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EMPOWERING WOMEN DISCIPLESHIP AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN MISSION: A HISTORICAL CRITICAL AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF JOHN 20:1-18

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Introduction

This research begins with the desire to highlight, the empowering discipleship of Mary Magdalene and her significant role in the Church and society. It is based on the research question: "Whom are you seeking?" The question that arises is, "What difference would it make if we take Mary Magdalene's witnessing role as a model for the empowerment of women?" The growing awareness of the basic equality between women and men, together with the realization of their complementary roles and functions both in Church and Society, is a remarkable sign of the times. There is a demand in the Indian context to give special attention and importance for women in

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ministry. The aptitude and charisma of a woman enable her to participate in areas of ministry that are suited to her. Her special capacity to love and give life makes her reflective and sensitive, thus equipping her for a more person-oriented ministry. Hence, the study emphasizes on Mary Magdalene's role in the resurrection narratives (Jn 20:1-18) by highlighting the importance of women and their role in the Church and society.

The gospels say very little about Mary Magdalene until the narrative sketch reaches the day of the crucifixion. This research focuses on the encounter between the resurrected Lord and Mary Magdalene in the Johannine Gospel. What could be Jesus' intention in sending her forth to his brethren as the witness of his Good News? The Acts of the Apostles does not mention her, nor does Paul make any references to her in any of his letters. Was she not the first to receive the commission from Jesus to go and strengthen the disheartened disciples? To some extent the feminist theologians have tried to rediscover and reinterpret Mary Magdalene's identity in the light of women empowerment in the Church and society. The author employs both the diachronic and synchronic method to analyse the text (Jn 20:1-18). The research motivates us to discover how to be an effective instrument in spreading the message of risen Jesus in the present scenario.

Outline of the Thesis

The emphasis is given throughout the research on the need of women empowerment and their participation in the mission of the Church. The thesis begins with a general introduction, followed by five chapters of different length and it ends with a general conclusion. The introduction of the dissertation conveys the context and discusses the need of women empowerment in the Church and society. It responds to the women who are not given equal status, who are suppressed, and, in some cases, oppressed. Women can be liberated by listening to their cry, accepting them as they are through a dialogue and sharing the faith. Hence, the leadership of Mary Magdalene in the resurrection narrative is a role model for the liberation of women in the Church and society.

Chapter one presents the preliminary analysis of the text. The pericope is suitably placed at the beginning of the narrative (Jn 20:1-18). It is considered a single unit because it happens early on the 'first day of the week.' *In this narrative, the presence of Mary Magdalene adds a new dimension to the understanding of discipleship.* The finding of the empty tomb and resurrection narrative is a combination of different

traditions and stories. Mary Magdalene serves as the point of unity for these two older traditions. The story exhibits in the form of appearance, a verbal or nonverbal response to the appearance, words of comfort, or a command spoken by one appearance.

Chapter two explains the exegetical meaning of the text—an understanding of the concept of resurrection, the empty tomb, and the Easter appearances that laid the foundation for the exegesis of the pericope itself. This story achieves the basic need for testimony to the resurrection. *The pericope opens with the theme of the empty tomb announced by Mary Magdalene, with a question, 'where is the Lord'? In her fear and confusion, she seeks the help of the two disciples, to investigate further the tomb regarding the missing body of Jesus. Then Simon Peter and 'the other disciple' runs to the tomb to discover for themselves. Mary Magdalene being a woman, the unusual behaviour observed here is the time of her arrival to the tomb 'while it was still dark.' The darkness symbolises her lack of understanding, coupled with spiritual blindness. Belief in the risen Christ depends on the witness of those who have seen the empty tomb and the living Lord. It relies on the vision of faith of the first witnesses.*

Chapter three demonstrates the narrative-critical analysis. The understanding of the role of the narrator, the plot of the story, and the techniques used by the narrator are an essential part of the narrative analysis. The analysis of the story focuses on the world inside a narrative with its time and places, its characters, its past and future, its own sets of values, and its series of events. The implied author is attempting to communicate to the reader that women can also be disciples. The 'narrative' discloses the divine nature of the resurrected Lord. The resurrection of Jesus reveals the victory of life, love, freedom and the mission that Jesus lived.

