

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

John 20.1-20

April 9, 2023 (Easter Sunday)

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." ³ So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. ⁶ And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ So the disciples went away again to their own homes.

¹¹ But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her.

Today, we look at this fascinating person named Mary Magdalene.

Since, I started reading and studying the Bible, I've been interested in her. In fact, we were so taken with her that we named our third child after her. In all four Gospels she's credited with being the first person to see Jesus Christ alive after the resurrection.

IF, as some have tried to maintain, since the start of Christianity, IF the disciples of Jesus concocted the story of Jesus Christ's resurrection – if they thought they would get famous or wealthy or considered to be super-spiritual heroes and THAT'S why they invented this story of the resurrection, IF the story was fabricated, Mary Magdalene would have been the worst possible choice to be the first witness because she was a woman with a shady reputation.

People who rejected Christianity may have concluded that she'd been insane... "so why would we possibly trust her testimony? She's mentally ill!" That TO ME, is an indicator of the story's authenticity.

I want to look at her today and what she might tell us about WHAT Christianity IS and what IS its basic message to the world: **1) Who was Mary Magdalene? 2) Who was the Gardener she met?**

Who was Mary Magdalene?

Let me look at popular opinions/views, traditional views, MY views and what the Bible says (which we'll break down into a few more categories when we get there).

Popular views include *Jesus Christ Superstar* in which she was sort of in love with Jesus and she was deeply conflicted about her feelings and she sings, "I don't know how to love Him..."

Dan Brown, in the *DaVinci Code* using the discredited Gnostic Gospels goes a step further and says that she was the secret wife of Jesus. I'll try to show in a moment, Dan Brown wasn't too far off the mark but in a very different way than what he intended.

Church tradition says she was a prostitute. The Bible doesn't explicitly say that. We also know that early Christian icons sometimes pictured her holding an egg. The backstory behind the icons is that she was a very wealthy woman and was invited to eat at the table of Tiberius Caesar in Rome. At the dinner she was holding a white egg and she exclaimed that Christ is risen. Tiberius laughed and said there was about as much possibility of a man rising from the dead as a possibility that the egg, she was holding would turn red and immediately the egg turned blood red. Some believe this is also the background to the tradition of colored eggs for Easter.

By the Middle Ages she was called, *apostolorum apostola* ("apostle to the apostles").

My theory (also held by the Roman Catholic Church) is that she was the sister of Martha and Lazarus, Mary of Bethany. She may have left home, moved from the Jerusalem suburb (Bethany) to a town on the Western Shore of Lake Galilee called Magdala and then was restored to her brother and sister by Jesus. It's just a theory (though, C.S. Lewis seems to have believed it – just saying) still only a theory.

What's not a theory is what the Bible actually says about her. Let me tell you about who she was, what contact she'd had with Jesus Christ and what she supposed when she went to the tomb on that Sunday after the crucifixion.

In Luke CH 8 she's mentioned in company with other women who supported Jesus Christ financially; Luke mentions, "*Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out*". I'm not exactly sure what demonic possession looks like but I THINK it's somewhere between *The Exorcist* and what we call insanity or mental illness. In any case, Jesus Christ restored her to society. Without Him she'd have been ostracized and avoided as a social pariah.

Obviously, she became very devoted to Jesus Christ. She traveled with him and supported Him financially. We can understand this devotion because Jesus had rescued her from SEVEN spirits; she was seven-fold demonized i.e., totally and completely dominated by evil and utterly insane (SEVEN!) He restored her to life and saved her from a life of torment and isolation.

The Church Fathers called her, “Μυροφόρος or Myrrhbearer” because she brought myrrh and spices to anoint the dead Body of Jesus on that Sunday morning (Mark 16). Mary may also have helped prepare the Body for burial. Just a few verses prior to today’s reading, John records: “*Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.*” (Jn. 19.39)

That Sunday, she came before sunrise... it was dark. She expected to find the Body behind that massive stone. She worried about how they would move the stone and if they might find some help in that garden cemetery. When she arrived, she saw the stone had been moved and she concluded that someone had stolen the Body.

She ran to Peter and the others, and those young men came running to retrieve the Body but when they looked inside the tomb, the graveclothes apparently convinced them that He had risen. Some say it’s because the wrappings were there... like a discarded cocoon, that the Body had passed right through the clothes and they were there in the shape of a body but like a deflated balloon and the face cloth rolled up separately. Peter and John (if that’s who it was) saw and they believed – even though they hadn’t yet seen the risen Jesus.

Mary Magdalene returns, weeping because she expected to find the Body and after she’d witnessed the unspeakable horror of His torture and cruel, brutal death what else could they possibly do to her Rescuer...but apparently there were more indignities – they’d stolen and desecrated His Corpse.

