

María of Magdala: Apostle to the Apostles

Written by Faye Reynolds for the 2018 Great Canadian Bible Study

If I counted correctly, Wikipedia¹ lists 150 women mentioned in our Scriptures. In choosing which woman to explore for our Great Canadian Bible Study, I often wrestle between characters of which little is known, leaving perhaps too much room for speculation, or women of whom much has been written and studied, so what more could be added? Thus, I have avoided the study of Mary Magdalene, upon whom much has been both written and speculated. However, I feel it is time to boldly go where many have gone before and try to rediscover for myself this fascinating woman of Scripture who gets more mention than most of the twelve disciples in the Gospels. Why is she known by the place where she is from? What were the seven demons cast out from her or does it matter? What was her relationship to Jesus and the twelve? Perhaps none of these questions will be answered, but may God help us discern where Mary's story and ours might intersect.

María is the Greek form of Mary and there are 14 Scriptural references (we will read them later) to her in the four Gospels but she never again appears in connection to the early church in the book of Acts or in any of Paul's letters. I have not included the final verses in Mark, which are a later addition to the manuscripts. Thus, from the Gospels we learn:

- Jesus cast seven demons out of her and
- She was one of several women who provided for Jesus out of her own means (Luke 8:1-3)
- She witnessed the crucifixion of Christ (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; Luke 23: 49; John 19:25).
- She was present at His burial (Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55).
- She arrived at Jesus' tomb on the Sunday following His crucifixion to find His body missing (Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-7; John 20:1).
- She saw the risen Lord, spoke with Him, and later reported the encounter to the apostles (Matthew 28:9-10; John 20:11-18).

There is no reason to infer that Mary was the prostitute mentioned in Luke 7 who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. Mary is first introduced to us in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 8 so we must not assume that she is the woman of chapter 7.

What do we know of Magdala? There were two towns in the region of Galilee that bore the name Magdala (tower). Some scholars feel that Magdala Nunaiya is the likely home of Mary found on the shore of Lake Galilee. The name refers to "fish tower" for processing dried fish. Another source² identifies Magdala as "*a thriving*

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_women_in_the_Bible

² <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Mary-Magdalone>

populace town on the coast of Galilee about three miles from Capernaum. Dye works and primitive textile factories added to the wealth of the vicinity. It may be that "The Magdalene" was connected with the industry of the town for it would seem as if she was not without means, enabling her to serve the Lord with her substance"

Another interesting tidbit from Wikipedia³ is that Herod the Great had built three towers in memory of three people dear to him, his brother, his wife (Mariam) and a friend. So there existed at the time a tower known as "Magdala Mariam". I can't help but wonder if the Gospel's name for Mary Magdalene wasn't a bit of a nickname, playing on the town from where she was from, and also the tower that bore her name. Perhaps her personality "towered" over the others and that, too, played fondly into her name. The goal of this study, however; is to do the least amount of speculation as possible and discover afresh the Mary recorded in four books of the New Testament.

Mary Magdalene primarily figures into the death and resurrection narratives and is only mentioned once outside of that event.

1. **Read Luke 8: 1 – 3** and *discuss* what can be understood about Mary from these verses. There is no record of Mary's family background, whether married or single or her age but she seems free to travel with Jesus and the disciples.
2. The number seven in Scripture most often implies as sense of completeness, rather than as specific number – such as forgiving "seventy times seven". Evil spirits or demons in Scripture were thought to be the source of mental illness (Luke 8:27ff), epilepsy (Matthew 17: 14 – 17) and other ailments. One of the great signs of the coming of God's kingdom was the driving out of demons. We may not know what ailment Mary suffered from, but we can understand that she was set free from a great affliction. *What might her life have been like before meeting Jesus and then after? What is her response to Jesus?*
3. Share with one another one or two things for which you are most grateful to Jesus or ways that you have experienced healing. *How has gratitude shaped your path of discipleship? Mary was blessed to become a blessing in supporting the mission of Jesus. How have you been blessed to be a blessing?*
4. I have always appreciated Luke's attention to the women involved in the ministry of Jesus. Joanna is introduced the same time as Mary Magdalene, inferred in Luke 23:55 and mentioned again in Luke 24:10. We know that Joanna was married, and that her husband, Chuza was the manager of the household of Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great), whose primary residence was in Galilee, not far from Nazareth. This is the Herod who executed John the Baptist. Her connection to Herod's household is interesting

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdala>

and it appears that she also experienced healing from the hand of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, Joanna and Mary Magdalene are often mentioned together, inferring a friendship as they travelled together side by side. *How has friendship encouraged your spiritual journey?*

