

You Asked For It – “Mary Magdalene: Prostitute or Saint?”

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Cleveland Heights, OH

June 26, 2005

Text: I Corinthians 15:3-8

I really had never thought much about Mary Magdalene until seeing *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a high school student. And there she was, darkly luminous, contralto voice providing a show-stopping moment with: *I don't know how to love him, I don't see why he moves me. He's a man...he's just a man, And I've had so many men before, in very many ways....*

In the rock opera, Mary Magdalene was clearly portrayed as a prostitute or at least a sexually immoral woman whose relationship with Jesus (ambiguous as to its boundaries) changed her into a new woman. That seemed to jibe with what I remembered from Sunday School, and how Jesus had cured her of “seven devils.”

I'm betting that many of us learned more about Mary Magdalene from *The Da Vinci Code* than we ever did in Sunday School, however. How many of you have read it? I did too, and thoroughly enjoyed it. Professor Joe Kelly, religious historian who teaches at John Carroll University, gave a fascinating presentation here a couple of years ago in which he attempted to parse out truth from fiction in the best-selling novel.

The central theme of *The Da Vinci Code*—that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus, and that their physical union produced a new spiritual human/divine partnership---while intriguing, is more literary invention than historical fact. Art historians cannot resolve the disagreement as to whether Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* painting portrays her at the table next to Jesus—and are even more divided as to whether the composition of the painting was intended to provide clues to her identity that the Church had conspired to suppress

The unprecedented popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* reflects growing interest in re-examining the Church's historic treatment of women, and that's what prompted this sermon request. The church member wrote, “Was she a prostitute or was she Jesus' wife, or something else?” He continued, “I'm intrigued by paintings of the Last Supper and the figure on Jesus' right that looks unmistakably feminine..... I am also concerned about the male-dominated approach to early church history and the way women were locked out right from the start.” The member's comments suggest to me that he has already figured out that recovery of women's experience is good for the *whole* church. I believe the example of Mary Magdalene offers not simply a fascinating historical perspective, but a role model of faith for contemporary women *and men*. This isn't about political correctness. By focusing primarily on Mary's sex and sexuality, the Church has missed a compelling witness to the good news, and a Christian worthy of emulation.

So what do we know about Mary Magdalene from Scripture? She is first mentioned in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, along with other women followers of Jesus. In Luke 8, for example, we read: *...[Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. [Luke 8:1-3]* In this pre-scientific age, physical and mental illnesses alike were attributed to demon possession, and there is absolutely no biblical evidence that the "seven demons" cast out of Mary were sexual in nature. We don't know much more than that until Jesus' crucifixion, when the gospels list her among the handful of those who stood near the cross as he died [*Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 19:25*]. But notice her prominence in all four accounts of the first Easter morning. Listen for God's word in the readings from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. . . [Matthew 28:1].

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Salome brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb... [Mark 16:1,2]

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. . . .then they remembered his words and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles....[Luke 24:1-10]

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from [it]. . . . Mary stood weeping outside the tomb....she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni" which means Teacher. 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.'" 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. [John 20:1-18] The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Given this testimony, what do you make of the epistle reading, from the first letter to the Corinthian churches, authored by the apostle Paul? Reading from the 15th chapter at the third verse:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [that is, Peter], then

to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. What happened to Mary Magdalene? Why doesn't Paul include her in his list of resurrection witnesses? She is favorably portrayed in all the gospels; in the gospel of John she is the one commissioned by the risen Jesus to proclaim the good news of his resurrection to the disciples; to be the "apostle to the apostles." But she is nowhere to be found in the biblical letters and accounts of early church life. For a little while in the church's memory, Mary Magdalene had a name and an identity, and was poised to have significant influence on Christian history. And then she vanished from the "official record"—and the church's memory of her became distorted and nearly erased.

