

Mary Magdalene: Not Who You Think She is©

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Imagine with me for a minute if you will- think of this young person- coming of age in the 1970s in a mill town in the Piedmont area of NC. The parents are working class people-a truck driver, a mill worker. Five children in the family. This young person was in the middle. A pleasant person. Somewhat scattered and definitely unique who became very involved in the family's church. In the 5th grade, would get up early on Sunday, wake up mother for a ride to church. Did not miss a Sunday that year. Went through confirmation, was baptized. Later became very involved in the church youth group. Went to the United Nations on behalf of the church to learn about the Nestle campaign of selling baby formula that did not meet U.S. standards to undeveloped countries. Was asked to be a representative to the church's revitalization team on behalf of the youth. Was president of the Youth Group. Was the first to go to college in the family and was given money anonymously and in the form of loans from the church to be able to get through college.

Given this early history what would be a likely career choice for this person? Many would say – the ministry.

Now I invite you to engage with me in another way--When you first heard (or read) the name Mary Magdalene in preparation for this sermon- who do you think of? This is not a test of who can get it right. When you have an answer, raise your hand. How many first thought of the **penitent prostitute or whore**? Hands down. Who thought of Mary at the **tomb** to whom Jesus first appears? As the possible **beloved** of Jesus, and even a **sex object**? Who thinks of Mary as the **Apostle to the Apostles**-- the teacher and caregiver of the other disciples? As I have asked this question, who is Mary Magdalene to you? Throughout the week, in preparation for this sermon, I have explored the stories of either the repentant whore or Mary at the tomb. Some have mentioned the idea of sacred union through sexuality. Not one person has answered the latter-Mary: the Apostle to the Apostle. So who is this controversial woman of the Bible? And why talk about her in this day and time, especially in a UU context where many know little of Christianity, or have

rejected what they learned? First, let's get some history and facts on her and dispel some myths.

While the penitent whore makes a good story: to take a woman, a second class citizen within the social constructs of the time and depict her in the worse possible light- a harlot, a prostitute, a whore- who is then turned around by this Savior who comes along. It shines Christianity in a positive light: Derelicts are taken in and "saved" them from their ingrained humanity of sin. The problem with this depiction is-it is not historically accurate. It is not true!

What we have learned from scholars such as Karen King, professor at Harvard Divinity School, and Episcopal Priest Cynthia Bourgeault, is that Mary was a wealthy Jewish woman from the town of Magdala located on the west coast of the Sea of Galilee. It was a prosperous town. She was likely well educated because, as a woman of means, she had more control over her life. Living near the Sea of Galilee, she had plenty of opportunities to hear Jesus' message and witness his healings.

In the new testament of the Christian Bible, she is referred to as the woman who had seven demons cast out of her. Jean-Yves Leloup's interpretation of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* interprets this to mean, "she has done her psychological work" inwardly and is hence prepared to be a disciple. The teaching she understood so completely from Jesus was the message of healing from the inside out: how healing one's spirit can heal one's life and others' lives. She learned that suffering is a part of life, but our attachments to life's outcomes are what make us ill at ease with life. She was so alive with this new message and loved the man bringing the message so deeply that she decided to dedicate her life to his work. She-and other women of means - supported him not only financially, but intellectually and spiritually as well - with their money, their brains, their hearts and their spheres of influence.

The early church fathers held her in this high esteem. Scholars from that era recognized her as a spiritual authority in the community. Evidence of this is seen in the New Testament, from the scriptures read this morning and others and also from the fact that she never is introduced to the community. Other people have to be explained. This lack of explanation indicates she was well known to the audience of the author. In addition to being at the resurrection, she stayed at the cross until Jesus died along with his

mother Mary and another disciple-unlike the remaining disciples. In the *Gospel of John* the risen Jesus gives her special teachings and commissioned her to go and tell the others what you have seen and heard. Evidence of this experience also appears in the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and *Gospel of Phillip*. In other theological writings of the time like *Dialogue with the Savior* records some of the conversations Jesus had with his disciples where Mary asks 39 of the 64 questions. The early fathers did question her story of the resurrection since she was alone (according to the Gospel of John), but they did not question her significance and role as a leader among the disciples. They saw her as the visionary prophet and exemplary disciple that led her to apostolic leadership.

