

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of “On the Strength of Her Testimony”

**presented on July 22, 2015 by
Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P.**

Dr. Jane Regan:

Now it's my honor, really, to introduce Sister Mary Catherine Hilkert who is a member of the Dominican Sisters of Peace. She's Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame where she teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses on theological anthropology, Christology, fundamental theology, and feminist and intercultural theologies.

It's clear that Notre Dame has very much appreciated the work that she does. And she was honored with the Joyce Award for excellence in undergrad teaching in 2009 and the Kaneb Award for Excellence in teaching in 2003. From 2010 to 2012 Sister Hilkert served as visiting professor of faith and culture at Radboud University in Nijmegen in the Netherlands, where she offered courses on the thought of Edward Schillebeeckx. Sister Hilkert holds her Ph.D. from the Catholic University of America as well as honorary degrees from Providence College and from the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis.

She is the author of *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*, *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today*, *The Praxis of the Reign of God: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, in which she was co-editor, and numerous articles on theology, preaching, and spirituality in both scholarly and pastoral journals. She is currently working on a book entitled *Words of Spirit and Life*.

Former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America from 2005 to 2006, Sister Hilkert has also received a number of prestigious national awards. She was the first recipient of the Washington Theological Union Sophia Award for Theological Excellence in service of ministry and was awarded Barry University's Yves Congar Award for Theological Excellence in 2011. She was a 2012 recipient of the Ann O'Hara Graff Award by the Women's Constructive Theology Seminar of the Catholic Theological Society of America for her contributions to the integration of academic and pastoral theology.

She is a speaker who is much in demand—we're thrilled to have her here today—and has preached and lectured in Ireland, the Netherlands, South Africa, and Australia, as well as throughout the United States and Canada. Sister Hilkert is really a woman of the Church committed to teaching, preaching, speaking, and scholarship. We are really delighted to have her with us here today. Please join me in extending a warm welcome to Sister Mary Catherine Hilkert.

Sr. Hilkert:

Thank you, Jane, for that warm welcome. It is really a delight to be here, actually to be back in Boston. I want to say thank you to so many community members, friends, former students; and I especially want to thank my friend and colleague, Elizabeth Johnson, for driving up from New York for this, as well as Rita for all of her work on this. And when Mark thanked the women who make this happen, I really want to thank you, Rita, and also Melinda who very much is at the heart of making this happen.

Recent writings...recent attention to the writings of Pope Francis has focused on his long-awaited encyclical on the care of creation, “Our Common Home, *Laudato Si*,” and rightly so. But on this feast

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

of Mary Magdalene I'd like to return to his earlier Apostolic Exhortation "*Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel." His call there for all baptized Christians to serve as missionary disciples included the invitation to the entire Church to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. I want to suggest if we're serious about that, then one of the most important steps we can take as a Church is to foster and promote opportunities for women to proclaim the Gospel in every possible setting, included but not limited to the liturgy.

The saint whose feast we celebrate this day, the one who has come down in the history of the Church since at least the Middle Ages—somewhat disputed when her title "the Apostle to the Apostles" or "the Apostle of the Apostles" was first used precisely, but that saint, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Magdala, offers clear evidence that since the time of Jesus there has been an incisive female presence in the Church, including women who have been gifted and called to preach the Gospel. Given her central role as a preeminent missionary disciple in the Gospel of John, it's surprising that Francis did not include her in his call for all baptized Christians to embrace our vocation of missionary discipleship. All the more so since other recent papal documents, including John Paul the Second's, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*" have recognized that Mary Magdalene was the first eyewitness of the Risen Christ, and for this reason she was also the first to bear witness to him before the apostles.

Equally surprising is the woman from the Gospel of John whom Francis does choose to highlight in his exhortation as an example of missionary discipleship, the Samaritan Woman. Her story, a text which features prominently in Christian reflection on baptism during Lent, is narrated only in the Gospel of John where it spans chapter four. Here we have a true outsider as both woman and Samaritan whose encounter with Jesus issues in such powerful words of witness that the Gospel narrative reports: "Many Samaritans from that town believed in him on the strength of the woman's word of testimony." An incisive female presence indeed.

