

Mary Magdalene

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a six-part series

August 30, 2015

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Luke 8:1–3 (CEB)

Soon afterward, Jesus traveled through the cities and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. The Twelve were with him, ² along with some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses. Among them were Mary Magdalene (from whom seven demons had been thrown out), ³ Joanna (the wife of Herod's servant Chuza), Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

Mark 15:40–41 (CEB)

⁴⁰ Some women were watching [Jesus' crucifixion] from a distance, including Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James (the younger one) and Joses, and Salome.

⁴¹ When Jesus was in Galilee, these women had followed and supported him, along with many other women who had come to Jerusalem with him.

John 20:1–18 (CEB)

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." ³ Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. ⁴ They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. ⁵ Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. ⁶ Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. ⁸ Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

¹¹ Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. ¹³ The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." ¹⁴ As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

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

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means *Teacher*).

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

What we see in Mary is a portrait of utter devotion to Jesus. Her life, her money, her service, her witness . . . she gave all of it to her Lord. Can we really do less?

This week we move from the Old Testament to the New, but we won't leave behind the big surprises we encountered in the stories of Rahab, Deborah, Huldah, and Esther. When it came to the role of women in society, the world of Jesus was much closer to that of Moses than to our own. In the Greco-Roman culture of the first-century AD, women were still excluded from public life. In fact, the place of women in Roman society was more liberal a century or two before Jesus than it was the days of Augustus. A woman's place was in the home. They were not educated and were not seen as reliable witnesses in law-courts. This was as true of the Jews as it was the pagans.

Remember the title of the lecture I heard from a historian of ancient Rome, *Women and Slaves: Less Than Human*. That about sums it up.

But when we come to the New Testament, we find a very different portrayal of women. Martha, who sat and learned at Jesus' feet, a place reserved for men in Jewish society. Lydia, who heard Paul's message of the Good News and became a leader among the believers in Philippi and a benefactor of the ministry. Phoebe, referred to by Paul as a deacon, who carried to Rome Paul's monumental letter. Junia, whom Paul refers to as a prominent apostle. Priscilla, teacher and leader, about whom we will learn more next week. And Mary Magdalene whom the early church called the "apostle to the apostles."

Mary from Magdala

If you were to drive up the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, you could make a brief stop at a small crossroads known today as Migdal. There isn't much there now, but in Jesus' day it was a thriving and important center for the Galilean fishing industry. The most famous person from this town, called Magdala,¹ was a woman named Mary, the most common female name among the first-century Jews.²

We don't know much about Mary from Magdala. Although none of the gospels tells the story of the initial encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, she appears in all four accounts, most significantly as the primary witness to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus, presumably, had cast out from her seven demons. In addition, Luke tells us that Mary and other women who were also Jesus' disciples provided for Jesus and the others out of their own pockets. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Mary was a woman of substantial means.

Mary was the most prominent of the women who followed Jesus, being first in every listing of female disciples. Thus, it is pretty surprising that Mary has been slandered so much over the centuries. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great delivered a sermon on Mary Magdalene that identified her as the sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50, assuming she was a prostitute. That may have been a powerful sermon on repentance, but it was terrible unfair to Mary Magdalene. There is absolutely no reason to think that Mary Magdalene, or any other NT Mary for that matter, was the woman who anointed Jesus feet with her hair in Luke 7. There is no reason to think that Mary was an adulterer, prostitute, or any other sort of "loose" woman. None whatsoever. To make matters worse, Pope Gregory also conflated Mary Magdalene with Mary from Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, thus confusing matters further. It has taken a long time to reclaim the historical Mary from Magdala.

What do we know about Mary Magdalene after Jesus' resurrection and ascension? Nothing. She is not mentioned in the NT outside the gospels. That doesn't mean she wasn't part of the believer community in Jerusalem, but she wasn't mentioned by name. Still, not surprisingly, given her prominence in the gospels, many legends and stories grew up around Mary Magdalene, all of them quite untethered to the gospel accounts. Do we really need to know more about Mary than John tells us? N. T. Wright again:

"Mary Magdalene doesn't feature in John's gospel until her appearance, with the other Marys, at the foot of the cross. John has told us nothing of her history; the little we know, we know from the other gospels. But her place here is spectacular. She is the first apostle, the apostle to the apostles: the first to bring the news that the tomb was empty. And, in the next section [verses 11-18], a greater privilege yet: the first to see, to meet, to speak with the risen master himself."³

¹ "Magdala" means "great" or "tower" in Hebrew. It also means something like "elegant." Thus, a minority of scholars believes that calling Mary "Magdalene" referred to her prominence not to her hometown.