5. **Read Luke 23: 26 – 31 and verse 49.** There is no other mention of Mary Magdalene or Joanna in the stories of the gospels until the crucifixion of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, it is not unreasonable to conclude that "the women who had come with him from Galilee" would include Mary and Joanna, Suzanna and others. It is not as clear if verse 27 are the same women, but the magnitude of their grief would lead me to believe that this is also reference to those women close to him. The title "Daughters of Jerusalem" may seem a bit confusing since Mary and Joanna were from Galilee, but it is an inclusive term referring to Jewish woman and Jesus may be referencing the destruction of Jerusalem which would occur in A.D 70. Women have long wept for their children, the innocent caught in systems of injustice, victims of war, famine, a drunken driver or a killing cancer. There is no greater grief than the loss of a child and often mothers would take upon themselves their suffering if it were possible. *What is Jesus saying to these women? How does the suffering of Jesus in his innocence speak to those who have suffered such loss? How do these words: "Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore" address other atrocities in the world today? Is there anything in this warning of Jesus that continues to resonate with us?*
6. **Read Luke 23: 54 – 24:12.** *Is Mary's role any more significant here than the other women from Galilee?* The intriguing thing about Luke is that he is the only author that gives us any sense of who Mary Magdalene was and the role she played as a supporter of Jesus along with other women, yet he does not mention her individual encounter with the risen Lord. She plays no more a role than does Joanna and we actually know a bit more about her background than we do of Mary. One question to consider is *why has Mary Magdalene grown "larger than life" throughout church history?*
7. When the women shared with the disciples what they had seen, the "words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them". *Were their words dismissed because they were women, or because of the fantastic nature of their report? Are there times that women's words are considered to hold less weight or as a society have we moved past that stereotype?*
8. Let us now turn to the other gospel narratives. In Mark, the first reference to Mary Magdalene is **Mark 15:40** and it is noted here that she along with many women followed and provided for Jesus in his ministry around Galilee. Pick up the story at **Mark 15: 46 – Mark 16:8**. *Again, what role does Mary play here and is it in any way distinguishable from the others?*

9. **Read Matthew 27: 55 – 61.** Whereas in Luke the women who observe the crucifixion and follow the body of Jesus to find the location of his tomb remain unnamed, in Matthew we are told that Mary Magdalene and Mary, Mother of James and Joseph are among them. Luke does name those who found the tomb empty but does not include an encounter with the risen Christ. Now **read Matthew 28: 1 – 10** on the resurrection. For the author of the book of Matthew, the number two is very significant in that it adds weight and authority to the author's arguments. Where there might be one blind man in the other gospels, there will be two in Matthew. And is it important that the resurrection of Jesus be witnessed by two, rather than one (especially since the witness is by women) and thus we have both Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who encounter the risen Lord. *Describe the scene at the tomb. What were the angel's instructions to them? What emotions were the women experiencing first with the angel and then when they actually encounter Jesus? How has your personal testimony been shaped by your own encounter with the risen Christ? In what ways do we get stuck in our intellectual beliefs and fail to put words to our personal experiences with Jesus?*

If we did not have the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene would not have found such a place of prominence in the story of Jesus. She would simply have been one of several Galilean women who experienced such profound healing from Jesus that they determined to dedicate their lives to following and serving him. Then came the overwhelming, chest-beating grief when their rabbi and master was arrested, tortured and crucified like a common criminal as they stood helplessly by. Their only comfort was to tend to his body with a dignity it deserved – but there was no body! From shock and horror, to confusion, to wonder and finally unbelievable joy – they met their risen Lord! John tells a different story.

10. **Read John 19: 25; 20: 1 – 18:** It is from this text that Thomas Aquinas⁴ coined the title for Mary Magdalene as “an apostle to the apostles”. *What is your understanding of the role of an apostle and how did Mary fulfill that role?*
11. Mary calls Jesus “Rabbouni” and in that way, she is thus identifying herself as a disciple of Jesus. *How has the testimony of Mary opened the way for women to be disciples and apostles within the church today?*
12. *What is the difference between what Jesus told Mary to say to the disciples and what she actually said? In what ways have we seen the Lord that we need to give voice to within and beyond our communities?*

⁴ Thus, as already indicated she becomes an evangelist, that is a messenger who announces the Good News of the Lord's resurrection or, as Rabanus Maurus and Saint Thomas Aquinas say, she becomes the “apostolorum apostola” because she announces to the apostles what in turn they will announce to the whole world (Rabanus Maurus, *De vita beatae Mariae Magdaleneae*, XXVII; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *In Ioannem Evangelistam Expositio*, c. XX, L. III, 6)

The goal of this study has been two-fold. The first is that we need to be true to the Scriptures when we endeavor to know the Biblical characters and their place in God's story. Even Christian tradition can leave us with understandings that may not be backed by the texts that we have. Mary Magdalene may not have been a prostitute and we will never know what demons or illnesses she from which she was released, but her place of fame stands Scripturally firm upon her eye witness to the bodily resurrection of Jesus – the very foundation of our Christian faith. In that sense, she is truly an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, proclamation is one of the key identities and callings of the church, but we have often lost voice as we have endeavored to deepen our understanding of Scriptures, thus moving our faith more and more into our heads and away from our hearts. If we could learn to say to one another in our small groups, in our Sunday school classes and in our pulpits how we have *seen the Lord*, we would have a much easier time proclaiming that Good News outside of our church circles! Mary's role must become our role. We must bear witness to the resurrected Lord by sharing our own experiences with the living Christ, for He is alive my friends – He is alive!

Mission Project:

The offering received during the Great Canadian Bible Study will continue to support the literacy projects in Rwanda, a project initiated by Canadian Baptist Ministries partner, the Association of Baptist Churches of Rwanda. This is an opportunity for Canadian Baptist Women to encourage and support the women of Rwanda. Please forward offering, designated for, "Rwanda Literacy Program", to your Provincial Treasurer with your group's regular offering.

Ask: How did you use your literacy skills today?

Answers may include: read a recipe, e-mail, face book, read signs while driving, read the newspaper, read the Bible, did a crossword puzzle, played scrabble, etc.

What are your earliest memories of learning how to read?

Knowing how to read is a very important skill.

Women in Rwanda, who have learned to read, now live with hope.

Read stories of those who have participated in the literacy program in Rwanda.

See *Tidings*: April 2017, p 19

Feb 2015, p 15

Nov 2016, p 12-13

Dec 2015, p 13

For Canadian Baptist Ministries information sheet see:

http://www.cbmin.org/resources/church-resources-2/information-sheets/cbm_projectprofile_rwanda_womensliteracy-2/