Yet another disciple whose words of testimony are remarkable in John's Gospel is Martha of Bethany, who for too long has been relegated to the kitchen in the Christian imagination, or compared, usually unfavorably, to her supposedly more contemplative sister, Mary. In John's Gospel Martha speaks strong words, even to Jesus, and it is Martha rather than Peter who professes the central faith claim of the Christian community: "You are the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

There are other women featured in the Gospel of John, notably Mary of Nazareth who plays an important role in the beginning of Jesus's ministry at that wedding feast of Cana and again in the Passion Narrative at the foot of the Cross, as well as Mary of Bethany who lavishly anoints Jesus at his final meal in Bethany, a symbolic preparation for his burial.

But I want to focus this afternoon on the three women who offer explicit, prophetic testimony to Jesus, highlighting what the narrative surrounding each one suggests about what shaped her identity and prophetic words. In the final and briefer section of my talk, I'll point to another prophetic preacher who was also inspired by the witness of Mary Magdalene and claimed her mantle and a similar vocation to preach, even as an uneducated young laywoman in the turbulent Church and world of the 14th century, Catherine of Siena.

Each of these women's stories offers testimony that has too long gone unheard, or been omitted from the record of what constitutes the official witness of the Church, or been reinterpreted in ways that mute, deny, or undermine the prophetic vocation of each, and in Mary Magdalene's case her vocation and identity as apostle. I won't be commenting directly on the art in the background here, but each of these women has also inspired countless artists, including Rita's friend most recently. And their images have also contributed to shaping our perception of each woman and her role in the Christian

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

tradition. As we turn to each narrative in turn, you might ask yourself what insights can we glean from the story about the strength of this woman's testimony, and what might that mean for women today who are also beloved disciples and missionaries sent to proclaim the truth that we have seen and heard.

So, we turn first to the preacher that Pope Francis identified as a model of evangelization, the Samaritan Woman at the Well who remains nameless in John's Gospel but who is remembered and celebrated in the Eastern tradition as Photini, the enlightened one. For too long she has been described only as the foreign woman who had five husbands and who was living with yet another man when she met Jesus, who called her out on her sexual partners. But more careful attention to the details of the story in John's Gospel reveals a deeper story of conversion, and her true identity as a preacher of the Gospel.

The encounter begins in chapter four of John's Gospel when Jesus pauses at midday for a rest near Jacob's well in Samaria on his journey from Judea to Galilee. Although this is hostile territory for him, and he and the woman who has come to draw water are initially alone at the public space of the well, he takes the initiative to ask her for a drink. It is the woman who takes the conversation to a deeper level, reminding Jesus of the cultural, religious, and gendered boundaries that separate them: "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman for a drink?"

As the narrative unfolds Jesus chooses to ignore the antipathies and the history that had long-divided these religious siblings. He focuses instead on the concrete person in front of him. In Photini he saw not a sinner or a woman with a questionable sexual history, but rather a woman searching for fuller life, and he invited her to a deeper encounter with God: "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Although the woman appears to respond on a surface level—he has no bucket, the well is deep—her real question is a theological one about Jesus's identity: "Are you greater than our father, Jacob?" Recognizing her openness to discovering more about his invitation, Jesus reveals the gift that is offered to her: "The water that I shall give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Once invited into discipleship, the woman responds with enthusiasm: "Sir, give me this water."

But like the other disciples in John's Gospel and contemporary disciples as well, her response to the invitation to "come and see" unfolds gradually. Her initial desire to never thirst again and her glimpse of a future promise give way in the narrative to a genuine encounter with Jesus that will require exploring deeper levels of her identity as well. The conversation which follows, in which Jesus questions the woman about her husbands, is often interpreted on a moral level, and the woman's questionable history of sexual partners is all too often the focus of preaching when this passage appears in the Lenten Lectionary. But the focus of the Gospel writer is rather on the woman's gradual recognition of who Jesus is, what he offers, and what he asks. She moves beyond her earlier question to the faith claim: "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet."

When she takes the risk of raising the divisive and profoundly theological question of where true worship takes place, on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem, Jesus calls the woman to a faith that moves beyond all that separated Jews and Samaritans, to a deeper understanding of all genuine worship as in spirit and truth. His words prompt a deeper awareness of the truth that she still cannot fully see. When she voices her hope in a messiah who is to come, the one who will tell us everything, Jesus responds to the woman's growing enlightenment with the fullest revelation of his identity to that point in the Gospel, using for the first time the "I am" formula which establishes his unique relationship with the Father: "I am he, the one speaking with you." This revelation of Jesus's identity is the turning

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

point for Photini's embrace of her true identity as well. Like the other disciples earlier in the Gospel, she leaves behind her livelihood, in her case the water jar, to embrace a mission of announcing the Good News to her people. In words that echo Jesus's earlier call to his disciples and their summons to others, she invites her townspeople to "come and see." Her personal encounter with Jesus shaped the authenticity of her preaching.

