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Peter and Mary Magdalene in Conversation: A Dialogue Sermon¹

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At the time of preaching, Indra Skuja-Grislis was a full-time student in the School of Art, University of Manitoba, and an ordained Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad.

[That was a wonderful age when the followers of Jesus could actually converse with him and subsequently among themselves. Can we ever, even in part, imagine these encounters? Perhaps not ever fully, but at least we can seek to picture for ourselves some moments in their lives. Hence the attempt made by this dialogue sermon.]

Peter: I admit, as is well known, that I did not respond to Jesus' call immediately. I had my family, my work. And I loved fishing!² It was a good life, but something was missing. When I met Jesus – or, more accurately, when my brother Andrew who had been a disciple of John the Baptist introduced me to Jesus – something immediately changed in my life.³ I could no longer continue to live as I had till then.

Mary Magdalene: My life had taken a different course, and yet it had some similarities with yours. I really did not understand what had happened to me. There did dwell in me seven evil spirits.⁴ Do you have any idea what it means when your soul is pulled in several directions at once? When you no longer are in charge of your life, but are obsessed by the Evil One? That was dreadful. But then Jesus came into my life and on his orders the evil spirits left me. I was free! Liberated! Born anew! And now I could love and believe.

Peter: It is possible to lead a good and respectable life without the demons – and yet to feel empty. To be with Jesus was absolutely wonderful! But to follow Him meant to distance myself from my family. Increasingly, I spent more and more time with Jesus and away from my wife and home. Initially I visited often, and Jesus and the other disciples came with me. Jesus even healed my wife's mother.⁵

But eventually to be a disciple demanded more and more time. Even when at times my wife travelled with me⁶ the family ties suffered.

Mary Magdalene: It was much easier for me, since I had no immediate family. And in following Jesus I made wonderful friendships. These were intelligent, gracious women.⁷ Together, we provided the means for the mission of Jesus. And all of us proclaimed the good news. Those were remarkably beautiful days!

Peter: Soon enough Jesus told me that he will have to die for the cause. That frightened me, and I hoped this would never happen.⁸ Obviously, I had not understood what Jesus meant. Nor was I really in agreement with Him when I wanted to build three booths and thus to continue with the thrilling mountain top experience.⁹ I longed for such a life of glory where there would be no suffering and no death. Then Jesus warned me that I will soon deny Him!¹⁰ I protested vigorously that I would certainly never do anything like that! But then Jesus was arrested, and it all happened as He had foretold. The threefold cock crow shocked me back into the reality of my sinfulness. Now my fear was stronger than my faith. To save my life, I lied to a simple servant and denied my calling and my Lord!¹¹

Mary Magdalene: I understand you have much to regret, as, in some ways, do we all. Yet even though your sins were great, Jesus forgave you. Don't ever forget that all of us followers knew not only of your weakness, but also of your initial strength of faith and the forgiveness you received. At the same time, don't forget that we are haunted not only by the memory of forgiven sins but also by malicious gossip and suspicions. You will remember the woman "who was a sinner."¹² She had lived in sin, and now expressed her remorse publicly, even tactlessly. She poured expensive perfume on Jesus, then she dried his feet with her hair, and then she sobbed. Of course, she was ridiculed by others who thought of themselves as righteous. But Jesus defended her. I was not that woman! I, Mary Magdalene, have been wrongly identified with her. Despite what evil people say, I have never been a prostitute!

Peter: I understand that. And I have never supported malicious gossip. But I have never said that you, dear Mary Magdalene, have been one of the disciples. In my view, only men could represent the twelve tribes of Israel and therefore constitute the inner core of the twelve disciples.

Mary Magdalene: And I have never said a word about Judas, a man, a coward and a traitor, and one of the twelve like you. While he betrayed our Lord, several of us women stood firm in the faith and fearless. Have you thought about that?

Peter: I admit that I envy your courage. When I fled and cared more about my life than for my calling, you, together with our Lord's mother, as well as Mary the wife of Clopas, and John the disciple, remained at the cross.¹³

Mary Magdalene: You are speaking about courage. But think a moment! Courage does not depend on a person's physical strength or gender. Courage is rooted in faith and love. We women at the cross did not doubt, and so in faith we risked our honour and our lives. It is our faith that enabled us to remain lovingly at the cross.

Peter: I know that. And I acknowledge that you brought us the news that Jesus is risen from the dead, and that I did not quite believe you.¹⁴ Here you were way ahead of me, even though I was the one who had been given authority over my brethren. After all, Jesus said that I shall be the rock on which he will build His Church.¹⁵ If that's not real power, what is power?

Mary Magdalene: My dear Peter, do you not realize that all Christian power rests on faith? Without faith, there is no power and no authority. Without faith, the rock crumbles into a pile of dust!

Peter: I find it very difficult to think about those days immediately after the crucifixion. They were filled with tears and doubt.¹⁶ Hidden away in the upper room we lamented the loss of a Saviour.¹⁷ And then you arrived and declared that Jesus had risen from the dead!¹⁸

Mary Magdalene: I'm glad you remember that! Yes, indeed! I, Mary Magdalene, proclaimed the resurrection to you and to all the disciples!¹⁹ This was a great honour for me, to be the one from among all the disciples of Jesus to proclaim the miracle of the resurrection! Doesn't that say anything to you and to other Christian men about the role of women in the Church?

