

Identity and Faith

MARY MAGDALENE

Texts: Mark 15:40,47; 16:1-9. Matthew: 27:56,61; 28:1-20;

Luke: 8:1-3; 24:10; John: 19:25; 20:1; 20:11-18.

Mary Magdalene lived in Magdala which was known to be a notorious fishing village that was destroyed about 75 CE. The name “Magdalene” is believed to be derived from “Magdala”. A number of women named Mary are mentioned in the Gospels. By attaching the word ‘Magdalene’ to her name, her identity was set apart from the other Marys. Mary Magdalene is the only woman disciple of Jesus mentioned in all four Gospels

Who was Mary Magdalene?

The Gospel of Luke refers to her as a woman from whom seven demons had come out. (Luke 8:1-3). The text is not clear as to whether Jesus was responsible for the expulsion of the ‘demons’. From this point on she became a follower of Jesus and is mentioned as one of a small group of women who provided resources for the disciples and Jesus as they travelled through Galilee (Mk 15:41). She is mentioned by all four Gospel writers as one of the women who were present at Jesus crucifixion. She was also the first at the empty tomb where he was buried and the first to meet and talk with the risen Jesus.

There has been some confusion relating to an assumption that Mary of Bethany mentioned in John’s Gospel, the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus mentioned in Matthew and Mark, and the sinful woman who also anointed Jesus and mentioned in Luke was Mary Magdalene. It is possible that such an assumption arose from the oral traditions that passed on stories in the early church.

Retelling the story of Mary Magdalene.

What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is a composite rendering based on the records in all four Gospels. It is by reading into the silences around events and people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Mary Magdalene reflects: *The day I left my village in Magdala and went into the city was the day that changed my life, Many people knew who I was and avoided me as I walked through the city streets. There was a belief that I was possessed by demons. Some shouted at me to keep away. Everyone avoided eye contact with me. As I walked I could see in the distance the man named Jesus with a group of people. I had heard of him and that he was a healer. I had nothing to lose. So I pushed my way through the crowd till I stood in front of him. He healed me from an ailment that had troubled me for a long time. It was a moment I wouldn't forget. Watching us were a group of women who then moved close to me. Later I learned their names. Susanna and Joanna were among the group who provided resources for Jesus and his followers as they travelled. (Luke. 8:3).*

From then on I joined the women and followed Jesus. I listened to his teachings. I marveled at the miracles he performed. Most importantly I believed the good news of the Kingdom of God that Jesus talked about. I was aware of the rumors that the leaders in the Temple in Jerusalem were gathering information to build a case against Jesus. There were also Roman soldiers who were watching us to make sure we didn't create trouble in the city. None of this worried us as we followed him. The most precious moments for me were when he taught me just the way I had heard him teaching the male disciples. To me he was my teacher and my closest friend.

My fears for his safety began to increase. There was something different about the day he entered Jerusalem. Yet he continued to teach while people gathered to hear him. It was during the celebration of the Passover Festival that we noticed a change coming over him. (John.13:1). He warned us repeatedly that his death was near. Then came the night when Jesus and his male disciples gathered in an upstairs room to celebrate the Passover meal. He had washed the feet of the disciples before sitting at the table and breaking bread with them. He had talked of the bread and the wine as his broken body given to save the world. He had then talked of the betrayal that would soon occur and named Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, who was one of the disciples, who would betray him that night.(John: 13: 21-30). I couldn't believe such news. How could a disciple betray his Master? Something wasn't right.

The rest of the night became a blur to me. Jesus left to pray at the Mount of Olives. He took Peter, James and John with him. (Mk: 14:33). We heard then that it was here that Judas had come with the Roman soldiers to arrest him. Fear was spreading through the city as word got out that soldiers had arrested Jesus. We were scared and hung back supporting each other as women do at such times. As the night wore on news came that Pilate had condemned Jesus to be crucified. We felt helpless. Our tears flowed as

we clung to each other and prayed. As Jesus was brought carrying the cross on to which he would be nailed some of us wailed. Some called to him in love. Some jeered and called him names. I will never forget the pain and the love I saw in his eyes as he looked at us. As the soldiers nailed him to the cross he looked down at us. Mary, his mother, her sister Mary, a disciple and I stood by the cross. Helplessly and in agony ourselves we watched him die. As we walked away when his body was brought down from the cross, I asked myself: Where was God? Why didn't God save him? Would a loving Father let a Son die in such agony?

PAUSE and reflect:

In times when you are fearful and anxious, to whom do you turn?

Does God seem distant or unapproachable at such times?

In silence we returned to the room where the disciples had gathered. No one was talking. We felt abandoned and afraid. I remember wondering if this was really the end. We were alone now. I couldn't sleep during the night that followed. As the day dawned I crept out of the house and moving like a shadow I found my way to the tomb where I knew Jesus had been laid. As I drew near I could see that the stone to the entrance of the tomb had been rolled away. It couldn't be. Had someone stolen his body? I couldn't see anyone around so I ran back to the house where Simon Peter and the others were still gathered. Breathlessly I cried "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have laid him." (John 20:2). Peter and another disciple ran ahead of us as we went back to the tomb. They looked into the tomb and found the linen wrappings folded and lying there. (John. 20:1-10). Not knowing what we should do next, the disciples returned to the house. I couldn't go back with them. My grief was too deep. I sat by the empty tomb and continued to weep. Something prompted me to look again inside the tomb. There were two angels who asked me why I was weeping. It didn't occur to me that this was a strange conversation. But I replied that someone had taken away my Lord. (John. 20:11-13). Then I turned around. A man was standing before me. I thought it was the gardener and asked him to tell me where he had taken the body of my Lord. Where had he been laid?

I waited breathlessly for his answer. Instead I heard a familiar voice say "Mary!" I turned. All I could say was "Rabboni!" as I reached out to touch him. He stopped me and said "Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and say to them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:14-18).

I ran back to the disciples with my heart overflowing with joy. I burst into the room and shouted "I have seen the Lord!" They looked at me with disbelief. But I knew I had seen and talked with my Lord. He was alive!

PAUSE and reflect:

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb to mourn the dead. She left as the first person to see and speak with the risen Christ.

What emotions surface when unexpected events occur in a day?

REFLECTION

Why has Mary Magdalene disappeared from the New Testament after she played such a significant role in the Four Gospels? Did the early Christian communities revert back to traditional roles for women? Mary Magdalene's voice became silent. She remained the repentant sinner, the prostitute and the adulteress. In the 6th century Pope Gregory the Great declared her to be a Saint for repentant sinners. She was portrayed by great painters as the sinful woman. In recent years she has been written into fiction and memorialized in a musical. She remains the sinful woman attired in red.

In the 20th century fragments of papyri written in Greek were discovered in Egypt. Among them was the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Apocryphon of John and the Acts of Peter. Six pages of the Gospel of Mary Magdalene are lost. What is left of this Gospel records the risen Christ teaching the disciples and commissioning them to go out and preach. It records that after Jesus departs conflict takes place among the disciples. Mary tries to intervene. Peter and Andrew refuse to believe that Jesus would have entrusted a woman with his teachings. Levi comes to her defense. He challenges all of them to stop arguing and to go out and preach the gospel as the Saviour had commanded them.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene and fragments from the other Gospel writers are compiled and held in the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt. Historians have dated these gospels as writings from the 2nd century CE.

Was Mary Magdalene a sinner, a disciple or an apostle?

What does her story and witness say to us beyond the Easter story?

Living God, may I know your presence in the ordinary times of my life that I may share the wonder of knowing you as my God.