

Woman in the Bible: Mary Magdalene
Jennifer Hasler
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Mark 16: 1-7

16 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

John 20:1-18:

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her."

In the ancient world, in the Greco-Roman world, if you were to plan out a person to speak for your organization, you would have an affluent and well connected male person be that representative.

One would never plan for the primary story for a new movement to be told by women.

The testimony of a woman was less than a man. We see remnants of these issues in some world cultures today where the testimony of a woman is worth half of a man.

Women were of gentler soft stuff and men were of better hard stuff. If you wanted credibility, you would look for and find as well respected and affluent and well-educated individual you could find. That would include someone male.

And yet, a careful reading of scripture shows women leading in key places throughout the early community and early church. Even if the letters and stories were trying to be more male centric to fit better in a wider Jewish or Greco-Roman space, there was no way to tell the story without mentioning all of the women leaders.

A few weeks ago we heard about Phoebe, a leader from the greater Corinthian church who was involved in the writing as well as carried and read aloud the letter to the Romans with Paul's authority. Tabitha from Joppa was one person we heard about last week. One can find a whole number of women who had key ministries and leadership within the early church.

And yet, *the greatest among all of these women* was a women named Mary, Mary from Magadala. There are several important women named Mary in the NT. For example, there was a Mary in Bethany that anointed Jesus with perfume.

It is ok if you get confused by everyone named Mary. After all the 6th Century pope, Pope Gregory the Great, did as well. From a sermon he gave we get the incorrect story that Mary of Magadala, also known as Mary Magdalene, was a prostitute and all of the related stories. The Catholic Church did later declare that Mary Magdalene was not the penitent sinner a few years later *in 1969*.

Mary was from a city named Magadala, a city on the Sea of Galilee. The full name of the town means towers of salted fish, so likely an important area of trade and commerce. Being on the Sea of Galilee, it is not suprising that this Mary heard about Jesus. Luke reports that Jesus sent out seven demons from Mary. What that means is unclear, other than having a miraculous healing connected Mary to Jesus.

This Mary followed Jesus, being part of a group women funding the ministry as seen in Luke's Gospel (8:1-3):

“After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means”¹

¹ Mark 15: mentioned Mary M, Salome, etc. Luke 24 mentions Joanna again

The core travel group was Jesus, 12 male disciples that we call apostles, and more than 3 female disciples, who might have also been considered apostles of a sort. The scripture says many others. Joanna, another key person in this group, was the wife of the manager of Herod's household. She had significant influence in the Galilee region. Some think that Joanna might be the same person as Junia, the apostle mentioned in the Romans letter, and although there are good arguments, it mostly is speculation at this stage.

Remember, it was not uncommon for women to own property or have influence and status on their own. It might be that the women were generally more wealthy and had higher status than the men. It paints a different picture than we usually expect.

Mary is central to the passion and resurrection stories of Jesus. She is in all four resurrection accounts, and plays a significant role in these stories. In particular, when bringing the four gospel accounts together, this Mary was the first person to see the risen Jesus and the first to testify to his resurrection.

No doubt Mary heard Jesus talk about his resurrection, just as the other 12 male apostles and other women heard about his resurrection.

She stayed around the cross with the notable women, and was present during his burial. Maybe she thought something could happen during those moments. They left Jesus in the tomb at the Sabbath started.

It is just crazy to think someone would rise from the dead. And yet, she was hoping that maybe there was a chance as she went to the tomb early that Sunday morning.

Mary and other women arrive at the tomb on Sunday morning. The stone was rolled away. Jesus' body was not there. Jesus was not there in a manner that made it look like someone quickly took his body away. Things were neatly folded up. One who is robbing a grave would not be expected to leave a tomb in such a neat manner.

And yet, what did this mean. In Mark, an angel appears to the women. You know the day will be *interesting* when an angel appears. Mary Magdalene, and maybe others, find their way to Peter and John. The women were the first disciples to report the empty tomb to the rest of the disciples. We are not exactly sure what John and Peter are hearing. They hear Mary is worried that Jesus' body is not there. They also hear Mary and the other women giving the sense that something else might have happened. Maybe what Jesus told them about his resurrection actually happened?