...but she did not disappear entirely. *The Da Vinci Code* spoke of other documents that chart her activity. These documents including letters, collections of Jesus' sayings, fragments of gospels and infancy narratives, circulated in the early church. Though these documents were not included in the Bible, scholars have long used them to better understand the context, struggles, and issues of the early church. They're called "extracanonical writings" some of which were discovered in the last century and only more recently made widely accessible. We pick up Mary's trail in the Gospel of Philip, for example, where she is described as Jesus' companion, one of three who "always walked with the Lord" [*David Cartledge and David Duncan, eds. Documents for the Study of the Gospels, p. 67*]. An early second-century gospel bears her name and may have been authored by her.

These documents not only attest to Mary's role in the church, they also reveal significant tensions in the early church about the role of women generally. In one passage in the Gospel of Mary, for instance, Peter wonders incredulously if Jesus prefers to talk with a woman than with the male disciples [*Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Searching the Scriptures, vol. II, p. 680*]. In another of these manuscripts, Peter complains to Jesus, "My Lord, we cannot bear this woman any longer. She deprives us of any opportunity to say anything. She keeps on talking." [*Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, The Women Around Jesus, p. 77*]

These texts hint that even where women's leadership in the church was permitted, the struggle for authority and power included gender issues. Given the social and religious climate of this time generally, in which women were viewed as the property of men and valued primarily for their child-bearing ability, it is not surprising that the church successfully eliminated them from ordained leadership positions—a ban that continues to this day in the Roman Catholic Church, for example, and in our own Presbyterian Church stood until the 20th century. In fact, this year and next marks the 100th anniversary of women deacons in the Presbyterian Church, the 75th anniversary of women elders, and the 50th anniversary of women ministers. The relatively recent admission of women to church leadership positions begs the question of how different the church might have been if women's and men's gifts had been equally valued and exercised.

Not unlike Mary Magdalene, however, women have always found ways to express their devotion to Jesus Christ. It was a group of women, for example, seeking to provide Christian education to their children and neighborhood families, who began a Sunday School Society that would eventually be chartered as Fairmount Presbyterian Church. Though the first woman minister to serve as "assistant pastor" —Carolyn Olds Mikels—began in 1985 (after ten years as Director of Christian Education), a woman named Marjorie McKee had served as a Parish

Visitor starting in 1940. Where would this church be without the faithful service and leadership of women such as Jo Morris, Esther Wright, Polly Scheid, Kitty Borchert, Jane Reynolds, Dorothy Dickey, Millie Yoder?

The witness of these women –and many more like them—is compelling because they are human, which is to say, not perfect. Their Christian faith is lived out in the real world shaped by both divine and demonic forces. So it is with Mary Magdalene. She is finally neither bad girl nor angel, but a woman of faith who lived with courage and caring. We know that she became a disciple of Jesus, following him to the cross, standing with him in suffering when the others ran away in fear. We hear her commissioned by the risen Jesus at the empty tomb to “go and tell”—and because she did, the Christian gospel is proclaimed even to this day.

Rather than venerated, Mary Magdalene deserves to be emulated as someone who shared good news with other people. Her commissioning is ours as well. To go and tell someone that God loves them and sent Christ to show the way to life. How do we do that? If you struggle to find words, point to Mary Magdalene as an example. She told what she knew. She claimed no privilege or special knowledge. She never stopped asking questions. Could you and I do that? Could you tell someone that engagement in this faith community has opened a source of healing, acceptance, purpose you hadn't known before? Could you tell someone that we don't have all the answers, but we have some great companions for the search? Could you tell of even one time when God felt more real, and closer to you, because you heard music here that touched your soul, or were visited by a minister before surgery, or celebrated marriage, the birth of a child, or the life of a dear one who has died? In the spirit of Mary Magdalene, may it be so, for you and for me. Amen.

Suggested resources for further study:

Haskins, Susan. Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor. [New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993]

Moltman-Wendel, Elisabeth. The Women Around Jesus. [New York: Crossroad, 1982]

Schottroff, Luise. Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity. [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995]

Westfall, Louise, Sue, and Mary. The Face is Familiar: Remembering Unnamed Women in Scripture. [Louisville, KY: Horizons, Volume 16, no. 3, 2003]