

In John's Gospel, Mary of Magdala is the key witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In contrast to the disciples who fled when Jesus was arrested, Mary, along with the mother of Jesus and her sister, stays by the cross as Jesus suffers and dies (19: 25). Aware of where Nicodemus buried the body of Jesus, Mary comes to the tomb early Sunday morning while it is still dark. Finding the stone removed from the tomb, she runs to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple and reports that the body of Jesus is missing. They race to the tomb, find it empty, except for the burial cloths, and return home. But Mary stays outside the tomb weeping. At that point she sees Jesus, but thinks he is the gardener. It is only when Jesus says to her, "Mary!" that she recognizes him and says to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni," which is an endearing term for a revered teacher. At that, Jesus tells her to stop holding on to him, but to tell his brothers that he is going to "my Father and your Father." Mary then goes to the disciples, announcing, "I have seen the Lord," and reporting what he told her (20: 11-18).

This appearance account calls for context and commentary. Luke's Gospel tells us that Mary of Magdala (a small fishing town near the Sea of Galilee), along with other Galilean women, accompanied Jesus as he went from town to town proclaiming the good news, and supported his ministry out of their own means (8: 1-3). We also know from Luke that Mary, from whom seven demons had gone out, accompanied Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, where she was witness to his death (23: 49) and burial (23: 55), as well as his resurrection (24:10).

The decision of Jesus to include women in his travelling ministry was most unusual in first-century Palestinian Judaism. This radical departure from social norms suggests the inclusive character of his whole community-building project. As one of the Galilean women, Mary Magdalene serves as a prime example of those disciples of Jesus who left their comfortable surroundings and followed him wherever he went, relying on the hospitality of stay-at-home followers of the Teacher.

John's dramatized account of Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus also emphasizes her role as a prominent disciple, mentioned in the Gospels more than any other disciple except Peter, James, John and Judas. Magdalene, grief-stricken over the death of Jesus, is concerned with finding his body missing from the empty tomb. Despite her close relationship to Jesus, she does not recognize him when he appears plainly in sight, but thinks he is the gardener. This is a common feature of the appearances: for example, Cleopas has a long conversation with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus without recognizing him. It is when Jesus calls Mary by name that her eyes are opened and she recognizes him. Earlier in his Gospel, John spoke of genuine disciples as those who recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls his own sheep by name (10: 3-5). Mary is clearly among those who recognize the voice of the Lord and follow him. Called by name, Mary responds "Rabboni," indicating her deep respect for Jesus as her teacher and expressing her faith in him as the risen Lord. Jesus then tells Mary, "Do not cling to me," perhaps referring to Mary's natural desire to experience his continued presence in her life as before. Jesus then tells Mary, "go to my brothers and tell them I am going to my Father and your Father." In following this command, Mary becomes the first to proclaim the risen Lord, the first to utter the great formula of faith, "I have seen the Lord." She is a witness to the resurrection, appointed by Christ himself. She carries the message that the God who raised Jesus to life is the Father of all, and that Christ founded an inclusive community of disciples open to men and women. Thus, Mary of Magdala, as remembered in the Catholic tradition, is truly the "apostle to the apostles."

The privileged witness of Magdalene in John's Gospel is not shared by the whole New Testament. In his first letter to the Corinthians, written about four decades before the fourth Gospel, Paul, drawing on an earlier tradition, lists a series of witnesses to the resurrection, including Peter, the twelve, five hundred brothers and James, without mentioning Mary of Magdala (1 Cor: 15: 5-7). It is possible that Paul was interested in noting only those who could bear public witness to the risen Christ, a role denied to women in the patriarchal culture of his audience. In the strange original ending of Mark's Gospel (16: 1-8), Mary, and two other Galilean women who watched where Jesus was buried, went to the tomb early on the first day of the week. There they encountered a young man who told them Jesus was raised and commanded them to tell his disciples and Peter that they will see Jesus in Galilee. The last line of the original Gospel then says Mary and her companions "went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid" (16: 8). In contrast to John, Mark portrays Mary as a frightened woman who fails to carry out her assigned mission to proclaim the good news.

Luke's Gospel notes that the Galilean women, including Mary of Magdala, witnessed the death and burial of Jesus and encountered two men at the empty tomb who told them Jesus had been raised. Mary and the others reported this to the eleven

and all the others, but their story seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them (Lk 24: 1-12). Here, the male apostles treat Magdalene not with the respect due to a privileged witness, but with a condescending disdain for a woman engaged in idle chatter.

