

Feast of Mary Magdalene, 2018  
Year B - 22/7/2018

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19  
Psalm 24  
Ephesians 1:1-14  
Mark 6:14-29

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

Who was Mary Magdalene? What do we know about her? And how do we know it? The question of *how* we know about her is a relatively simple one. Simply, she appears in a number of early Christian texts associated with the ministry of Jesus.

These texts comprise Gospels written in the first and second century of the Common Era (CE). The earliest of them are included in the New Testament, where Magdalene plays a significant role. She also appears in later Gospels, which were not included in the Bible and come from a later period (still) in early Christianity.

The answer about who she was and what we know of her is more complex. In Western art, literature and theology, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a prostitute who meets Jesus, repents of her sins, and pours oil on his feet in a gesture of humility, penitence and gratitude. She is sometimes depicted kneeling at the foot of the cross, hair unbound, emphasising the sinful past from which she can never quite escape, despite being declared a saint.

The tradition of the penitent prostitute has persisted in the Western tradition. Institutions that cared for prostitutes from the 18th century onwards were called “Magdalenes” to encourage amendment of life in the women who took refuge in them. The word came into English as “maudlin”, meaning a tearful sentimentality. It is not exactly a flattering association!

Artistic depictions continued to emphasise Magdalene's sexuality in various ways, under a facade of piety. In another twist on the same theme, she is presented as the wife of Jesus, most notably in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

Yet nowhere in the Gospels is Mary Magdalene associated either overtly or covertly with sexuality. The four Gospels of the New Testament present her in two significant roles.

In the first place, she is a disciple of Jesus: one among a band of women and men from Galilee who believed in his message of love and justice and followed him in his ministry.

Secondly, Magdalene is a primary witness in the Gospels to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Unlike many of the other disciples, she does not flee when Jesus is arrested. She remains at the cross when he dies and later visits his tomb to find it empty, with a vision of angels declaring his resurrection.

Mark's Gospel, which we now know to be the earliest Gospel to be written, speaks of Magdalene as a disciple of Jesus who has followed him from Galilee along with other women, but it does not mention her until the crucifixion. These women disciples now stand near the cross, despite the danger in being present at the execution of a dissident.

Three of them, including Magdalene, visit the tomb on Easter morning where they meet an angel who informs them that Jesus has risen from the dead (Mark 16:1-8). The women's subsequent departure from the tomb is ambiguous, and they leave in fear and silence, which is where the manuscript of Mark's Gospel abruptly ends. An ending added later (perhaps based on John's Gospel) makes mention of the risen Jesus making an appearance first to Magdalene.

In Matthew's Gospel, Magdalene meets the risen Christ as she leaves the tomb, this time with only one other female companion, who is also called "Mary" (Matt 28:1-10).

In Luke's account, Magdalene appears at the cross and at the empty tomb to hear the angel's words, but she and her female companions are not believed when they convey the message of the resurrection to the apostles (Luke 24:1-11).

In Luke, there is also an earlier mention of Magdalene in Jesus's ministry where she is present, along with other women, as a disciple and supporter of Jesus. She is described as having had seven demons cast from her. Exorcisms – the casting out of evil spirits – are common in the Gospels. Those suffering demonic possession are never described as sinful but rather are victims of external evil.

These days, we would associate their symptoms with physical maladies such as epilepsy or mental illness. Magdalene, in other words, has been the victim of a serious illness and Jesus has healed her.

John's Gospel, however, gives Magdalene her most significant role. Once again, she does not appear until the crucifixion. In the narrative that follows, she comes alone to the tomb on Easter morning, finds it empty, tries unsuccessfully to gain help from two other prominent disciples, and eventually meets the risen Christ himself in the garden (20:1-18). He is alive and commissions her to proclaim the message of his resurrection.

On the basis of John's story, later tradition gave Magdalene the title of "apostle to the apostles" and recognised something of her significance for Christian faith, witness and leadership.

The later Gospels, beyond the New Testament, also emphasise Magdalene's importance as a disciple of Jesus and witness to the resurrection. The manuscript of the Gospel of Mary, which describes her discussions with the risen Christ, is unfortunately damaged and the central section is missing. In this and other similar Gospels, however, Magdalene is presented as the favoured disciple. This situation leads to some tension with the other disciples, who are jealous of her closeness to Jesus and the teaching she alone is given.

One Gospel speaks of Jesus kissing her, but this imagery in the Gospel of Philip is metaphorical and refers to a spiritual union with Christ. In response to the objection by the other disciples, Jesus asks why he does not kiss them in the same way, implying that they do not as yet possess the same degree of spiritual knowledge.

With all that we know, or think we know about Mary Magdalene, two things stand out for me. Firstly, we do well not to dwell on what someone has or has not been in the past - for in our own encounter with the risen Christ and his words of life we, too, are changed - from imperfection to perfection - from brokenness to wholeness. And so we are all, in our own way, just like Mary Magdalene.

And secondly - and in many ways this is all that matters - Mary Magdalene becomes, by her actions on that first Easter morn, the first Apostle. I know that for the Catholic church the apostolic succession to the current Pope is traced from Peter, because of Jesus' words about building the church on Peter as the rock. For me, however, there is no better example of an apostle than Mary Magdalene. She runs - she is so taken by the news and the appearance of Jesus that she cannot contain herself, and she runs to tell the other disciples the good news. Her proclamation of the empty tomb becomes the beginning of the whispers which then become shouts - "Christ is risen"

Let us be thankful for witness, faithfulness, and love of Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles, and may these qualities be evident also in our own lives.

In the name of God, Amen