With all of this evidence, how did the reputation as a repentant prostitute become so dominate? Well, that has in interesting answer. Beginning in the 4th century, Christian theologians began conflating Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed sinner woman in Luke. Both Marys washed Jesus' feet with their hair. This confusion could have been simply an error--there are, after all, many Marys--Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the wife of Clopas (Jesus' aunt), Mary the mother of James and the younger Joseph, and the "other" Mary. The simplicity of turning Mary Magdalene into the repentant whore is deceptive. Interestingly, the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church never made this mistake.

It was not until the 6th century after Jesus' death that this image of Mary Magdalene as repentant whore began to dominate. According to Karen King, Pope Gregory the Great identified her with the sinner woman of Luke and John with words like:

It is clear brothers that the woman clearly used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She had spoke proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. ... She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues in order to serve God entirely in penance... ¹

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King, p. 285.

Mary lost all semblance of the devoted disciple and became a model for women to immolate themselves for their crimes of sexuality, vanity, and bold speech, but NOT for the leader she actually was. Simple error cannot explain this unsavory portrait. Karen King, proposes, and many agree, this was an intentional act of omission and attempt to suppress the leadership of women; and, it worked-for a time.

These words shaped and dominated the imagination of the West for almost two thousand years. It has been within the last few decades that this image is beginning to turn around and I mean beginning. It was not until 1969 that the Catholic Church overruled Pope Gregory's depiction, but it dominated Western thought and still does as we saw this morning with hand-raising. It was as recent as the 1970s-- my teenage years-- the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* also depicted her as a repentant whore. Remember these words from that passionate song:

I've been changed, yes really changed. In these last few days when I see myself, I seem like someone else. I don't see why he moves me... he's a man, he's just a man & I've had so many men before in very many ways. He just one more... should I bring him down... should I scream and shout?...should I speak of love- let my feelings out?

Webber, A.L. & Rice, T. (1970). *I Don't Know How to Love Him*. From *Jesus Christ Superstar*: London: Decca MCA.

This image has been so steeped in our psyche for thousands of years--since it is not true--how do we begin to change the myth, the archetype, of the sinful woman turned worshipper? And what was the message Mary was bringing us from Jesus? We turn this around by knowing the truth and speaking this truth whenever we get a chance. By being bold and courageous like Mary Magdalene was. When the other disciples were hiding behind closed doors fearing for their life, Mary and her friends went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. When the other disciples such as Andrew and Peter questioned her authority as a woman, she did not back down.

This is part of the reason I wanted to go to seminary: to learn for myself the truth that has been left out of the story of Christianity thus far and to spread that truth as far and wide as I can. The tugging at my heart to go to seminary was gaining strength over 10 years and then my women's book group decided to read *The Gospel of Mary*

Magdalene.² It was the reading of this book that pushed me over the edge and piqued my curiosity even more. I had to go to seminary and I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to do so.

So what is Mary's message for us today? There are several. The one that stands out so boldly to me at present is one of healing. The healing from her own suffering brought her so alive she could not help herself. This freeing message she experienced from Jesus of personal healing and salvation from within was one the world needed to hear and she understood it so completely she was the one Jesus chose to begin the work. Whatever your suffering is--addiction, relationships, workaholism, trauma, insecurities, depression- -maybe it is a healing from organized religion. If I were to ask for a show of hands of how many people are here in this UU church because of a hurt, or disappointment or disillusionment with organized religion I bet I would see more than half of your hands go up. Whatever your wound is, I hope you will turn inward and continue the journey toward healing that has brought you this far. And like Mary, that journey inside will bring you fully alive.

The author Parker Palmer, in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation*, talks of being fully alive when thinking about one's life calling. This calling often comes from our wounds (Palmer, Parker, J. (2000). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.). He goes on to say something like-find the crossroads of what brings you fully alive with what the world needs. For what the world needs is more people fully alive. I think the world needs more leading in the way Mary Magdalene shows up: fully healed from the wounds of the patriarchy of war, oppression, hatred. The Way of the Divine Feminine that the patriarchy tried to snuff out, but couldn't. Yes, it went underground for a while, but it is coming back now, more strongly than ever.