² More than 20% of all Jewish women living in Palestine at this time were named Mary. That's why there are so many "Mary"s in the New Testament.

³ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (p. 140). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Mary in the Garden

Jesus was crucified and died on the Friday afternoon of Passover week. After the Roman soldiers, who were undoubtedly quite competent at execution, confirmed his death, Jesus' body was claimed by a prominent member of the Jewish Council, Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus' body was taken to Joseph's family tomb where it would have been wrapped, scented and laid on a slab. The women would have prepared Jesus' body as best they could before sundown on Friday, the commencement of the Jewish Sabbath.

The women returned very early on Sunday morning, after the Sabbath was over, to finish their work. As John tells us in his account, Mary Magdalene⁴ arrived and found that the tomb had been opened. She evidently believed, and naturally so, that someone had opened the tomb and made off with Jesus' body. She quickly headed off to tell Peter and another disciple what had happened. Upon their return, she stood outside the empty tomb and wept as Peter looked inside. Why weep? Simply because she believed that someone had stolen the body of her beloved Jesus.

Peter and the others left, John tells us, but Mary stayed behind, still just standing there and crying. Alone now, Mary pulled herself together and bent over to take another look inside the tomb, whereupon she saw two angels dressed in white. They asked why she was crying and her reply is simple, someone had made off with the body. But then, Jesus, standing near her, also asked her why she cried. Not realizing the man speaking to her was Jesus, she simply sought to know where her Lord's body had been taken. Lost in her grief, Mary is unable to recognize him until the moment when Jesus calls her by name, "Mary" (v. 16). Then she is swept up in her joy, reaching out to grasp him. But Jesus stops her from embracing him. What gives, we ask? Why push her away? N. T. Wright suggests:

The most puzzling feature of the passage is Jesus' warning to Mary in verse 17. 'Don't cling to me'; or, as some translations say, 'Don't touch me.' Two magnificent and world-famous paintings, by Titian and Rembrandt, explore, but don't capture, the poignant scene. What did Jesus mean?

Some have thought that his resurrection body was so new, so different, that he didn't want Mary trying to touch him and getting the wrong idea, thinking he was a ghost. That seems hardly likely in view of the other accounts, and the subsequent invitation to Thomas to touch and see (though admittedly that was a week later). I think it's more likely that it was a warning to Mary that the new relationship with him was not going to be like the old one. He wouldn't be going around Galilee and Judea any more, walking the lanes with them, sharing regular meals, discussing, talking, praying. They would see him now and then, but soon it would be time for him to 'go to the father', as he had said over and over in chapters 14–17. That's why I think 'Don't cling to me' is the best way of saying what he said here. 'Don't try to keep me, to possess me.' Strange words for a strange moment.⁵

One of the strongest pieces of evidence supporting the resurrection of Jesus is that in every gospel the first witnesses to the empty tomb are women. As I mentioned earlier, women were not allowed to be witnesses in a Hebrew law court; their testimony was deemed unreliable simply because they were women. If you were going to concoct a story claiming the resurrection of Jesus, you would never have women be the first witnesses.

But Jesus was resurrected and women, especially Mary Magdalene, were the first to see and to hear. They were ones who carried this amazing and spectacular news to others. Jesus didn't come to Peter or to Andrew early that Sunday morning. He came to Mary Magdalene. It was she who would be the "apostle to the apostles." Mary from Magdala would be the one to announce to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord" (v. 18).

⁴ Though John mentions only Mary Magdalene, the other gospels tell us that several women went to the tomb that morning.

⁵ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (p. 147). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| Monday, John 2:1-12 Mary, Jesus' mother, has Jesus help out with the wine at a wedding. | Tuesday, Luke 10:38-42 Jesus visits the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. |
| Wednesday, John 11:17-35 Jesus arrives at the home of Lazarus and his sisters after Lazarus' death. | Thursday, John 12:1-8 Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' sister, anoints Jesus on the evening before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. |
| Friday, John 19:16b-30 John's account of Jesus' crucifixion including the presence of Mary Magdalene. | Weekly Prayer Concerns |

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class - now studying Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class - now studying Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series:

Biblical stories that will make you feel better about your own family!

Information Meeting: Fall 2016 Israel Trip with Scott Engle and Arthur Jones

Sunday, August 30, at 6:30 in Piro Hall

We are planning a ten-day trip to Israel, similar to the Fall 2014 trip. If you've ever thought about taking an in-depth tour of Israel, this is the trip to take. Visit Nazareth, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Masada, and much more with friends and family. This trip is life-changing. Your faith will be deepened, you will never read the Bible the same way, and you will have a great time. We hope that you will join us!

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org