Likewise, her living witness to what she had experienced in faith had the power to change the lives of others who heard her testimony. Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman, on the strength of her testimony. The Greek expression for the word of the woman witnessing used here is the same expression Jesus uses in his farewell prayer for his other disciples at the Last Supper in chapter 17 as he prays for them and their apostolic mission: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their words." Same expression. No wonder Francis singled out this Samaritan woman in his discussion of the joy of the Gospel that is incarnate in a people of many faces. Highlighting the importance of hearing the Gospel proclaimed as it has been experienced in the richness of diverse cultures, Pope Francis remarks, "In this way the Holy Spirit shows the Church new aspects of revelation and gives the Church a new face."

One of the new aspects of revelation which the Holy Spirit reveals in this new face of Photini is that women, too, from many cultures and backgrounds, are called to preach the Gospel, and that others will be led to Jesus on the strength of her testimony. That remains the most basic reason why as Church we need to recognize and celebrate the preaching of women, not only the prophetic witness of women's lives, as important as that is, but also the explicit testimony of women's words.

Here the subplot to the story remains instructive and a continuing challenge to the Church. In the Johannine narrative when Jesus's male disciples return to the well, they are amazed, or as Raymond Brown said, "shocked," to find him speaking to this woman. The text continues: "But no one said, what do you want? Why are you speaking to her?" Commenting on that question in a 1975 report on the roles of women in the Fourth Gospel for the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Brown remarked that Jesus's disciples did not dare to ask him, "what do you want of a woman?" He concluded his study with the observation: "That well may be the question whose time has come in the Church of Jesus Christ." Four decades later we can only add, it is a question that is long overdue and one which many still dare not ask.

A second woman whose strong leadership and prophetic testimony in the Gospel of John has been largely overlooked in the Christian tradition is Martha of Bethany, whose feast we celebrate a week from today. Frequently, she is not only paired with but also compared unfavorably to her sister, Mary. In Luke's well-known version of the story, Mary is rewarded for choosing the better part of discipleship by sitting at the feet of Jesus in the posture of one absorbed by the teaching of a rabbi rather than concerning herself with the details of hospitality.

We do know the all-too-familiar story about her complaining to Jesus: "Lord, are you not concerned that my sister has left me to do the household tasks all alone? Tell her to help me." In the Lucan narrative she receives an apparent rebuke: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and upset about many things. One thing only is required; Mary has chosen the better portion. She shall not be deprived of it." Now, biblical scholars Mary Rose D'Angelo, Barbara Reid, and others have noted this way of depicting the two sisters is part of the strategy of the author of the Gospel of Luke who, in contrast to the Gospel of John, was concerned about limiting and circumscribing women's roles in ministries in the early Church. That might be the topic of another lecture in this series in the future, but it's important for us focusing on the Gospel of John to note that Martha plays a much more significant role here.

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Her first appearance in chapter 11 of the Gospel of John is when she and her sister Mary send word to Jesus from their home in Bethany about their brother and Jesus's friend, Lazarus: "Lord, the one you love is sick." The two sisters' description of Lazarus as "the one you love" is frequently noted. It's even led some to suggest perhaps he was the mysterious and unnamed figure who takes that pride of place in the Fourth Gospel, the Beloved Disciple.

The women, on the other hand, are often identified individually or together as the sisters of Lazarus. And far less attention is given to the narrator's comment two verses after the one where they refer to Lazarus as "the one you love," or to the ordering of the names there. So in verse five: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." It is the two women who were more known in the Gospel tradition. The identification of Lazarus as their brother is unique, in fact, to the Fourth Gospel. As the story unfolds in John's telling, although Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus and knew that his friend was ill, he stayed away for two more days before proposing to the disciples that they return to Jerusalem. John portrays this delay as an intentional one on Jesus's part so that the disciples might come to believe in Jesus's power over death and that God's glory might be revealed. But from the perspective of Martha and her sister Mary, their friend had failed them when they needed him most. He hadn't even come to console them in their grief as so many other friends had done since the time of Lazarus's burial four days earlier. The intimacy of their friendship prompted Martha to speak honestly in her first encounter with him since the death of her brother: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." She speaks here on behalf of the entire Johannine community confronted with the death of beloved companions in the early Church. If to believe in Jesus is to possess eternal life, then what is the meaning of the death of his faithful ones? Her question then remains ours today as well.