If we had more leadership from the Divine Feminine people would be valued more than profits, Mother Earth would be a priority in decision-making. We would have more love and less hate. We would have more heart-led leadership. You know what I refer to here- you have heard of the leaders who use their intuition along with their retinal

² This gospel is one discovered in Egypt, just a few decades before the Gnostic Gospels were discovered in Nag Hammadi.

minds. If we were all giving more attention to the shadow side of our own greed and vanity and doing our psychological work, as Mary Magdalene, did we just may save ourselves and this world in which we live.

That child you heard about in the opening was me. In the 5th grade I wanted to be a minister, but I didn't find the courage because it was way out of the norm for a "girl" especially one from a working class background in the South. Later, when the call returned, I made excuses: I'm so old now; How can I do this with a family living here in East Tennessee. Where would I go? My resentments grew--with my background growing up--one of my old resentments resurfaced: If I had been a boy someone would have encouraged me to think about seminary. These excuses and resentments were getting me nowhere toward my dream. I had to reach deep down inside and find my courage, just like Mary did. I ask you to be like Mary, whatever that project you have wanted to start, whatever that dream you have in retirement, whatever career change that has been calling to your heart, but seems too daunting, whatever you are feeling led to do but cannot imagine how it would happen, do it anyway. Get started. Get the fear and anxiety out of the way and get started. Like Mary, see what revolution you can start-right here, right now, in this desert community.

Additional Readings about Mary Magdalene

From the Gospel According to Mark, 15:40-41

⁴⁰There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome.

⁴¹These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

From the Gospel According to Luke, 8:1-2

¹Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out

From the Gnostic Gospel of Phillip

³². There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, His mother; His sister; and Mary Magdalene, who was called His companion. So, there were three Marys: His mother, His sister, and His companion.

From the Gospel According to Luke 24:1-10

¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women* were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men* said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.’ ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

From Romans 16:1-2 when Paul is speaking to people as he prepares for a trip to Rome via Spain

¹⁶ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon* of the church at Cenchreae, (sin kre a) ²so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

More Information

Phoebe means “bright one” in Greek. She was a woman of independent wealth who chose to support the early message of Jesus. Contrary to what we have been taught many women were involved in the leadership of the early church and YES! Paul worked with many of these women.

Another such woman is Priscilla aka Prisca- She traveled with her husband, Aquila (a-ke-la). In most verses she is mentioned first, indicating she was the church leader.

Acts 18:2-3

²There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul* went to see them, ³and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers.

The *Gospel of Mary* relates that “when the disciples [were] disheartened and terrified after the crucifixion, asked Mary to encourage them by telling them what the Lord had told her secretly, she agrees, and teaches them until Peter, furious, asks, ‘Did he really speak privately with a woman, (and) not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?’ ...”³

...Mary Madgalene is one of the disciples, learning from Jesus. She asks questions, she is spoken to and spoken of ... she asks about the nature and purpose of discipleship... she receives special instructions. She [inquires] about the meaning of sorrow and joy. She also asks where and how they will keep all the things that the Lord tells them. ... she has a role as an interpreter of the Scriptures. ... In The First Apocalypse of James, James says of the female disciples, ‘I am amazed how powerless vessels have become strong by a perception which is in them’ (and) the Lord instructs him to learn from them...[mentioning] Mary Magdalene [specifically]. ⁴

³ p. 119 *The Gospel of Thomas: The Enlightenment Teachings of Jesus*

⁴ p 5-6 *The Gospel of Thomas: The Enlightenment Teachings of Jesus*

From Act IV (4), Scene 3 of Julius Cæsar.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune...”

—

From Anonymous

Women, both in history and in our society today, have no such tide. In fact, they are stuck in the shallows that Shakespeare goes on to mention, and if they wait for a tide to arrive, they are most likely to wind up high and dry.

For women, success is more like an obstacle course, where we must overcome certain common barriers or roadblocks just to stay on the right path, much less to cross the finish line ahead of our peers.