

Homily for Ordination in St. Cloud, 6/23/2013

Dear Bernie, dear Corene, dear Martha, Sisters and Brothers,

“Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to Abba God. Rather, go to the sisters and brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Abba and to your Abba, my God and your God.”

Deacon Irene just read these powerful words of our brother Jesus to us. It is our tradition in the Midwest Region to let the ordinands choose the readings for the ordination liturgy. And as they have told me, they pick readings that speak to them and give them insights and guidelines for their lives and their ministries.

How can the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene open our hearts and minds to a deeper understanding of our baptismal call to ordination, priesthood and ministry, especially in regard to women?

The resurrection of Jesus is one of the central messages of our Christian faith. Those who encountered the risen Christ were filled with fear, amazement, awe, joy, denial and many other emotions. In today's Gospel Mary Magdalene's eyes and heart are opened when she hears Jesus call her by her name. It seems only natural that Mary not only cries out: rabboni—teacher—to signify that she has recognized him, but that she also wants to embrace him.

Jesus explains to her that this is not the right moment, but he gives her a task. “Go tell the brothers and sisters about your experience of me, the risen one.”

And Mary does what Jesus told her to do. Here ends the story in the Gospel of John.

There are some variations in the synoptic gospels. Mark tells us that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene. When she told the brothers that Jesus was alive, they would not believe her. Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary encounter first the angel and then Jesus who sends them to tell the brothers to meet him in Galilee. In Luke's version we hear about three women, including Mary Magdalene, who find two men in dazzling clothes at the empty tomb. When the women tell their experience to the eleven and the other disciples, they don't find open ears and hearts. As a matter of fact, Luke writes: “Their words sounded to them like idle talk and they did not believe them.”

Today we are gathered here for the ordination of three women to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. I do not have to explain to you, my brothers and sisters, how many different and conflicting emotions and reactions this simple

sentence evokes in our parishes, in the hierarchy and even in the secular world. I believe the figure of Mary Magdalene depicts some of the misunderstandings, tensions and problems that have existed from the very beginnings between the sisters and the brothers in our beloved church. This has not only be harmful to women but for our brothers as well. But Mary Magdalene is also a sign of healing, a sign of salvation, a sign of setting that relationship right.

Today I would like to ask the question: Would Christianity have developed differently if Mary Magdalene would have remained in the prominent position into which Jesus obviously placed her. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether believes that Mary Magdalene would have led the church into a different direction: In her book “Sexism and God Talk” she tells stories to help us understand what may have been different in a church led by a woman. Unfortunately, women’s stories in history were not written down and passed on like the stories men wrote. That is why we have to re-imagine, reconstruct a history where women have equality.

Here is Rosemary Ruether’s story:

Mary Magdalene experiences the risen Christ but as he disappears, she sees another figure, a majestic woman who says to her: You Mary are now the continuing presence of Christ. Do not look backward for him, but forward. He has gone ahead into a new future. It is for you to continue the redemption of the world. Suddenly all her confusion disappeared and Mary felt a clear, calm center within herself. “So this is why he had to die,” she thought. “He tried to teach us to give up our fantasies of power and revenge. But we could not hear him. As long as he was here among us, we wanted him to take power, to replace the kingship of the gentiles with the kingship of Israel. But our ideas of God’s rules were still based on domination and subjugation. Only by bringing these hopes to an end and with his death, could we be forced to give up these dreams and find a different answer within ourselves, the answer that he had been trying to teach us all along. We must renew ourselves and our relationships with each other. Only when we are no longer slaves, but also no longer desire to be masters and to turn our former masters into slaves, can we lay the foundation for the world to come.” Excitedly Mary runs to tell her insights to the brothers, only to be scoffed. Especially Peter did not get it. He believes, Jesus only postponed his glorious victory. Peter believes, God snatched Jesus to heaven and he will come back with all the hosts of heaven to defeat the Romans and their lackeys, the High Priests. And then, Peter believes, Jesus will give the power to his faithful followers.

There is no clear answer to the question I asked before, if a church, led by Mary Magdalene would have been a better one than the one we know, led by Peter. That is water over the dam, that is the past. But the future is still open. We strive and we pray for a church led by Mary Magdalene and by Peter, together, in harmony.

Corene, Bernie, Martha—in a few moments, your names will be called, just like Mary's was called. When you answer the call you will commit to be the presence of Christ and to continue his redemptive work. All of us receive this call in baptism, but you will be asked to answer the call in a specific way, for a leadership role.

Does the task seem overwhelming to you at times? After all, we are faced with a crumbling patriarchal structure in our church. We are trying to establish new ways of leadership and are looking for a church where orthopraxis is more cherished than orthodoxy. We are yearning for greater accountability and openness. We are praying for a more inclusive church where all are welcome at the table regardless of their race, skin color, gender, class or sexual orientation. We are watching the destruction of the body of our Mother Earth and know that our church has to become more involved in environmental issues. The gap between rich and poor in our country and the gap between wealthy and poor nations is widening. Too many people, mostly women and children, live in substandard conditions, exposed to abuse, lack of education, war and hunger.

But I do not want to send you out filled with despair on the day of your ordination. Let me end with two symbols of hope: The first is the garden. You placed a beautiful image of the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene on the invitations to your ordination. On this icon is a depiction of the garden with the empty tomb and the tree of life. This garden reminds us of Paradise. Also depicted is the bond between Jesus and Mary. This bond is love, the kind of love described so beautifully by Paul in the letter to the Corinthians which we heard before. Soon, when your name will be called you are asked to respond just like Mary in that same Spirit of love which is after all the most important commandment Jesus left us.

But just like Mary, he does not leave you orphaned to do his work but he sends you the Spirit just as he sent it to Mary Magdalene and Peter, to the whole early church. This is the Spirit, Sophia, so beautifully described in the first reading from the book of wisdom. Go with confidence to be the hands and feet of Jesus. You are equipped with his Spirit of love, the Spirit, who renews all things who enters into holy souls and makes them friends of God.

The second image is the table: We do not know if Mary Magdalene was present at the last supper. (I believe she was.) She was, however, present at many meals with our brother Jesus. Here she learned from the one who ate with women, sinners and tax collectors what his new vision of God's reign was all about.

Listen to Mary Magdalene. She brings us the message that the one who invited us to a totally inclusive table community, where the world recognizes us by the way we love one another, is alive. Bernie, Corene, Martha, go, do the same.