as noted by philosopher and theologian St. Thomas Aquinas during the late 1200's It was Mary Magdalene who shared the story of the Resurrection and they, in turn, would spread the 'good news' to the whole world.

For the woman who was unwavering in her truth, the woman who stayed, it is more than fitting that in the year of 2016, a day of honor is made official; a day signifying her rightful place in the Easter story.

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