Peter: At that time I felt terribly depressed and powerless. I could not forgive myself that I, too, had betrayed Jesus. You did not see that, I know. But precisely then Jesus visited us! He came into the upper room through closed doors, and spoke first of all to Thomas.²⁰ Again, I felt I was born anew.

Mary Magdalene: It was an act of God's mercy that the truth of the resurrection emerged just in time before all of us succumbed to

despair and unbelief. Strictly speaking, none of us can insist that we deserved to hear of this miracle. Nevertheless, the fact remains that I heard of it first, and that I was able to preach, let us say, the very first Easter sermon! Perhaps in years to come some believers may call me “the apostle to the apostles!”

Peter: Well, don’t forget that I also had a distinctive calling and therefore a special leadership role. Three times the Lord asked me whether I loved Him – and then He entrusted to me the role of the shepherd.²¹ I often think this is a remarkable expression of grace that leadership was entrusted to me despite my shortcomings.

Mary Magdalene: I agree. But I also think that among the people of faith leadership rests far more on love than on power. After all, have you overlooked that Jesus inquired about your capacity for *loving and caring* – and not about power and might? You are not the only one who has been called to love. And in the measure of our love there is also found the degree of our authority. Love is the source, the only source, of all faithful leadership. The Holy Spirit has preferred it that way.

Peter: It seems to me that you are now reflecting more on the days to come than on the present. Unpredictable as the future always is, we can at least assume that there will always be some misunderstandings. It just might happen that for many centuries you will be mistaken for a former prostitute. And I would not be too shocked if my leadership would be misrepresented in terms of worldly might and splendour. But true faith will always yearn for the love of which you spoke rather than grasp for power. The best of our lives is always faithful love.

Mary Magdalene: Here we are of one mind and heart. But in the end our deeds will always speak louder than words, as you yourself have written.²² Often our opponents notice that very clearly. Do you know that among the Gnostic heretics there circulates a story that is too critical of you, and too flattering of me? Yet, perhaps, in the midst of the distortions it may provide a direction for both of us. Here is the story, from the so-called *Gospel of Mary*:

When it is told that Mary Magdalene was taught by Jesus some further wisdom which had not been disclosed to the other disciples, Peter denied that. Mary Magdalene now felt rejected ... Mary wept and said to Peter, “My brother Peter, what do you then believe? Do you believe that I imagined this myself in my heart, or that I would

lie about the Saviour?” Levi answered and said to Peter: “Peter, you have been of a hasty temper. Now I see you do exercise yourself against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Saviour has made her worthy, who then are you, that you reject her? Certainly the Saviour knows her surely enough. Therefore did he love her more than us. Let us rather be ashamed, put on the perfect Man,²³ form ourselves as he charged us, and proclaim the Gospel, without requiring any further command or any further law beyond that the Saviour said....”²⁴

Peter: But as you already warned, your story comes from the heretics and thus from outside the Church. In the Church your voice has never communicated power. The appropriate role for women is to obey and not to rule.²⁵

Mary Magdalene: I would not be surprised if some day even some male apostles would contradict you.²⁶ In the hearts of many, there will continue to echo the words of our Saviour, that “there is neither male nor female” because all of us are “one in Christ Jesus.”²⁷ And do not forget that in the list of faith, hope, and love, love is the greatest of them all; power is not even mentioned!²⁸

Peter: History will disclose the truth.

Mary Magdalene: Which is that the love of Christ is above everything else!

[According to legend Peter’s life ended in martyrdom in the city of Rome. His earthly remains are said to be preserved there. Of Mary Magdalene’s death and burial we have no information. But, as already Cicero knew, wherever located, our graves are in an equal distance from heaven. And as Christians we believe that when all is said and done, we must listen only to Christ, our Saviour.²⁹]

Notes

- 1 The couple dedicates this sermon to the Rev. Dr. Faith Rohrbough, the Past-President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in appreciation of her friendship and scholarship.
- 2 Luke 5:1-11
- 3 John 1:40-42
- 4 Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9
- 5 Mark 1:30

- 6 1 Corinthians 9:5
- 7 Luke 8:2-3
- 8 Matthew 16:21-23
- 9 Matthew 17:4
- 10 Matthew 26:33-35
- 11 Matthew 26:70-75
- 12 Luke 7:37
- 13 John 19:25-27
- 14 Mark 16:11
- 15 Matthew 16:18
- 16 Mark 16:10
- 17 John 20:19
- 18 Mark 16:10
- 19 Mark 16:9-10
- 20 John 20:26-29
- 21 John 21:15-17
- 22 1 Peter 2:12
- 23 Cf. Romans 13:4 and James 3:2
- 24 Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha; Volume One: Gospels and Related Writings*, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., trans. & ed. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 343.
- 25 Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:4
- 26 Galatians 2:11
- 27 Galatians 3:28
- 28 1 Corinthians 13:13
- 29 Matthew 17:5