



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for Saint Mary Magdalene (22<sup>nd</sup> July) 2024

Many years ago, now, whilst I was in one of my previous parishes, a man in my congregation rang to inform me that his young son had died and asking whether I would find the child's grandfather and tell him the terrible news.

It was, otherwise, an unremarkable day and the death came as a bolt from the blue. The old man was, therefore, simply engaged in ordinary daily tasks and it took quite a while to find him. As I trailed around the parish and the awfulness of the news I carried sank in, perhaps influenced by a measure of shock, I began to wonder in my mind whether I had actually imagined the conversation and I contemplated the harm and affront that falsely reporting such a thing would cause.

I imagine something similar inhabiting the mind of Saint Mary Magdalene as she left her meeting with the risen Christ and went to tell the Apostles. Distraught, as we might suppose, at the Death of Jesus, her Friend, the memory of her encounter with Him in the garden must have felt unreal; and maybe she, too, began to wonder whether she had imagined the whole thing and reflected on the obloquy, which would fall on her as people realised that her news was, in fact, a product of her imagination and her grief.

It is difficult for us to appreciate what it must have felt like to be the first and for a short time the only earthbound person to know of Christ's Resurrection: probably, it will only have been in retrospect that she could appreciate the full wonder of her experience; she was, after all, privy to a truth, the effects of which would shape world history.

It is for this reason that we have, in recent decades, reappraised the place of Mary Magdalene in the unfolding life of the Church. First, of course, her reputation had to be rehabilitated after centuries of spurious assertions about what we would now term her lifestyle. Then, we have had to adjust our appreciation of the timeline of events following the Resurrection.

As part of this process, some have come to understand Mary Magdalene's role in terms of Apostleship. Traditionally, we located the foundations of our Apostolic character in the first generations of the Church or, more specifically, the Twelve - Jesus' closest associates.

However, underlying this layer of Church history is the anterior phase of Mary Magdalene's experience. In a real sense, she was the vessel which carried the Gospel in a sort of zip-file, since it was in the light of the Resurrection that the eternal significance of the incarnate Life of Jesus of Nazareth was revealed.

As I have several times observed over the years, the Gospel accounts might offer us something of a streamlined narrative of the events of Christ's Passion and what followed. It is quite possible that the process by which news of His Resurrection was embedded in the association of Jesus' followers was rather more protracted than the accounts suggest: not least, by the time of the Crucifixion, the men we call Apostles might have scattered back to their homes; and it will have taken time to bring them back together.

We can only speculate on what role if any Mary Magdalene might have played in this embryonic phase of the Church's establishment. However, one thing seems certain: that we cannot take away from her the privilege of having been the first to meet the risen Christ and bring news of His Resurrection to those who were mourning His Death. That surely is sufficient to accord her a particular place in the life of the Church.