In his book, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, the great scripture scholar Raymond Brown offers the opinion that “the tradition that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene has a good chance of being historical” (p. 189). John’s Gospel, which preserved that tradition, does not mention the Twelve official witnesses, but emphasizes the witnessing role of the disciples, including women proclaimers of the good news, like the Samaritan woman at the well, who converts a whole village (4: 39). Furthermore, Brown attributes the silence about Magdalene in other New Testament writings to a patriarchal bias against women.

Feminist scholars argue that this bias eventually enabled male authority figures to take control of the church and effectively deprive women of the leadership positions they enjoyed in the early communities established by the Apostle Paul, who spoke positively of woman leaders, including the prominent apostle Junia (Rom 16: 7) and his co-worker Prisca (Rom 16: 3-5). The tension created by this bias is represented in the Gnostic, non-canonical 2nd century *Gospel According to Mary*, which was discovered around 1900 and published only in 1983. It portrays a dispute between Magdalene and Peter, who is upset that Mary is encouraging some terrified male disciples by sharing with them what the risen Lord taught her. In anger, Peter asks, “Did he really speak privately to a woman and not openly to us?” In response, Mary asks Peter if he thinks she made this teaching up or “is lying about the Savior?” At that point Levi intervenes, telling Peter that he has “always been hot tempered” and is mistakenly treating Mary like an adversary. Since the Lord “knew her very well” and “loved her more than us,” who are you to reject her? The story ends with the disciples going forth to preach boldly, having received encouragement and instruction from Mary. The publication of this Gospel has encouraged more research on Mary of Magdala and her role in the development of Christian spirituality.

In the last decade of the sixth century, the saintly Pope Gregory I (c 540-604) gave a series of sermons on Mary Magdalene that identified her as the sinful woman with the alabaster jar who bathed the feet of Jesus with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them and anointed them with ointment (Lk 7: 36-50). Gregory described her as a repentant whore, who transformed her forbidden acts of the flesh into self-sacrificing virtues “in order to serve God entirely in penance.” He interpreted the seven demons cast out of Mary as representing a sinful life of “all vices.” Pope Gregory’s questionable reading of the scriptures gave an official sanction to a common perception of Mary as a prostitute and influenced the popular understanding of her as a sinful woman representing the evils of the flesh. This interpretation of Mary has influenced the visual arts and popular culture up to our own time. The musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, for example, has Mary singing: “I don’t know how to love him . . . He’s just a man and I’ve had so many men before . . . I want him so, I love him so.” Today, many Christians simply assume Mary Magdalene was a repentant sinner without any consideration of its accuracy or negative implications.

Contemporary scholarship is helping to develop a more accurate understanding of Mary of Magdala and a deeper appreciation of her role in the Jesus movement. New Testament scholars tell us that the seven demons cast out of Mary refer to a serious or chronic ailment and have nothing to do with being a prostitute. Nor is there any sound biblical basis for identifying Magdalene with the sinful woman who anointed the feet of Jesus, as did Pope Gregory the Great. There are good reasons for recognizing Mary as the “apostle to the apostles.” The risen Lord himself sent her to the apostles to proclaim the good news. Her statement “I have seen the Lord” is the standard apostolic proclamation of the resurrection. In the Western Church, the Creed was traditionally recited at Mass on her feast day, an indication that she was considered an apostle. A 9th century biography of Magdalene notes that she exercised “the office of the apostolate,” an honor conferred on her by the Lord. Contemporary feminist theologians are retrieving John’s positive portrayal of Mary as part of a larger project to expand the roles of women in the church of today. They are also intent on disconnecting Magdalene from the harlot image, which has contributed to the sexualization of women, symbolized by the pejorative terms “temptress” and “whore.” This frees Mary to serve as a model of feminine courage, fidelity and integrity.

In 1997, *Future Church*, a Catholic advocacy group based in Cleveland, began encouraging special celebrations of Mary of Magdala on her feast day, July 22nd. That practice, which has grown significantly over the years, has promoted a more accurate popular understanding of the important role Mary played in the early years of the Jesus movement, and has encouraged a renewed dialogue on the role of women in the contemporary church. Today, Mary of Magdala, retrieved by scholarship and celebrated in popular devotion as the apostle to the apostles, once again proclaims the risen Christ and his grand vision of an inclusive community of justice and love.

