

During the Sunday liturgy (July 22, 2018) at St. Francis Xavier Church (NYC), Natalia Imperatori-Lee, associate professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, offered a fascinating reflection (which prompted a standing ovation).

Good afternoon to all of you, sisters and brothers. I first want to wish you a happy feast of Mary Magdalene, patroness of the mansplained and of the dismissed, of women on the move and women forced to migrate, of women truth tellers, and women who are gospel proclaimers. I ask that you pray with me now that the Spirit be with us this day.

We live in interesting times. Dangerous times, especially for women, for children, for the vulnerable and the displaced. Our times are dangerous to mental health, to physical health, especially to the physical health of non-white, non-heteronormative bodies. It can be difficult to discern how, or even if, individual lives matter. We are traversing, as a community, a country, a church, a time in the world when for the poor and the excluded, the displaced and the forgotten, as Jon Sobrino said, tomorrow is not guaranteed.

We live in dangerous times for truth, which is seemingly under assault every day. Those who dare proclaim the truth (black lives matter, "*ni una menos*," families belong together) are ignored or maligned, not believed or taken seriously, called hysterical or worse.

We continue to live in dangerous times for women, especially. U.S. women die in childbirth at alarming rates, especially women of color. Black women are three times as likely to die in the US after giving birth than white women. Intimate partner violence harms 1 in 4 women, up to 20 persons a minute in this country. In addition to this, sexual violence and harassment, environmental injustice, homophobia and transphobia are crushing daily realities to so many women.

What, then, is good news today? If for Frederick Douglass the question was what, to the slave, is the fourth of July, then what, to a woman of color in the US of the 21st century, the age of #MeToo, and family separation, what to us is the feast of Mary Magdalene? How can we, in these dark days, celebrate women and women's leadership, when our sisters and our children are cut down at every turn? Who is this woman who we claim to be a towering figure in Christianity, the apostle to the apostles, the friend of Christ? Where is she in all these narratives that border on despair?

I think we can find her if we pay attention. Remember, attention is the expression of love, and Mary Magdalene was attentive. Mary, whom Jesus called Magdalene, saw it all. She walked alongside Jesus in his best moments and stood at the cross at the absolute worst. She saw God, collaborated with God, through moments of triumph but also, and more importantly I think for us today, in moments of despair. She proclaimed the truth and stood firm when she wasn't believed. She was, for some time (as Jim Martin reminds us every year at this time), the whole of the church, experiencing the truth of the resurrection before anyone else, and she walked before us in the need to share that hope-filled truth with a community that had lost hope. The Magdalene is, foremost, a beacon of hope.

Biblical archaeologist and professor Joan Taylor noted in a 2014 article that there was no town named "Magdala" in first-century Palestine or mentioned in the earliest NT writings. There were towers ("*migdala*") all over Palestine, ancient and contemporary, and so the claim that the word "Magdalene" ties Mary to a particular location is difficult to support. Instead, suggests Taylor, the possibility exists that Jesus gave Mary a particular nickname, not unlike calling Simon Peter or the Rock. Because of the

ambiguity of the Aramaic word Magdala (Hebrew "migdala," or tower), Taylor raises the possibility that Jesus named or called Mary "The Tower" as a sign of her closeness to him, her prominence among his followers, and her independence from patriarchal familial relationships (she's not the wife, or daughter of X). Instead, Taylor says, "Perhaps, as Simon Peter was a Rock, she was in some way the woman of the Tower."

But history has misunderstood and maligned Mary, whom Jesus called Magdalene. Our tradition, steeped in male-dominance, relegated her to a state of irrelevance, calling her a prostitute, a woman of ill-repute, a whore. Artists and authors eagerly inscribed this image in our collective imaginations, sullyng not only the narrative of the Magdalene but the beauty of women's bodies, reducing her to sinful submission saved only by the merciful Christ. She is depicted as a temptress and a seductress, a woman who used her "wiles" until God put a stop to her awful behavior, aroused her shame, and set her right. Sound familiar? A foil and a foe to Jesus's mother, virginal and "uncorrupted," again reminding us that women's bodies are only useful as vehicles for sin.

Jesus did not see this. When Jesus looked at Mary, called Magdalene, he saw a tower: a beacon, a fortress, a lookout. She stood out, she stood tall, a marker, a sign. Can we see these things in her? I've already talked a bit about how Mary Magdalene is a beacon of hope, having witnessed the worst of Jesus's suffering she is among the first to witness his triumph, and must share this victory with the others. Hope works like that—not something we contain merely within ourselves, a little propeller that pushes us forward to the next day, but a combustion engine that propels us outward, into a community that needs it most. Mary Magdalene is the woman who refuses to give in to despair, who tends to the wounded and the dead, who finds in that tomb nothing...nothing but promise, and who then turns and lets that joy overflow.

Mary Magdalene is a tower—the kind of tower that is a fortress against assault. An independent woman (remember she is not named in relation to any male family member) of means, my students frequently refer to her as someone who "bankrolled Jesus's ministry." A source of strength and refuge for Jesus and the other disciples, she also embodied, from the time she left the empty tomb to the time she reached the other apostles, the whole of the church and the essence of our ecclesial mission. That seed of hope let loose in the world, that is what it means to be the church, reaching outward toward the other. Mary proclaimed, like a banner you'd hang on a tower, or a tower itself, the strength of the message of Christ. She was a tower in the sense of an elevated pulpit: she stood and proclaimed the truth she housed in her being—Christ is alive, even here, even now. And she didn't change her tune, even though the men dismissed her testimony. Like countless women before and since, the men did not believe her. Patroness of the mansplained, indeed. So many men did not believe her, in fact, that for centuries she was derided as a prostitute—only a story of unbelievable redemption from horrible sin could justify her nearness to the Truth. But we know better. Women tell the truth all the time and are not believed, sometimes a truth they know with their own bodies: I've seen it or experienced it, I KNOW. I'm sure many of us are in the room right now. Me too.

Mary, whom Jesus called a tower, can be a person who invites us to change our perspective. From a tower we can survey the landscape, see with broader vision. The tower invites us to contemplate our smallness in the scale of creation. It also allows us to see more. Perched in a tower, we cannot help but

look beyond: beyond our comfort or discomfort, beyond our politics and religious boundaries, beyond our selfishness or our shame. In the person of Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles, hearer and proclaimer of the Word of God, we have an invitation to not turn away from the suffering of those in our families, on our borders, in the jails our taxes pay for; nor from the suffering of the millions of migrants across the globe, many of them women and children, vulnerable and unwelcome and disbelieved. They, too, proclaim the truth, and we, like Mary Magdalen must hear them and proclaim the truth in hope.

Today we celebrate this towering woman, and we name, acknowledge, and revere all the towering women who brought us to this moment—the mothers and grandmothers who kept our faith alive and nurtured it when we were children, the teachers and professors and mentors, the friends we’ve made from surprising and reviled places, the misfits and the misunderstood. We celebrate the ways in which this unlikely messenger bore the whole church within her, like another Mary in the gospels bore the whole of God within her. But we cannot merely celebrate this figure, we must go and do the same: to whom will we proclaim the hope that is within us? For whom will we stand up, even if we are disbelieved? On whose behalf will we challenge the structures that keep people invisible, disposable, forgotten? And finally, who will we choose to believe today, what voice crying out from the tomb, or the detention center, or the jail, or the shelter, or the street corner? Mary, whom Jesus called Magdalene, truth teller, hope-bearer, towering woman, pray for us.

-- Natalia Imperatori-Lee  
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