And weeping, she crouches and looks inside the cave... and sees two messengers/angels – one at the head and one at the foot – like on the lid (the Mercy Seat) of the *Ark of the Covenant* – angels with outstretched wings bowing toward the center where there was no representation of God, just a blank, empty space – the God whose Presence cannot be depicted. It’s as if we finally see the very Presence of God – it’s the Body of Christ, the dwelling or Temple of God, where God lived on earth.

The angels question Mary Magdalene, “*Why are you weeping?*” Then she turns and sees the Gardener there and He also questions her, “*Ma’am, why are you weeping Whom are you seeking?*” and she was, of course, seeking a dead Body and supposing that He, the Keeper of the Garden, of ALL people, would know, “*Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him and I will take Him away.*”

And the Gardener says one word, “*Mary*” and something about the way He said her name made her turn again (twice she turns) and she says, “*Rabboni*” (Hebrew for Teacher) and apparently her second turning was like an approach or an embrace.

And Jesus Christ says something that sounds cold (at best) or cruel (at worst), “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father... go to My brethren and tell them” In other words, “Be an apostle to the apostles” – one sent to the ones sent.

But what’s happening here? Well. She thought it was the Gardener, but she was wrong... OR was she? Truth is: He IS the Gardener. The first Adam was a gardener but he proved unworthy of tending the Garden and thus rejected his high calling. Now a Last Adam has come to reclaim the Garden, to cultivate the world with New Seed (Luke 8.5 et al) and make life come out of the ground – He IS Life come out of the Ground on the Third Day (Remember Genesis CH 1: *“The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a third day.”* (Gen. 1.12-13). This is the True Gardener, Life Himself, come out of the earth – life coming out of death on the third day.

Additionally, Mary is a picture of the Church, the Bride of Christ. When I said that Dan Brown (*DaVinci Code*) wasn’t all wrong it’s because Mary Magdalene was NOT the wife or girlfriend of Jesus but she WAS a kind of symbol for Bride of Christ, the Church. The Church in Jesus Christ’s day had become evil, like possessed by devils – Jesus said they were of their Father the Devil (John 8.44). And Jesus Christ came to liberate the Church from evil (1st John 3.8). She was a personification of the Church liberated from the total dominion of evil.

In a great article by a Presbyterian minister, (Jeff Myers*) he points out all the parallels between this scene of Mary Magdalene in the Garden and shows that she is, in a sense, playing the role of the Shulammitte beauty in the Song of Solomon... Here’s CH 6 *“Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?”* And she replies: *“My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of balsam, to pasture his flock in the gardens and gather lilies.”* (6.1-2)

The Shulammitte just like Mary Magdalene. She’s looking for Her Beloved and her Beloved is looking for her! The Church has turned to many other lovers, and they all abused her but now the true Lover has come. In the Song of Songs, CH 7, we read, *“Return, return, O Shulammitte; Return, return, that we may gaze at you!” “Why do you gaze at the Shulammitte, as she moves so gracefully between two lines of dancers?”* (6.13 NLT) The Greek version of the Hebrew (LXX) uses the same words that John used of Mary Magdalene as she turned and turned again!

As in the Creation Story, Adam’s side is opened and Eve is made from his rib, so with the Last Adam, the Lord of a New Creation, His side is opened, pierced on the Cross and fluids of BIRTH burst forth giiving birth to a Bride – Mary Magdalene is the representative of that Bride... not in a physical sense but in a true and spiritual sense.

“Don’t cling to Me” says the Gardener, Jesus Christ, *“don’t cling to the way it was, your past spiritual mountain-top experiences and maudlin* memories, sentimental pining for the Good Ol’ Days when you were first liberated I go to present My perfect obedience and My sacrificial death before the Throne of God*

above... and if that sacrifice is accepted, the Father will signify it by raising Me from the dead and calling Me a Bride from every people and tribe and putting all Creation under My feet."

The Bible is a love-story; a tragedy ends in death, but a comedy ends in a wedding. The Bible is a comedy, a love story. The Lover of our souls has come to live the life I failed to live, to die the death I deserve to die and to RISE for everyone who believes.

Do YOU believe?

All other lovers and attachments will ultimately fail to complete you... even spiritual experiences in the past, even ENORMOUS experiences like being possessed and then set free from evil spirits will NOT sustain you.

Only one Lover has power over death and only He, the True Gardener can make you flourish... all those who Trust Him with their past, present and future. All who are like dead branches grafted into the Living Vine (John 15.1-5)

Only TRUST HIM ...only TURN to Him – as Mary Magdalene – turn and turn again.

*"Maudlin" (sentimental and silly) is derived from the word, Magdalene.

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