

Mary Magdalene: A Faithful Disciple

Luke 8:1-3

¹ Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Mark 15:40

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

John 20:10-18

¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes. ¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know

that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus 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.'" ¹⁸ 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.

Theme Statement

When we discern Mary Magdalene's motivations for committing her life to Jesus and appreciate the sacrifices she made in order to follow him, we are encouraged to embrace a lifestyle of wholehearted discipleship.

Exploring the Word

When we talk of Mary in the New Testament, we have to consider a few details to ensure we are talking about the right one. "Mary" might refer to the mother of Jesus, or the sister of Martha and Lazarus, or the wife of Cleopas, or the mother of James and Joses, or the woman from Magdala. Sorting through the Marys of scripture, we want to avoid making connections that aren't there.

In this session, we will look at the discipleship of Mary Magdalene and consider how her story informs ours.

Luke 8:1-3 The beginning

Earlier in Luke's narrative (7:36-50), Jesus was anointed by a "sinful woman" and talked with a Pharisee about forgiveness.

Luke says he then traveled from town to town with his disciples, who included Mary Magdalene. At some point, she had been freed from seven demons, a number that simply means “a lot.” Throughout history, people have tried to connect her with the “sinful woman” of Luke 7, but there really is no evidence that the unnamed woman was Mary Magdalene. Perhaps this jump comes from Mark 5:1-20 and Acts 16:16-18, where demon possession is connected to dehumanizing lifestyles and enslavement.

Note that Mary was not the only woman in the group. Luke names Joanna and Susanna and says there were many others. These women helped support the disciples out of their own means. Mary understood Jesus’ teaching that where one’s treasure was, there would be found their heart (Matthew 6:21). We see her commitment to his ministry at this level of leadership.

Mark 15:40 The end

While Mary Magdalene appears in three of the gospels in the crucifixion accounts and in all four at the empty tomb, Mark records that she watches the crucifixion from a distance. She is accompanied by Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph and by Salome. Imagine the pain and confusion she felt. She and her friends had invested time, energy, finances, and heart in what Jesus was doing. And now this hoped-for new reality was slipping away on the cross.

Though the women observed “from a distance” in Mark’s account, the men who were Jesus’ disciples were nowhere to be seen. Since the women were the only ones from Jesus’ group there, perhaps they were the ones who brought the story to the rest of the disciples and preserved for us the account of what happened. Not only were they the original witnesses to the resurrection but apparently to the crucifixion as well.

John 20:10-18 Beginning again

In John’s account, Mary had gone to the tomb quite early and discovered that the stone had been rolled away. She ran to Peter and the other disciple (the one Jesus loved) and reported that the body was missing. The two male disciples ran to the tomb, verified the report, and went home. This is where our passage takes up.

While she is waiting outside the tomb, crying, she sees two angelic messengers. She answers their query about why she is crying and turns around to see a third person. She thinks it is the gardener, but recognizes Jesus when he speaks her name.

Jesus asks her to not hold on to him. Some wonder if this is literal or metaphorical. The latter suggests that her understanding of Jesus would change as the implications of the resurrection became clear.

Mary went to the disciples with the proclamation “I have seen the Lord!” (v. 18).

The Word Today

The number of words in this brief session guide exceed the number of words about Mary Magdalene in the scriptures. We really have only a glimpse of this disciple in the gospels. And she isn’t mentioned in the epistles at all. Yet she is an important figure in the salvation narrative because of her commitment to Jesus and his message, and to him personally at the hour of his dying and rising again.

Mary Magdalene’s story has become larger than life over the centuries. We must remember that even the limited words about Mary were written decades after the resurrection, not immediately. They capture an oral tradition and

were selected to shape a grander story. Each gospel writer was emphasizing certain things to make a distinct theological point.

And in the centuries that followed, Mary's story was reinterpreted by the church to shape contemporary theology and piety for the time. Some early writings from the Christian community gave indication that Mary's apostleship was as strong as that of the more often named men. As the clergy became more male-dominated, her story was amended to focus on her weakness, not her strength. Eventually, artists connected her to the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet and inferred that she was a prostitute. This was a more tantalizing subject for painting.

Why do we seek to enlarge her story when we have so few details? Perhaps we seek balance between male and female voices as seen in Luke. Maybe we instinctively know that the Jesus story is not simply male-centric, but includes both men and women. That certainly was Paul's view of the faith (Galatians 3:28). Perhaps we hope Jesus' life had both the strength of the men disciples and the compassion of the women disciples. Whatever the reason, Mary's example of discipleship seems worthy of greater elaboration.

Isn't it interesting how someone about whom we know so little can capture our attention and direct it to Jesus?

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What is one thing people would never guess you do but don't really like to do?

2. Put the following actions in order from showing least personal commitment to greatest commitment.

- Speak positively about a person
- Risk personal safety for a person
- Learn about a person's priorities
- Ask a person questions about goals
- Invest financially in a person's work

Exploring the Word

1. Select whichever of the following may explain Mary Magdalene's dedication to Jesus:

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| gratitude | intrigue |
| admiration | hope |
| conviction | |

2. The gospel writers place Mary Magdalene and the other women at different places (near the cross; at a distance) during the crucifixion. Why do you think they did that?
3. Compare and contrast the accounts of the resurrection in all four gospels. Who was there? What did they do? What did Jesus say?

The Word Today

1. If all that people could know about you came from two short stories from your life, which two do you think would tell the most about who you are and what you believe?
2. Mary Magdalene supported Jesus' ministry through prayer, generosity, and compassion. What faith practices have become part of your discipleship? Which ones would you like to develop further?

Closing Prayer

Power of the eternal Father, help me. Wisdom of the Son, enlighten the eye of my understanding. Tender mercy of the Holy Spirit, unite my heart to yourself. Eternal God, restore health to the sick and life to the dead. Give us a voice, your own voice, to cry out to you for mercy for the world. You, light, give us light. You, wisdom, give us wisdom. You, supreme strength, strengthen us. Amen. (A prayer of Catherine of Siena, ELW, p. 87)

Further Study

Mark 5:1-20; 9:14-28; Acts 16:16-18; demon possession in the New Testament

Daily Readings

M. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

F. Matthew 28:1-10

T. John 19:25b-30

S. John 20:19-23

W. Mark 16:1-8

S. Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40;

T. John 20:1-9

John 20:10-18

Memorization

Luke 8:1b-2a

The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits.