

St Mary Magdalen, Patronal festival, 19 July 2020

Song of Solomon 3: 1-4; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-17; John 20: 1-2, 11-18

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+ Jesus said to Mary, 'Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father'

We should have been packing to go on holiday this weekend, but the pandemic has put paid to that. Our plan was to leave Oxford on the feast of Mary Magdalen, setting off very early in the morning – not quite while it was still dark – on our way to the Folkestone and the Tunnel. Then we would have spent three days driving down the eastern side of France until we reached the property we always rent in Provence, near Avignon. To avoid the horrors of south-bound French motorways on summer Saturdays, we aim to travel a little further than our ultimate destination and spend the day before our arrival somewhere in eastern Provence. Last year, as we have done before, we arranged matters so that we could visit the small town of St Maximin de St Baume (east of Aix) where in 1279 the body of Mary Magdalen was allegedly discovered in the crypt of the Benedictine Abbey.

Nowadays, the saint's skull is displayed in a gold and glass reliquary erected above the saint's alabaster sarcophagus behind an iron grill in the crypt, in a space so narrow that social distancing and reverent queuing have always been necessary should one want to get close enough to see. Underneath the skull, inside the same reliquary but protected within its own glass vial, is a small piece of skin, known as the 'Noli me tangere'. Some assert that this was discovered still attached to the skull when the tomb was first opened, at exactly the point on Mary's forehead where our Lord had touched her on the day of resurrection. Other legends suggest that this is a small piece of the skull which became detached after having been touched by the hands of thousands of pilgrims visiting her shrine. Today the iron grill and glass case keep the faithful well away from any sort of physical contact. One may see, but not touch.

I admit that I hadn't been familiar with the Magdalen's connection with Provence until we started going to this region regularly. In my mind, she is most closely associated with Vézelay in Burgundy, where the great basilica of St Mary Magdalen in

front of which St Bernard preached the second crusade still dominates the landscape. Or with the cathedral church of nearby Autun, which is dedicated to Lazarus, whose 'sister' Mary Magdalen is depicted in a beautiful twelfth-century sculpture that once decorated the tomb holding Lazarus' relics. Several other French abbeys claimed a share in Mary's legend, perhaps most memorably Fécamp, in Normandy, which had one of her arms. When that avid relic-collector, Hugh of Lincoln, visited the abbey, he unwrapped the arm from the silk and linen in which it was tightly bound and tried to break a piece off, resorting eventually to his teeth until he succeeded. When the monks objected at his gnawing of their precious relic as if he were a dog, he retorted that since he had only recently touched the blessed sacrament with his lips and teeth, he believed he could do the same to saints' relics: 'by this commemoration of them increasing my reverence for them,' he said.

I have now learnt that a whole array of medieval stories associated Lazarus, Martha and Mary with Provence. Lazarus was said to have been martyred at Marseille; Martha went to preach in the area round Avignon, where she calmly tamed a 6-legged dragon called the Tarasque; while Mary lived as a hermit in a cave at St Baume near Aix and died there, a virgin. According to Vézelay's version of events, in the eighth century, when southern France was badly afflicted by marauding 'Saracens', a monk called Badilon went to Aix to look for the saint and was led by a dream to the place of her burial in a ruined church; Badilon was able to rescue the incorrupt body and carry it safely back to Burgundy. The miraculous rediscovery of her body in 1279 – complete apart from one missing leg – in the church of St Maximin near the cave where the saint had lived in her final years attracted considerable attention, casting doubt on Vézelay's claims. Yet both remained significant places of pilgrimage throughout the later middle ages.

Many legends attach to the cult of Mary Magdalen, and we may have cause to feel sceptical about much of what they report, especially when they conflate Mary Magdalen with a range of women mentioned in gospel narratives. But we are on secure ground when we assert that Mary was the first to witness to the resurrection. In St John's gospel she was alone when she came to the tomb early in the morning and found the stone rolled away, but in the synoptics – who also named her – she had varying numbers of other female companions.

