

**Mary Magdalene**  
**Sermon for April 27, 2025**  
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In John's Gospel Chapter 20, we hear about the dead, buried, and resurrected Jesus appearing on earth to his disciples on the evening of the first day of the week. But earlier very same day, Jesus revealed himself to another disciple. That was the lesson we heard last week on Easter Sunday, and that disciple was Mary Magdalene. After the shock at finding Jesus's tomb empty, she did not recognize him standing in the garden, and mistook him to be the gardener, until he spoke to her and she knew who he was.

Mary's discovery of the empty tomb and her encounter with Jesus is arguably the most important thing that she does in the Bible. In fact, it is so important that Pope Francis, who departed this life on Monday, wrote his final sermon for Easter Sunday about Mary. Although he wrote the sermon, he was unable to deliver it himself, so it was read by a cardinal at the Vatican Easter Mass. The very first words of the homily are "Mary Magdalene, seeing that the stone of the tomb had been rolled away, ran to tell Peter and John." Francis goes on to say, "the haste of Mary Magdalene, Peter and John expresses the desire, the yearning of the heart, the inner attitude of those who set out to search for Jesus."

When Jesus talked to Mary in the garden, he said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the 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.' With these words, Jesus made Mary an apostle. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Disciples and apostles are not the same thing, although the two words often are conflated when we talk about the people who followed Jesus. A disciple is a student, one who follows a teacher, leader, or philosopher. In the Greek Bible, the word for "disciple" is simply "student." The word apostle comes directly from the Greek word "ἀπόστολος", which in turn derives from the verb "ἀποστέλλω," which means to send off. It means a person who is charged with sharing the teaching of their mentor to other people. It is a missionary, an evangelist. Not all the disciples were apostles, and not all the apostles were disciples. Next week, Father Geoff will begin his sermon series on St. Paul, who was perhaps the most famous apostle, but he did not know Jesus during his lifetime, so he was not a disciple. On the other hand, Mary was both a disciple and an apostle.

The fact that Jesus told Mary that he was ascending to God, and instructed her to go tell the others about seeing him, and what was happening, made her the first apostle. In the 13th century St. Thomas Aquinas gave her the title "apostle to the apostles," although several others have also been credited with this as early as the 8th century. The

1549 Book of Common Prayer lists July 22nd as her feast day. In 2016, Pope Francis honored her by raising the level of Roman Catholic commemoration to a full feast day, to finally be consistent with the male apostles, and specified for her to be referred to as the "apostle of the apostles."

Mary Magdalene is considered to be a saint by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Anglicans denominations. She is recognized extensively by the Bahai Faith. But who was she? The truth is that we don't know very much about her. She is mentioned by name in all four of the Gospels for a total of 14 times.

First of all her name was Mary. Magdalene is not her last name but it describes where she came from, which is a town called Magdala, on the western shore of the Sea of Gallilee. Magdala was known in ancient times as a fishing town and a center for drying and salting fish, and for making garum, the fermented fish sauce that the Romans used to season their food. The town of Magdala was described by the historian Josephus, but today the town doesn't exist, like so many other ancient places.

The name Mary--or Mariam--was the most common Jewish given name for girls and women during the first century. This Mary is arguably the most famous woman in the Bible after Mary, the mother of Jesus. And because of her common name, she was conflated with several other Marys in the Bible.

In her recent article in the *New Yorker*, Eliza Griswold, who is the daughter of former presiding bishop Frank Griswold, writes that she "belongs to a tangle of at least six women named Mary. This multitude of Marys leaves considerable room for disagreement over which Biblical threads are authentically woven into Magdalene's story, and which aren't."

If you ask a lot of people what they know about Mary Magdalene, they would probably say that she was a prostitute who repented her sinful life and became a follower of Jesus. That is the story that has been repeated by the Catholic Church since the middle ages and preserved for time immemorial in literature, music, and art.

But it probably isn't true. There is nothing in any of the Gospels that describes Mary as a prostitute or "fallen woman" or any sexual behavior at all! That dubious distinction came over 500 years later and is attributed to Pope Gregory, became known as "Gregory the Great.". In 591 A.D. Gregory gave an Easter sermon in which he stated that Mary Magdalene should be considered sinful, which resulted in a widespread belief that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute or promiscuous woman. He referred to the story in Luke's Gospel in which Jesus exorcised seven demons from her body. He preached that the seven demons were evidence of Mary's sinful life. He conflated Mary Magdalene with several other women, including the woman who emptied an entire jar of expensive ointment and wiped Jesus's feet with her hair. In Pope

Gregory's interpretation, the seven demons expelled from Mary Magdalene are transformed into the seven deadly sins of the medieval Church. The result was that Mary was condemned not only for lust, but for pride and greed as well.

