

“Mary Magdalene”

*Luke 8:1–3; Mark 15:40–41; Matthew 27:57–61;
John 20:1–18*

The apostle to the apostles?

This week we begin a new series: *More Than the Twelve*. Twelve what? The disciples around Jesus known in Scripture as the Twelve. Who were they, by name? The lists are not fully consistent, for the names don’t matter as much as the designation “The Twelve.” Jesus was forming around himself a new Israel. Twelve Tribes and now the Twelve disciples.

But there is a lot of confusion around this. Were the Twelve the only disciples? No. A disciple is merely a follower or apprentice, and Jesus attracted many disciples. There were more than the Twelve then and there are certainly more than twelve now. Before Jesus returned to the Father, he instructed his disciples to go and make more disciples of all nations. That is the project we are still about today. Being witnesses to Jesus, proclaiming the Good News in word and deed, and making disciples.

Over the coming weeks, we are going to look at the stories of disciples other than the Twelve, including a couple who lived after the biblical days. In doing so we can see that, indeed, God’s project to rescue humankind has always been far-reaching, encompassing evermore diverse peoples.

We begin with a well-known disciple of Jesus, a woman named Mary from the village of Magdala.

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 terribly 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



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 Marys in the New Testament.

Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, thus confusing matters further. It has taken a long time to reclaim the real 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, 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:

"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

Mary in the Garden

Jesus was crucified and died on the Friday afternoon of Passover week in, perhaps, AD 30. 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, her reply was 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 again:

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

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

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

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. 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).

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