



FEEDING FIVE THOUSAND

Honoring St. Mary Magdalene as Apostle of the Apostles Through Art

The Root of the Inaccuracies in the Historical Record

Mary Magdalene is perhaps one of the most maligned and misunderstood figures in Christianity. In Christian art and hagiography, Mary has been romanticized, allegorized, and mythologized beyond recognition. Since the fourth century, she has been portrayed as a prostitute and public sinner who, after encountering Jesus, repented and spent the rest of her life in private prayer and penitence. Tragically, her image has been used to reinforce the misguided notion that sexuality, especially female sexuality was suspect, shameful, and sinful, worthy only of repentance.

Yet the actual biblical account of Mary of Magdala paints a far different portrait than that of the reformed harlot of Renaissance art. Nowhere in scripture is Mary of Magdala identified as a public sinner or a prostitute. Instead, scripture shows her as the primary witness to the most central event of Christian faith, named in exactly the same way (Maria e Magdalena) in each of four gospels written for diverse communities throughout the Mediterranean world. It was impossible to relate the story of the Resurrection without including "Mary, the one from Magdala."

Luke 8:1-3 tells us that Mary traveled with Jesus in the Galilean discipleship and, with Joanna and Susanna, supported his mission from her own financial resources. In the synoptic gospels, Mary leads the group of women who witness Jesus' death, burial, the empty tomb, and His Resurrection. The synoptics contrast Jesus' abandonment by the male disciples with the faithful strength of the women disciples who, led by Mary, accompany him to his death. John's gospel names Mary of Magdala as the first to discover the empty tomb and shows the Risen Christ sending her to announce the Good News of his resurrection to the other disciples. This prompted early church Fathers to name her "the Apostle to the Apostles."

That the message of the resurrection was first entrusted to women is regarded by scripture scholars as strong proof for the historicity of the resurrection accounts. Had accounts of Jesus' resurrection been fabricated, women would never have been chosen as witnesses since Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women.

Early extra-canonical Christian writings show faith communities growing up around Mary's ministry, where she is portrayed as understanding Jesus' message better than did Peter and the male disciples. Scholars tell us that these writings are not about the historical persons Mary and Peter but instead reflect tensions over women's roles in the early church. Prominent leaders such as Mary and Peter were evoked to justify opposing points of view. What is not disputed is the recognition of Mary of Magdala as an important woman leader in earliest Christianity.

Why are contemporary Christians uninformed about Mary's faithful discipleship and prominent leadership role in the infant church? One explanation is a common misreading of Luke's gospel which tells us that "seven demons had gone out of her." (Luke 8:1-3) To first century ears, this meant only that Mary had been cured of serious illness, not that she was sinful. According to biblical scholars such as Sr. Mary Thompson, illness was commonly attributed to the work of evil spirits, although not necessarily associated with sinfulness. The number seven symbolized that her illness was either chronic or very severe.

In 312, when Constantine declared Christianity to be the religion of the empire, the Christian community was caught in a cultural conflict as it moved from worship in house churches where women's leadership was accepted, to worship in public places where women's leadership violated Roman social codes of honor and shame. In the fourth century, male church leaders at the Council of Laodicea suppressed women leaders because they believed women were created subordinate to men. During this same time period, we see the memory of Mary of Magdala changing from that of a strong female disciple and proclaimer of the Resurrection to a repentant prostitute and public sinner. Scholars such as Dr. Jane Schaberg believe this was done deliberately to discourage female leadership in the church.

As knowledge of Jesus' many women disciples faded from historical memory, their stories merged and blurred. The tender anointing of Mary of Bethany prior to Jesus' passion was linked to the woman "known to be a sinner" whose tears washed and anointed Jesus' feet at Simon's house. The anointing texts combined all of these women into one generic public sinner, "Magdalen." Misidentification of Mary as reformed public sinner achieved official standing with a powerful homily by Pope Gregory the Great (540-604).

Henceforth, Mary of Magdala became known in the west, not as the strong woman leader who accompanied Jesus through a tortuous death, first witnessed his Resurrection, and proclaimed the Risen Savior to the early church, but as a wanton woman in need of repentance and a life of hidden penitence. Interestingly, the eastern church never identified her as a prostitute, but honored her throughout history as "the Apostle to the Apostles".



**ARTIST
JANET MCKENZIE**

Mary of Magdala: the Great Apostle

Even though Mary of Magdala is the second most frequently named woman in the New Testament after Mary the mother of Jesus, what we know about her is quite limited, being confined to the texts from the canonical Gospels, and what can be deduced from how she is portrayed in a number of extra canonical texts. Yet it is striking how much biblical scholars can tell us about her even from this sparse data. For example, all four Gospels depict her as leading the group of women who first witnessed events surrounding the Resurrection. All four describe her with exactly the same phrase: "Mary, the one from Magdala." Scholars call this multiple attestation which means there is credible historical evidence that she existed and that one just didn't tell the story of the Resurrection without also telling about "Mary the one from Magdala."