Luke's Gospel did state that Jesus exorcised seven demons from Mary. I imagine that she must have suffered from tremendous emotional or psychological distress for an exorcism of this kind to have been seen as necessary. Modern Bible scholars have offered various explanations. Bart Ehrman suggested that, in Jewish tradition, seven was a number of completion, so that Mary's possession by seven demons may simply mean she was completely overwhelmed by their power. An even more modern explanation would be that the seven demons represented seven distinct personalities as a multiple personality disorder. It has also been suggested that the seven demons were seven chakras! It has been speculated that Jesus might have traveled to India, and maybe there he learned how to clear and balance chakras!

Mary is also named as one of the people who helped with financial support of Jesus and his ministry. The fact that she could afford to do this suggests that she was a woman of some means, and possibly even wealthy. In Margaret George's historical novel *Mary, Called Magdalene*, she is portrayed as the daughter of a prominent family of Pharisees in Magdala who have successful business making garum for the Romans.

In addition to Mary being mentioned in all four of the canonical gospels, she was also described in several of the Gnostic gospels. These texts portray her as an apostle, as Jesus's closest and most beloved disciple and the only one who truly understood his teachings. Most of these writings were discovered much later, and many are in fragmentary form. In 1896 an ancient text written in Coptic was discovered in Cairo which is titled the *Gospel of Mary*. It is the only apocryphal text named after a woman. It was probably written in the 2nd century, over 100 years after Mary Magdalene's death. It is not attributed to her and its author is unknown. Instead, it received its title because it is written about her. Much of the text has been lost, but what remains is fascinating.

Mary is talking to Peter and Andrew, about their conversations and experiences with Jesus. "Peter said to Mary, 'Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember – which you know but we do not, nor have we heard them.' Apparently Peter expected to hear things that Jesus had said when he was not in hearing range. Mary then startles Peter by telling him not only what Jesus said to her, but things he did not tell her, things that he told her in a vision that she saw. Mary then told them that she is the only one who has understood Jesus's true teachings.

Peter and Andrew are shocked by this. "Did he really speak with a woman without our knowledge? Are we supposed to turn and listen to her? Did he love her more than us?" In those days under Jewish law women were considered unreliable witnesses. These men questioned

whether Mary is telling the truth, and accused her of making it all up. Mary is understandably upset, but then Matthew (also known as Levi) finally comes to her defense and says, "But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us."

Elaine Pagels has written extensively on the Gospels both canonical and otherwise. She wrote that the *Gospel of Mary* serves as a "defense of the right of women to be teachers, perhaps in opposition to a growing institutionalization of Christianity and an increasing restrictiveness of the role of women." She describes Mary as the "manifestation of divine wisdom." Another scholar has posited that Mary was the mysterious unnamed Beloved Disciple. Hmm.

I have always been fascinated by Mary Magdalene. I became even more interested in her this year when I embarked on a Lenten discipline. I read Margaret George's novel *Mary, Called Magdalene*, which had been on my bookshelf for years but I had never read. Most of the details of Mary's life are fictitious, but there is also a lot of accuracy in the historic events described in the book. Clearly, the author did exhaustive scriptural and historic research in compiling her narrative. It made me want to understand more about who was this amazing woman.

In 1969 the Catholic Church finally decided that Mary Magdalene wasn't a prostitute, and went so far as to apologize for its "mistake." But the damage had already been done. Pope Gregory succeeded in helping to

marginalize women in the Church for the next fourteen hundred years. It makes me sad and angry that these misogynistic church fathers were so successful in denigrating a woman who was one of Jesus's most important followers.

Pope Francis on the other hand, was an advocate for Mary Magdalene throughout his papacy; he continually re-imagined and re-presented her. As recently as February of this year in a Jubilee audience at the Vatican, he held her up as the model of discipleship and transformation. The pope connected Mary Magdalene's spiritual journey to the broader meaning of conversion, noting that entering "the new world" often requires changing perspective more than once.

As we both celebrate the life of Mary Magdalene, and as we mourn the death of Pope Francis, I will leave you with more words from his final sermon.

"Like Mary Magdalene, every day we can experience losing the Lord, but every day we can also run to look for him again, with the certainty that he will allow himself to be found and will fill us with the light of his resurrection."

Amen.