I was reminded of that just after graduation this year when a beloved professor at Notre Dame who had just received the highest award for outstanding teaching in the College of Arts and Letters . . . he was a husband and father of two children . . . he died of ALS in his mid-40s. The grief of his family and the struggle of the entire community gathered there to attempt to continue to believe in a gracious God who never fails us, that grief was palpable, as the priest, who himself had been a close friend of this professor since their old college days, repeated Martha's haunting refrain throughout his homily: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." Without moving too quickly to Martha's expression of resurrection faith, this wise preacher knew it was important to express her anguish first, and that of her community and family. When laments and cries from the depths of darkness and absence are addressed to God in the tradition of the psalmists, those words, too, are testimony of the faith that one cannot see but believes.

Martha's next words confirm that trust in spite of her grief and her disappointment that Jesus had not been there for them. John reminds us of the vulnerable space from which her words of faith emerged as he introduces her response with the words "even now." "Even now I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Drawing on the insight of contemplative theologian, the Carmelite Constance Fitzgerald, we might say Martha proclaimed her firm and bold conviction in her own time of impasse born of grief and confusion. Jesus's response to her radical trust, is to offer Martha what he had not yet revealed to any other disciple in this Gospel, not only the promise of resurrection on the last day, which Martha and the Johannine community had already come to believe, but a deeper invitation to faith based on the startling revelation, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

That astounding disclosure is followed by the further promise that, “Whoever believes in me though they die, they will come to life. And whoever is alive and believes in me will never die.” And his final challenge to her and to us: “Do you believe this?”

The author of this Gospel has structured his narrative in such a way that it is Martha, not Peter as in the Gospel of Matthew for example, nor any of the male disciples, who proclaims the fullest profession of the faith of the early Church in her reply: “You are the messiah, the Son of God, he who is to come into the world.” As Sandra Schneiders has remarked, “Martha’s role of being the one to articulate the faith of the community is difficult to understand unless women in John’s Gospel actually did function as community leaders.”

We might further reflect on the strength of Martha’s testimony from the perspective of the theology of discipleship as friendship, which is so central to this Gospel. Her words of frank rebuke and pain in this Gospel cannot be separated from the words they must have spoken over festive meals and other vigorous conversations over years of friendship, . . . that’s Martha with the . . . actually functioning as the community leader. Here’s a somewhat vigorous conversation and festive meal . . . hospitality, table companionship. This is after all the Gospel in which Jesus describes his disciples as no longer servants but friends. It was Martha’s house where Jesus turned for a final meal with friends before facing his own death, and it was there that Martha is described as performing the ministry of serving Jesus with the Greek term from which the word deacon is derived. Yet both her ministry and her strong testimony remain hidden in the Christian imagination . . . and silent in preaching, so long as Martha is consigned to the roles of anxious housekeeper—here she is as the patron of cooks which hardly is a negative role in itself, I hasten to note, but just not the full picture—or that of the competitive, jealous, or petulant sister. But in the memory of this early community of beloved disciples, she remained a prophetic leader, the one who in this Gospel portrait most fully proclaimed the identity of Jesus—another incisive female presence and missionary disciple.

If both Photini and Martha have been overlooked or depicted in limited and negative ways in the Christian imagination, and their prophetic witness has been dismissed or attributed to others, no one has suffered that fate more than the woman whose feast we celebrate this day, Mary of Magdala. Earlier lectures in this series and a wide variety of articles and books on Mary Magdalene have traced the story of how the woman who clearly functions as the primary witness to the Risen Jesus in the Gospel of John, the Apostle to the Apostles as well as the Apostle of the Apostles, how she can be identified in the Christian imagination, how she came to be identified, as the archetypal sinful woman most often identified as prostitute, harlot, or whore, her saving grace being that of repentance.

As you know from Mary Ann Hinsdale’s lecture last year, that conflation didn’t happen in the Eastern Christian tradition. And texturally we can trace it to the words of another preacher in the West, the sixth century pope, Gregory the Great. It’s in his now well-known or infamous homily, at least well-known in this group. He linked an unknown female sinner in Luke’s Gospel, Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus, and Mary Magdalene whom Luke identifies as one from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. He links them all, Pope Gregory, in a single portrait of Mary Magdalene as extravagant sinner. In Gregory’s homily, the seven devils, which are also the seven deadly sins, signify all the vices. The lavish perfume with which she anointed Jesus recalls the way that she had previously perfumed her flesh in forbidden acts. Her abundant tears flow from the same eyes with which she formerly coveted earthly pleasures. Gregory’s point was to celebrate her profound conversion and repentance. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues and now served God entirely in penance. Hence, the many portraits of the penitent Magdalene in Christian art.

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Perhaps most significant for our focus today on Magdalene the preacher, however, is that this mass of crimes of which she was guilty included not only her vanity and forbidden acts of the flesh but also the fact that she had spoken proud things with her mouth. Gregory explicitly commends Mary for repenting of that bold speech as well, symbolized by her act of planting her mouth on the redeemer's feet. Although Gregory's portrait of Mary Magdalene has had a powerful hold on the Christian imagination, and it's been reinforced by artists, authors, and film makers throughout two millennia of Christian history, the biblical portraits of Mary Magdalene offer quite a different vision of a missionary disciple.

A prominent Jewish disciple of Jesus from the town of Magdala on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, she participated in the ministry of Jesus. (I'm going to move to that one before I was ready for it. Just can't leave that other one up there as I'm speaking about this missionary disciple.) She participated in the ministry of Jesus, following him and ministering to him. She's the one disciple identified in all four Gospels as witness to both the death and resurrection of Jesus. In John's Gospel she's the one to discover the open tomb early in the morning on the first day while it was still dark. She's also the first one to encounter the Risen Jesus and be commissioned by him to announce the Good News to her brothers and sisters when we hear the full story in the Lectionary, thank you. There is no question in this Gospel that Mary Magdalene is the Apostle to the Apostles, the first commissioned to preach the Gospel. Once again we might ask of the narrative, what was the source of the power of this woman's testimony? The dynamics of her encounter with Jesus are more developed than in either of the other two women's stories. Although many discussions of the Easter experience of the disciples, even in fairly contemporary theology texts—I hate to admit even in the texts of Edward Schillebeeckx—and many homilies, still speak of all the disciples as having abandoned Jesus and later been forgiven by the Risen Christ as Peter was.

That is not the story of Mary Magdalene, who kept vigil at the foot of the cross. Rather, her conversion, and it is equally a radical conversion, begins not with bitter tears of regret after betrayal but rather with tears of grief, loss, and confusion. Standing by an empty tomb, not even being able to locate the dead body of her beloved friend, she is a woman once again facing impasse. Fitzgerald described impasse as a situation in which there is no way out, no way around, no rational escape from what imprisons one, no possibilities. In impasse, the new vision that is needed, the alternative that can open up a future is totally beyond our control. Using the language of the mystics, Fitzgerald argues the only thing that can keep us in that situation from succumbing to despair is to embrace a stance of radical trust in God and the power of God's Spirit. Anything but passive, this stance of radical openness and vulnerability before God requires radical courage and faith in the face of the darkness that persists. This is precisely how John pictures Mary Magdalene, not as running away from the pain, but rather as she wept, she bent over into the tomb. "She stooped to peer inside," another translation says.

It was while she was still weeping as she peered into the tomb and while it was still dark that Mary Magdalene caught a glimmer of the presence of God even there. The text says, "two angels in white." But she didn't find what she came looking for, the dead body of Jesus which she hoped to give a proper burial. The words that are spoken in the passage first by the angels, are an invitation to Mary to bring her pain to word, to name the source of her tears. That, too, is strong testimony. "Woman, why are you weeping?" But she can't fully reply, at least not yet, answering only: "They have taken my Lord. I don't know where his body is." The Gospel suggests that the recurring question of "why are you weeping" is one that preachers and missionary disciples will need to engage repeatedly on our own journeys of conversion. And every time we answer, a little more is revealed about what we have lost or fear losing, about who we thought we were, about the grief of others that we bear, about the unknown future that we face.

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Analyzing this story as a conversion story, we can see that Mary's initial words of confusion and loss were one step in letting go of the past and seeing new life. Once she could speak those words, the passage says "she turned around"—biblical language for conversion—"and she saw Jesus"—John's language for faith. But she still did not know that it was Jesus. The text suggests that before she could recognize the new life being offered to her, she needed to name not only her own tears but also the desire that gave rise to those tears.