Left alone by the two male disciples whom she had summoned to witness the empty tomb, Mary remained weeping and stooped down to look inside. Like the lover in the Song of Songs who rose again to ‘seek him whom my soul loves’, Mary persevered in seeking. Her unfulfilled desires increased and as they increased, she found that for which she was seeking. Preaching on this passage, Gregory the Great compared the intensity of Mary’s longing for the Lord with that of the lover in the Song of Songs and also the search of all believers, we who seek the one whom we love upon our beds as we sigh with longing for our Redeemer. ‘We first see the one whom we cannot find’, he wrote, ‘so that when later on we find him, we may hold onto him more intimately.’ (Gregory, *For Gospel Homilies*, §25)

When she saw Jesus, Mary did not at first recognise him; that she thought he might be the gardener adds an almost humorous note to the scene. Her error also, inevitably, causes us to compare this garden with the garden of Eden, contrasting Eve’s first sin in Paradise with Mary’s role as witness to the resurrection. Perhaps the risen Christ was wearing very little and so she thought him a manual labourer; perhaps in the intensity of her need to find Jesus and through her eyes, swollen by tears, she didn’t look at him properly. Or perhaps her eyes, like those of the disciples who would later meet Christ on the road to Emmaus, were veiled so that she could not see. Only when Jesus, the Good Shepherd, spoke to her by name, did she know his voice and recognise him, and when she did she addressed him, Rabboni, Teacher. Then (John does not say directly) she surely reached out to touch him. (In Matthew’s gospel – 28: 9 – she took hold of his feet and worshipped him).

That touching brought an apparent rebuke: ‘Noli me tangere’, the Latin Vulgate text reads. Do not touch me. But the sense of the Greek present tense imperative is different. Not, don’t touch me at all, but – as our translation put it – do not hold me. Do not keep doing the thing you are doing, holding onto Jesus now that you have found him, but go and tell the other disciples that he is risen and his ascending to his father and our father.

In this time of lockdown, no biblical phrase speaks to us more directly than this injunction not to touch. We have been forbidden to touch or hold others outside our immediate family circle (or social bubble) for weeks. For people who live alone, this has proved especially difficult. Fr Peter and other clergy here will share my frustration at the inadequacy of pastoral calls conducted over the telephone; sound

alone is no substitute for face-to-face encounters. I have discovered rather painfully over these past months just how much my own pastoral persona depends on touching people: hugging in joy; reaching out a compassionate hand to express sorrow, pain, or grief. A touch can say so much more than words. Although we are now, with numerous restrictions, allowed back inside our churches to worship, there is still definitely no touching; no physical sharing of the peace; we may not touch to offer a blessing instead of the sacrament; there can be no hugs or handshakes at the door afterwards.

But even while we lament what we cannot have, we must be mindful of what we have not lost. We have not been cut off from this church or its community during the long weeks when we were forbidden to worship together. Fr Peter has continued to hold the congregation through the regular emails and pastoral letters that Jonathan has sent out on his behalf; he has held all of us in prayer, through the worship he offered first in vicarage and more recently inside the church, but at first without a congregation. In this he has shown us how Mary Magdalen can be the best sort of patron, for he has held onto us, but without touching.

Mary was no more cut off from her risen Lord by not being able to continue to hold onto him, than we have been cut off from the body of Christ in our isolation and separation during the Covid-19 crisis. Nor are those who cannot join us in body this morning but are still shielding at home isolated from us in our worship; they are present in spirit in our midst. Fr Peter holds them on his heart as he stands at the altar.

We, who have the privilege of being here, will, like Hugh of Lincoln, shortly enjoy that intense physical experience when with our lips and teeth we will receive the body of Christ. And as we eat his flesh, knowing that we thereby also drink his blood, we will know that we are held in the love of Christ within us and all around us, just as we have been held all this time when we could only worship remotely and when we could only make spiritual communion, neither touching nor chewing.

So, as we recall the example of Mary Magdalen, who was the first to witness the good news of the resurrection, and to tell the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord', let us pray that we may keep faith with her, that our witness may be as bold, our love as deep, our faith as true.