The fourth chapter illustrates the role of women disciples and the empowering discipleship of Mary Magdalene in the four gospels. Jesus accepts women into His fold and affirms their dignity and worth even when they were neglected within the society. The women in the Gospel of John constantly act with a clear vision and a prophetic spirit. In an age and culture in which women were not considered legitimate or legal witnesses, Jesus' attitude is highly significant. Mary Magdalene is a representative figure for the true discipleship. Therefore, she shares in the mission of God's empowerment of people.

The final chapter deals with the theological synthesis and reflects on empowering women discipleship and their participation in the mission in today's context. Women and men are called to bear

witness to the Good News they have received. Jesus commands Mary Magdalene 'to go and tell his brethren,' which contains a mission implication. Her role as an important apostle in the early Church invites us to reflect on the position of women (Acts 12; 9:2; 13:50). The general conclusion summarises the research and raises questions about current reconstructions of the study. It also presents alternative ways in which a modern reader might interpret the women in this gospel from a non-androcentric perspective.

The mission of Christ can be carried forward more effectively only when women are equal partners with men in God's mission. Mary Magdalene is one of the daring women, who comes to the tomb in the morning of the first day of the week, receives the commission of the risen Lord to bring the Easter message to the rest of his disciples. She functions as a representative figure for true discipleship. Therefore, she shares in the mission of God.

Contribution to the Field

Empowerment is a greater need for the mission. God's very purpose in sending Jesus and empowering the disciples through Jesus is to bear witness to the Gospel in the world. The empowering story of Mary Magdalene could empower Indian women to awaken their dormant spiritual energy and the life-giving force. The rebirth of this spiritual energy will enable them to embrace the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' of traditional spiritualities and in their understandings of the Church and her mission in society.¹ Among all women, Mary Magdalene comes across as an outstanding figure in the Johannine community. She emerges as the first witness as well as a proclaimer, even though her testimony has been taken out at the end by the redactor. There are no scholarly bases to prove the authenticity of the tradition concerning the first Christophany to Mary Magdalene.²

This research highlights the role of Mary Magdalene in the context of the empty tomb and the resurrection narratives. In particular, it attempts to demonstrate the presence of genre pairs as a significant literary means in supporting inclusive nature of Johannine discipleship. Jesus treats women and men alike, regarding the nature and value of discipleship. Inclusive and empowered leadership is needed for the effectiveness of the mission. The exploration does not

¹Aruna Gnanadason, "Women and Spirituality in Asia," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed., Ursula King, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, 355.

²E.S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press, ³1983, 332; C. Setzer, "Excellent Women: Female Witness to the Resurrection," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 (1997) 272.

intend to answer all gender issues faced by women in our society and country today. It certainly envisages an egalitarian society and a Church where everyone strives to empower women to realise their worth as the children of God.

As Christians, we are called to build a community of love, peace, and justice, by being faithful to Jesus' teaching and by bearing witness to His message in the world. Therefore, the empowerment calls for a self-transformation that enables one to lead the disheartened people for a greater commitment to share His Good News with the least and the lost. The dignity of women as equal partners is to be encouraged. Mary Magdalene, an empowered leader, actively participated in the evangelising mission of Jesus, restoring faith in the resurrected Lord. We live in a society, which is much different from that of Jesus' time. Do we need a tangible Jesus today? Is it necessary to see, to feel, to touch to believe in our generation? Must we insist on a 'seeing' that leads to 'believing' or 'deepening faith' approach? These are some of the questions that come on the way. The study inspires us to have the eyes of faith to see the risen Lord and to have a stronger commitment to work for the empowerment of women.