Jesus's question to her is twofold: "Woman, why are you weeping?" And, "Whom are you looking for?" Part of Mary Magdalene's call to conversion is to be more extravagant, more bold in her hope and in her desires. Since at this point she is still longing for the physical presence of Jesus as she knew him before death, she can't yet see the Risen One. Her hopes remain limited to finding and ministering to a corpse. "Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him and I will take him." The whole conversion story here turns on a word, a name, Jesus speaking her name. "Mary." Nothing more. But that one word brings about her final turning. This time she really sees the one she has encountered, not the gardener, but her beloved friend and teacher. This seeing is knowing in the ways that friends know each other. And there are, of course, echoes here for John of the Good Shepherd passage earlier in the Gospel. "I know mine, and mine know me. They recognize my voice."

In many other biblical stories the person who's called to relationship with God and to a special mission has her or his name changed, but not here. Here Mary's name is spoken again, but this time in a way that deepens her identity and transforms her hope. Now, like Photini, she sees not only Jesus but her true identity as beloved disciple. Now she knows the real answer to the question she couldn't answer. "Whom are you looking for?" But this moment of intimacy is followed immediately by a challenge and a charge. The famous words "Do not cling to me," *noli me tangere*, have been interpreted by some as further evidence of Mary Magdalene's attachment to all things earthly and carnal, or she was clinging hysterically to Jesus. And that goes back to the early Church. Rather, as Sandra Schneiders interprets this passage, Mary Magdalene represents the early Church in its most basic challenge of believing and recognizing the ongoing presence of Jesus among them, but now in a radically transformed way. Jesus is Mary's beloved friend and teacher "*Rabboni*," but he is now with God—"Ascending to my Father and your Father." His charge to her to "Go and tell my brothers and sisters," is not only a clear apostolic commission to announce the Good News. It's also a challenge to Mary to return to the community and to recognize the presence of the Risen One there in a radically new way. Hence, her announcement is not *I have seen Jesus* or *I have seen Rabboni*, but rather "I have seen the Lord."

Like Photini and Martha, Mary Magdalene's prophetic words emerged from an encounter in love, a relationship with Jesus that radically changed their perceptions and their lives, and in each case a power that moved them to speak boldly of what they had experienced in faith. Only that kind of preaching with conviction can form communities and change lives. But preaching with that kind of power can also be perceived as a threat to the power of others, which as we know, is the way the second century Coptic Gospel of Mary portrays the tensions that emerged in the early churches over women's speech and roles of leadership in the community. The text focuses on the competing—this is the Gospel of Mary—the competing leadership roles of Mary Magdalene and Peter in the early Church, and the question of the authenticity and significance of Mary Magdalene's Easter experience, since it's precisely the primacy of their witness and their commissioning by the Risen Jesus which serves as their authorization for leadership in the community. In the Gospel of Mary, when Mary begins teaching the males disciples who were terrified by the death of Jesus, Peter challenges both the Easter experience and the authority of her witness. "Did he really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

The dispute escalates when Mary asks Peter if he thinks she is lying about her experience. Levi, however, intervenes with the comment about Peter's hot temper and the judgment and calls attention to her deep relationship with Jesus as the basis for her speech. "If the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Lord knew her very well. That is why he loved her more than us." In that text, which was not included in the biblical canon, the disciples take Mary Magdalene's teaching as a source of encouragement for their own mission to preach.

But in the centuries that followed, authoritative texts explicitly prohibited women's preaching. The third century *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the teaching of the apostles, and the fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions* mention Mary Magdalene, but they deny that she was commissioned by Christ to preach. The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, for example, says:

It's neither right nor necessary that women should be teachers, and especially concerning the name of Christ and the redemption of his passion for you have not been appointed to this, O women. For he, the Lord God Jesus Christ, our teacher, sent the Twelve to instruct the people and the Gentiles. And there were with us women disciples, Mary Magdalene and Mary the daughter of James, and the other Mary, for he did not send them to instruct the people with us.