Then Peter and John race to the tomb. Mary came with them. John make a point of saying he arrived first. They also see the empty tomb, they believe that something has happened, just as the women said, and then leave puzzled trying to figure out what this would mean.

Give the male and female disciples a bit of grace. Even if someone said to you that they would be resurrected, and you found their coffin empty after three days and you talked with an angel, your mind might still be having trouble fully grasping the reality.

Mary stays by the tomb after John and Peter leave. Mary is not quite sure what to do at this point. Then she sees two more angels now appearing in the tomb. Well, this is an interesting day. And Jesus himself comes up to her, and at first she did not recognize him. Did she really expect he would just walk up to her? She assumed it was someone working around the tombs and maybe he knew something, anything, about what happened.

And then Jesus spoke to her: Mary

She *knew* that voice. She knew that familiar voice calling her name. She knew that voice calling her name that knew her better than anyone.

Her eyes were opened. The unexpected actually happened. It was Jesus, actually there in front of her, now very much like he was in life, but now resurrected and transformed, not just resuscitated.

Any surprise she is absolutely overwhelmed when seeing Jesus?

“I have seen the Lord”

The remaining verses have a lot of mystery around them. And yet, what is clear is that she was the first to see Jesus resurrected. She became the first witness to Jesus, the witness to the other male and female disciples.

The resurrection account is not one anyone would have constructed, or not one anyone would have suggested. The gospel account is written this way because everyone in the community knew this remarkable story likely told by this female apostle and retold by men and women alike. This retelling of history where this Mary stated

“I have seen the Lord,”

first to the male and female apostles, and then later to others on the day of Pentecost, and beyond.

How close was Jesus with this Mary? In the end it is hard to tell, but clearly Mary had a deep connection with Jesus.

We get some additional perspectives from extra-canonical writings at the time. It was clear in all of these writings that this Mary had a special connection to Jesus. One document, sort of implies there was a romantic relationship, and yet some of the key words in our oldest manuscripts seem to be eaten through by ants. Yes, God does have a sense of humor.

In these writings, Mary had some positive interactions with some apostles (e.g. Levi or Matthew) and some difficult interactions with others (e.g. Peter). Maybe there was a power struggle. Likely the friction was known in the community. What is clear in each case, is that Jesus defends Mary as an important leader among the apostles, and in some cases implying she was the most important leader among them.

What seems clear from all of the sources we have is that this Mary was among the leadership of the early Christian community both to men and women.

I wonder how different this perspective of the biblical account and the picture of the NT church sounds to us today, whether raised in the church or if one has never been part of a church.

I wonder if we understood that women were among the leadership of the entire NT community, how that would transform our understanding of the movement of the church today. We believe that we understand the early church, and have an ideal vision of the early church. And yet, the picture is different and wider than we would expect. The early Christians were known for their radical inclusiveness, rich and poor, free and slaves, women and men, Jews and Gentiles. All were part of this community, and called to lead others in making disciples.

If we are following this egalitarian perspective of the NT church, do we not also raise up leaders of all people? Should we not think twice when we put limitations on groups of people today whom God and Christ call to today? It is very deep in the primate brain for all of us to identify those who are in our group and those who are outside of it, to identify those who are our leaders and those who

are in lesser places. Know that the very people you are inclined to restrict from the community are ones God loves and has called to his ministry. None of us are immune from this tendency.

Jesus calls us to something different. In the end, Jesus calls us to make disciples of all nations. All means all, and all means we need everyone. Mary Magdalene would have understood this call and the need for everyone to be part of this call, the need for all people everywhere to proclaim as she did

“I have seen the Lord”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Call to Worship:

One: If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

All: God, may we grow to see you in all people.

One: May we open our hearts to the Risen Christ.

All: Jesus, may we see your reflection in all people called to serve you.

Unison Prayer:

May we proclaim the Good News to all people. Forgive our lack of trust in your Spirit moving through all people and calling all people in this mission. Grant us your grace as well as open our eyes and hearts to empower everyone whom you call. Give everyone you call the strength to persevere, the courage to speak out, and the faith to walk humbly with you.