

One of a Kind – Mary Magdalene

This message is about Mary Magdalene. Although they were great women the message is not about Mary the mother of Jesus, nor is it about Mary the Mother of James and Joseph, or Mary the wife of Cleopas, or Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. Sadly, there are many things that have been attributed to Mary partly because there were evidently a number of Marys (Most popular name at the time with one in four women called Mary) and also because there are three unnamed women described as sexual sinners that people have sometimes assumed to be Mary. In a sense this has affected her brand and also our understanding of the weight she carries in scripture. I will address this at some point in this message.

Luke 8:1-3

¹After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ²and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

These verses should encourage all those women that see themselves as Kingdom Financiers and those who support missions practically. She was definitely a team player as she is mentioned amongst these other women a few times. She was not a lone ranger. The name Mary is derived from Miriam in the Hebrew and means bitter, rebellious or strong. She was aptly named Magdalene based on the town she came from called Magdala. It means tower of castle and was on the shore of Galilee about 3 miles from Capernaum. It was a fish processing, populous thriving town during Jesus' time and dye works and textile factories had added to its wealth. Mary was described as a woman of substance which was probably due to her connection to the wealth of her home-town. She is mentioned 14 times in the Gospels and in 8 of the 14 she is named in connection with other women, always heading the list. This means she must have been considered a leader amongst them. 5 times where she is mentioned alone is in connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus. In one instance her name comes after the mother and aunt of Jesus. After experiencing deliverance from demons she follows Jesus and becomes part of His mission team. Early texts of the Christian era show how she held a high status amongst the apostles.

Essentially, Mary's gratitude and love translated into devotion to Christ and His mission. The question her life inspires us to ask is, "How far am I willing to go in serving Christ after having first-hand experience of His power to liberate me."

Redefining Mary Magdalene

The Jewish Talmud affirms that Magdala was notorious for harlotry and does not exist today because of this. Because Mary was from there and the first reference of her from Luke is after the account of the sinful woman, people have built the idea around her of being a sexual sinner yet there is no evidence of this. Someone else put it this way stating that from the New Testament to the Da Vinci Code, her image has been repeatedly conscripted, contorted and contradicted. Mary has been represented in many different ways throughout history, especially during the Baroque and Renaissance periods (Artwork displaying her in a voluptuous somewhat sensual manner). In a novel and film she has been portrayed as the secret wife of Jesus. She is elusively identified in scripture and as a result many have opened themselves up to myths about her. It is important to understand the influence of Pope Gregory. *In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great brought Mary firmly back into the picture—not the way she was but as the church wanted her to be. With breathtaking oversimplification, Gregory conflated Mary Magdalene of the seven demons with the*

unnamed "sinner" who washed Jesus's feet with her hair in Luke (a close reading of Luke 7 and 8 shows that they are not the same woman) and also Mary of Bethany, who anoints Jesus with nard in John. (Richard Covington on what 6th Century Pope said)

In John Trigilio's book, *Saints for Dummies* he states: *Because of the legends saying that Mary Magdalene had been a prostitute, she became the patroness of "wayward women", and, in the eighteenth century, moral reformers established Magdalene asylums to help save women from prostitution.*

The ancient Roman world was rife with flesh-hating spiritualities such as stoicism, Manichaeism, Neoplatonism which influenced Christian thinking and also resulted in the disempowerment of women. In all this we must see a pattern in how Jesus redeemed broken women. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well who Jesus told to go and preach to her people after she wanted to follow him. She did preach to them, and was probably instrumental in the birthing of the church there when Philip the evangelist later arrived on the scene. How do you view her? Do you see her as this mighty evangelist or just a repentant unstable woman with a dodgy past who had a conversation with Jesus? When the Gospel moved to Europe, a lot of the accounts of these great women were suppressed by a culture (not Jesus) in the first few centuries that suppressed women. I believe that Mary Magdalene set the tone for some of the great women we see in the Book of Acts and Epistles like Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla.

Romans 16:7

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding amongst the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

In Eastern Orthodox tradition, Mary Magdalene travels to Rome, where she preaches to Tiberius, then settles in Ephesus in northwest Turkey with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the apostle John. Other accounts place her in southern France or even in India with the apostle Thomas. According to Chilton, she returns to Magdala, where she continues preaching, healing, and anointing. In A.D. 67, she becomes one of thousands of victims massacred by the Romans in reprisal for an armed rebellion. (Richard Covington, 2008)

Lessons from the life of Mary Magdalene

1. She continued to follow Jesus after her deliverance

This might seem to be an obvious statement but sadly it is worth mentioning because often it doesn't happen. Jesus would heal people and then say to them, "Now follow me." Not all of them did. We cannot separate deliverance from discipleship. Once delivered, it is important to fall in love with the Words of Jesus, as your source of sanctification. This is what Mary did. In those days, it was unheard of for a woman to be a disciple for a Rabbi, yet she was. This shows us something about Jesus and something about Mary.

Mt 27:55-56

⁵⁵*Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. ⁵⁶Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.*

Mt 27:61

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

2. She was free from condemnation

In the bible, you were not popular or well liked if you had demons. There was a strong stigma around this. People might have been afraid of her based on how the demons would have manifested in her life. The demons could have affected her severely mentally. Remember how the disciples were not shy about chasing the little children away from Jesus. One wonders what their attitude was like toward her. We know that Jesus was very gracious to her but it might have been a learning process for the disciples. They would have known the before and the after. People had obviously witnessed her deliverance and someone might have counted the demons or seven was an expression of completeness as in "She was completely demonised". Despite all of this, Jesus still elevated her and treated her as an equal amongst the rest and she internalised this.

Mark 16:1-9

¹When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" ⁸Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. ⁹When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.

3. She remained with Jesus and did not deny him

She was one of the women that stood by him right to the end, even in the face of danger. She appeared to have a quiet devotion to Jesus that was very practical as opposed to some who were very vocal and yet sometimes were inconsistent.

John 19:25

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Mark 15:39 – 41

³⁹And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" ⁴⁰Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

4. She recognized Jesus' voice

Jesus knew her by name and she knew His voice.

Is 43:1

But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

John 20:16

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

Jesus also knows you by name. Do you recognize His voice when He calls you? Initially Samuel didn't. His voice is something you learn through intimacy. Knowing His voice activates obedience despite your emotional state.

John 20:11-18

¹¹Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹²and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don't know where they have put him.” ¹⁴At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). ¹⁷Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

5. She was the first to share the Gospel

For those that try to suppress the role of women with regards to the Gospel they need to consider the fact that Jesus chose to first reveal His resurrected self to a woman and then commissioned her to share the news with the others. The Gospel of Mary (non-canonised into the scriptures) illustrates how the disciples asked her to unpack her experience with the resurrected Christ.

Luke 24:5-12

⁵In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” ⁸Then they remembered his words. ⁹When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹²Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.