And by the fourth century—I'm skipping some other passages you may prefer not to hear at any rate—from the *Apostolic Constitution* and the *Council of Chalcedon* which also says "inferiors should not"—this is actually about all lay preaching, not only women's preaching—should not take on the role of the superiors who have been ordained to it. But I also want . . . sticking with Mary Magdalene, by the 4th century St. Ambrose had even turned to the Johannine narrative and interpreted the words *noli me tangere*, "Do not touch me," to mean that women were forbidden to teach in church, an interpretation that continued to be cited in medieval debates about whether women were allowed to preach. So I turn there.

In spite of the growing hierarchical resistance to lay preaching and even stronger patriarchal resistance to women's preaching when even laymen were authorized at times to preach, interest in Mary Magdalene's role as *Apostola Apostolorum* and her preaching apostolate flourished in a particular way in the medieval period. Stories and legends have been circulating about her preaching missions since at least the eighth century, including a preaching mission in Provence. And by the eleventh century a legend was circulating which credited her with the evangelization of all of Gaul. By the twelfth century she was proclaimed by some to be the prophet equal to John the Baptist, and her title as *Apostola Apostolorum* and pictorial representations of her preaching to the apostles, including this well-known one from the St. Albans Psalter, were firmly established. She herself, in fact, became the subject of a number of medieval sermons. I won't go into this, but I'm happy to note that at that time also the Dominican Order from its origins claimed Mary Magdala as our patron. So if you want to hear more about that and if we have time for any questions, we could do that later.

At the same time—back to the bad news for a moment—medieval preaching manuals, canon law, and theological writings continued the prohibition on women's public preaching and teaching, citing the Pauline injunctions against women's speech in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "Women should keep silent in the churches. (Don't tell Francine.) It is a disgrace when a woman speaks in the assembly." And from the First Letter to Timothy that's obviously forgotten, an earlier part that says, "I know where you got your faith from, your mother Eunice and your grandmother Lois." Right? Forgetting that, it goes on to say, "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men." Among the reasons given for that prohibition by Humbert of Romans who wrote a well-known manual in the thirteenth century on the formation of preachers—he was a Dominican, I have to admit—among the reasons given were, why only men could preach:

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

A man is more likely to have understanding than a woman. Second, preachers occupy a superior position, and women are of an inferior status.

Third, if a woman were to preach, her appearance would inspire lustful thoughts in the minds of men. And finally, as a reminder of the foolishness of the first woman, of whom St. Bernard says, "She taught once and wrecked the whole world."

Nevertheless, nevertheless, in that climate, alright, the image of Mary of Magdala as preacher and apostle continued to flourish in the popular imagination. In spite of efforts to deny her commission to preach and her apostolic role, to minimize it, to describe it as an exception, all of which Katherine Ludwig Jansen has documented in her wonderful book *The Making of the Magdalen*, Mary Magdalene's preaching ministry and her title Apostle of the Apostles, remained popular in liturgy, sermons, art, drama, popular devotion. In addition, the precedent of Mary Magdalene's being the first commissioned to preach by the Risen Christ continued to be cited, not only in defense of women's preaching but more broadly in defense of women's speech. So, for example, Christine de Pizan cites that.

One of those who drew inspiration from the witness of Mary Magdalene as a preacher commissioned by Jesus himself was the fourteenth century uneducated, young laywoman, Catherine of Siena. Her encounter with Christ in mystical prayer led her to embrace a life of contemplation in action, including a vocation to preach. Like Mary Magdalene, she came to embrace a mission that was not of her making, not even within her imagination. Amid the dreaded bubonic plague and wars between Italian city-states and throughout Europe, economic upheaval, widespread poverty and disease, a Church torn by divisions and scandals and in clear need of reform, she heard a call to do what women didn't do. She identified her vocation as a lay Dominican, not only as a call to care for the sick and poor of Siena, as the other members of the Mantellate . . . This is just a refresher course. Another little break in the . . . so . . . Catherine . . .

She saw her vocation not only to care for the sick and the poor of Siena as the other members of the Mantellate—that was the tertiaries to which she belonged—did but also as a call to share the mission of her brother preachers when women of the word were supposed to be enclosed in monasteries. She led preaching missions throughout Tuscany. She accepted a ministry of peacemaking in a world of politics where she had little expertise. In letters to family and friends, to queens and kings as well as popes and cardinals, she penned sermons that changed people's lives and impacted the course of Church history. And she penned them in the name of Christ Crucified, Gentle Mary, and *Io Caterina*—"I, Catherine." Even as a young woman she gathered friends and disciples and shared with them the unspeakable joy of God's love. Without the appropriate education or titles, she authored a mystical classic, *The Dialogue with Divine Providence*, recording not only her petitions to God but the voice of God speaking. She is perhaps most well-known for the initiative she took to persuade Pope Gregory the Eleventh to return from Avignon to Rome—advice that he heeded. Another one of her amazing preaching opportunities came when she was invited by his successor, Urban the Sixth, to address the *Curia* in Rome. This actually hangs in the headquarters of the Dominican Order in Santa Sabina in Rome.