In Luke 8:1-3 we learn that with Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza, and Suzanna, Mary of Magdala "and many other women" accompanied Jesus and the male disciples around Galilee and "provided for them out of their resources." This short text tells us far more than might at first be apparent to our 21st century ears that don't understand the social customs surrounding women in first century Palestinian Judaism.

To begin with, women were rarely named at all in ancient texts. If they are named it is because they had some social prominence and even then, in most situations, they are named in relationship to the men in their lives, such as their husbands, fathers or brothers. Women were considered to be part of the patriarchal household and it was rare for them to have an identity apart from a male relative. So we see Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza. Herod is the king. Joanna is part of a wealthy household belonging to Chuza.

But when Mary of Magdala is identified, she is named for the town she came from, not according to a male relative. Biblical scholars believe this means that Mary of Magdala is a wealthy woman of independent means. And with Joanna and Suzanna (about whom, alas, we know very little) these women were prominent financial supporters of Jesus' Galilean mission.



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Thus began a long history of women's patronage that helped Christianity spread relatively rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world. We know that Paul had many wealthy female patrons such as Lydia and Phoebe who financially supported his ministry and introduced him to a broad swath of social relationships in the Gentile world he would not otherwise have had access to.

Jesus' inclusion of women in his itinerant Galilean discipleship is nothing short of remarkable. In Palestinian Judaism observant Jewish men did not speak to women outside their kinship circle in public, let alone permit them to travel with them in public in a mixed gender entourage. While observance of Jewish customs was probably less strict in Galilee than in Jerusalem, Jesus' passion for proclaiming God's reign of justice and right relationship was such that it transcended custom, and he knew his God-given mission was meant for women as well as men.

Jesus' female disciples often surpassed their brother disciples in fidelity to the person of Jesus, particularly in events surrounding Jesus' passion and death. While the Gospels tell us the male disciples fled to Galilee, the women stayed by Jesus' side through crucifixion, death burial and Resurrection. This is why all four Gospels show women as the first witnesses. They knew where Jesus had been buried. And the women were then commissioned to "Go and tell your brothers" the good news of Jesus' victory over death.

That the message of the Resurrection was first entrusted to women is regarded by scripture scholars as strong proof for the historicity of the Resurrection accounts. Had accounts of Jesus' Resurrection been fabricated, women would never have been chosen as witnesses, since Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women.

Early extra-canonical Christian writings show entire faith communities growing up around Mary of Magdala's ministry, where she is portrayed as understanding Jesus' message better than did Peter and the male disciples. Scholars tell us that these writings are not about the historical persons of Mary and Peter, but instead reflect tensions over women's leadership roles in the early Church. Prominent leaders such as Mary and Peter were evoked to justify opposing points of view.

What is not disputed is the portrayal of Mary of Magdala as an important woman leader and witness in the earliest Christian Churches.

Mary Magdalene's experience of the Resurrection

While we don't know exactly what the Resurrection experience of Mary of Magdala was like, we do know that she had such a powerful experience of the risen Christ that it drove her to run tell her brother disciples "I have seen the Lord." Perhaps understandably enough, they did not believe her at first. But whatever Mary's experience was, I like to think she was a profoundly changed woman, and that observable change likely prepared the way for other disciples to be open to receiving their own experiences of the Risen Christ.

It seems clear that while the disciples experienced a certain "corporality" of Christ in these Resurrection experiences, it wasn't the same as a resuscitation of a dead person. Jesus was indeed alive and made himself known to them, but he was also changed enough that they didn't recognize him at first. John's Gospel tells us Mary first mistook him for the gardener, and it was only after hearing Jesus call her name and literally "turning herself around" that she recognized him. The Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13-35) didn't recognize Jesus through all that long journey, only at the breaking of the bread. So whatever the Resurrection experience was, it was not a straightforward recognition, but involved some liminal, mystical sense beyond our usual perceptive capabilities. It is in this way that I believe Mary of Magdala can be said to be a mystic.

The significance of her story for women today

Many women have experienced a “dark night of patriarchy” after realizing how deeply and profoundly all of western history rendered the contributions of women all but invisible.

That God first entrusted the proclamation of the Resurrection to a woman tells us that while human beings discriminate, God does not. Jesus’ inclusion of women in his Galilean discipleship and God’s choice in the event of the Resurrection is profoundly consoling to many Christian women and men.

Perhaps the most important aspect of retrieving the historical memory of St. Mary of Magdala’s leadership is that contemporary believers who are women, can for the first time, see themselves in the Gospel stories and in early Church history.

Many Catholics growing up had the impression that it was Jesus and twelve men who travelled around Galilee doing good. Women disciples were mostly invisible and those women that did appear seemed to be prostitutes, sinners, inhabited by demons or a virgin Mother. None of these were appealing as role models.

So if we as a Church can begin to see that Jesus (and later St. Paul) included women who were leaders in his closest discipleship, then it leads to the question well, why can’t the Church include women as leaders today? At present the Church teaches women are equal. However no Church structures permit them to exercise that equality.

Only men can elect the Pope, lead dioceses, pastor parishes and preach at Mass. This is a great loss to the believing community since we necessarily always hear the Gospel through the lens of male experience. We are missing out on hearing about the great truths of our faith through the lens of female experience.

All decision making in Church governance requires ordination and the Church teaches women can’t be ordained as priests and are still debating about the permanent diaconate. Eventually, we will have women’s equality in the Church, but it will be a long struggle and will come to about only through the grace of God at work converting male decision-makers (remember, even St. Paul was converted) and sustaining the tens of thousands of women and men working for such equality in many and various ways in our day.

Mary Magdalene and Jesus’ relationship to women

From the Gospels we see that Jesus had many friendships with women, and not only with Mary of Magdala. Certainly Mary and Martha of Bethany were dear friends, akin to family for him. Mary of Bethany assumed the role of a rabbinical student (traditionally reserved to men), sitting at Jesus’ feet to listen and learn. He refused to send her away even though Martha protested. “Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her,” says Jesus (Luke 10:38-42). John’s Gospel shows Martha giving a profession of faith similar to Peter’s when Jesus enjoins her to believe that her brother will rise again: “Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God: he who is to come into the world” (John 11: 27).

The Johannine author also shows that Jesus was nourished by the theological conversation and subsequent conversion of the Samaritan woman: “I have food to eat that you don’t know about” (John 4:32).

The anointing woman, whether it was Mary of Bethany in John’s Gospel or the anonymous female disciple seen in Matthew and Mark, surely understood Jesus’ Messianic mission better than the male disciples who criticized her. The woman’s faith that Jesus was indeed coming into his kingdom was



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JANET MCKENZIE**

shown as she anointed Jesus' head, an act similar to the anointing performed by the prophet Samuel signifying David's kingship. This woman's loving prophetic gesture must have been very comforting to Jesus as he faced his passion and death.

In the Gospels we see many examples of Jesus' encounters with the Divine. Luke's Gospel (Lk 4:18-19) reveals that Jesus modelled his mission from the writings of the prophets. He first announces his mission from God in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth by quoting Isaiah 61:1,2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives....to let the oppressed go free.

This tells us that Jesus was deeply influenced by the religious teachings of his own tradition and found his true identity through what could be called a mystical encounter with Divine Justice as mediated through the writings of Isaiah. Jesus was true to his call proclaiming the reign of God

where justice and right relationship will at last prevail between poor and rich, male and female, ruler and subject, strong and weak.

Mary Magdalene and Paul

Both Mary of Magdala and Paul had experiences of the Risen Christ that changed their lives.

The difference is that Paul's missionary journeys and letters to the early communities throughout the Mediterranean world have been preserved and provide an excellent snapshot of real challenges facing early Christians. They are the earliest Christian writings we have.

Unfortunately we have no similar direct record of what happened in St. Mary of Magdala's subsequent life and witness. We can only deduce from extra-canonical sources that she was remembered in some early communities, as a prominent woman leader and disciple who understood Jesus' mission better than her brothers.

Paul's letters also provide valuable information about coequal leadership in early Christian communities. Romans 16 tells us about Paul's "coworkers in Christ" the married couple, Prisca and Aquila. That Prisca is named first in four of the six times the couple is cited in the New Testament, tells us that she was probably the more prominent of the duo. Prisca and Aquila founded house Churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome that served as a base of evangelization in each of these major cities. With Paul, they can legitimately be called "Apostles to the Gentiles" because as Paul himself says: "Not only I but all the Churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them." (Rom 16:4) Paul praises another missionary couple Junia and her husband Andronicas as "outstanding among the apostles." (Rom 16:7) Junia is the only woman in the New Testament who is given the title "apostle."

Conclusion

Women often have personal experience of what it means to be suppressed and oppressed. They often understand very well the importance of witnessing to the God of justice and to Jesus who came to raise up the lowly and set the downtrodden free.

If women are ever given the opportunity to preach regularly, we may hear a lot more about Jesus' passion for the just reign of God and the Good News to the poor.

**17305 Madison Ave.
Lakewood, OH 44107
216.228.0869**

**futurechurch.org
futurechurchnews.org
info@futurechurch.org**



FutureChurch