In one of her letters, this fourteenth century preacher explicitly exhorted her followers to follow the example of Mary Magdalene who she described as "an apostle in love." Calling attention to the criticism Mary Magdalene received for her preaching ministry, Catherine, who had been criticized for her own itinerant preaching and bold words, said of the Magdalene:

If she had paid too much attention to herself, she would not have stayed under the cross with those people, Pilate's soldiers. She would not have gone and remained alone at the tomb. Her love kept her from thinking, *what impression will this make? Will they say bad things*

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

about me? She does not think such things but only how she could find and follow her master. She knew the path to holiness so well she has become our spiritual *maestra*—master.

Time does not permit further exploration of the source of this fourteenth century woman's authority to preach, but even this cameo appearance highlights that Catherine, like Photini, Martha, and Mary of Magdala, spoke because she believed. The strength of the testimony of each one was forged in diverse ways, but there are common threads of strangers encountered, challenging conversations and honest expressions of doubt, experiences of grief, table companionship and the school of friendship, radical faith born in darkness, and an unquenchable love and desire for God that is a sheer gift of the Spirit and that impels one to share that Good News with others. There is, of course, a history of resistance and suspicion of this prophetic ministry, and specifically of women's exercise of it, a suspicion and resistance that continues today—hence, the importance that we take to heart Catherine's exhortation to remember Mary Magdalene's courage. Her love kept her from thinking, *what impression will this make? Will they say bad things about me?*

I began this lecture with the hope that as a Church we would seek to foster and promote opportunities for women to proclaim the Gospel in every possible setting. I'd like to end with one of the most powerful images of women's testimony to the heart of the Gospel which we have witnessed in our country this summer. It occurred after another group of disciples gathered around the Word of God during their weekly Bible study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This time the stranger whom they welcomed to join them for their shared reflection on the Parable of the Sower and the Seed in Mark 4 returned hatred for love, brutally murdering six women and three men, and shouting words of racial hatred as he snuffed out their lives. What was almost as unbelievable as this horrific act in a year when our national wound of racism has already been laid bare multiple times in Cleveland, St. Louis, New York, and beyond—what was almost more unbelievable was the response of members of that faith community.

If we are looking for an incisive female presence in the Church, for the strength of women's testimony, we need look no further than to the women weeping and at the same time announcing the Gospel at the bond hearing for Dylann Roof and on the steps of the courthouse outside—women such as Nadine Collier, the daughter of victim Ethel Lance, pictured here on the left on the steps of the courthouse: "You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt me a lot. You hurt a lot of people. But God forgives you, and I forgive you. "

Or survivor of that massacre Felicia Sanders who lost her son Tywanza, who died when he was trying to save his elderly aunt and to get the shooter to stop. Sanders said at his hearing: "Every fiber in my body hurts and I will never be the same. But as we say in the Bible study, we enjoyed you. But may God have mercy on you."

As *New Yorker* editor David Remnick remarked, "The world is such a fallen place it's somehow easier to comprehend the deranged cruelty of Dylann Roof." And he noted earlier in that article, and I noted that Shawn Copeland also has just written this week in an online post, "That that cannot be separated from the history of American racism and a still existing cultural seedbed of white supremacy from which he derived his hatred." "It's almost easier," Remnick wrote, "to believe that than it is . . . or to understand that," he says, "than to comprehend the unfathomable and uncompromising mercy of Nadine Collier and Felicia Sanders."

Gospel testimony is lived witness. At times like this it is wrenched from the lives of faithful disciples who speak their words of testimony in the power of the Spirit of God. It is not enough to be inspired

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

by their words. We are called not only to admiration but to action. We are each called as Mary Magdalene was to go and tell. Thank you.

Melinda Donovan:

Thank you so much. What a wonderful presentation! Thank you so much for being a prophetic voice and for lifting up all the prophetic voices of women in our tradition. Thank you so much.