

# Mary Magdalene

JOHN 20:1-18

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This morning we return to our series on some of the more interesting women in the Bible, and today we come to a rather well-known character who was actually requested by several of our members. And this woman continues to be one of the most misunderstood women anywhere in the Bible. I am referring to a woman known as Mary Magdalene.

- Many times, Mary Magdalene is identified as a former prostitute, the **“sinful woman”** who anointed Jesus’ feet with the expensive perfume in Luke 7. And yet when we look into that, we start to understand that connection is never made in the pages of the Bible.
- At other times, Mary Magdalene is confused with Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and sister of Martha. And yet again, we have no indication that these two Marys are the same.
- And then in more modern times, we have seen a number of wild speculations made quite public, and the claim is that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were romantically involved, that Mary was the **“disciple whom Jesus loved,”** that Mary actually wrote the book of John, that Jesus and Mary got married and had several children together, and those rampant speculations basically have no end, although they are completely without support from the Bible.
- And adding to this confusion is the fact that there are up to five different women named Mary spread throughout the four gospel accounts.

And so we have a number of wild speculations and connections that have absolutely no basis in Scripture. What, then, do we actually know about Mary Magdalene from the word of God? One of the first passages that gives us any real detail about this woman is found in Luke 8. This isn’t our main passage this morning, but it helps to give some background (in our pew Bibles, Luke 8 is found on page 1611). In Luke 8, Luke cracks the door open just a bit and gives us a few details on some of the Lord’s most faithful followers. Josh and I were in a class together last week, a class on expository preaching, and the teacher of that class gave an awesome outline on this passage. So I’m hoping Josh can maybe preach that lesson the next time I’m out of town. I obviously can’t preach it while Josh is here – he’ll know where I got it! So, I’ll leave this passage for him. But we’ll look at it just briefly to give us some background on Mary. Notice, please Luke 8:1-3. Referring to Jesus, this is what Luke says,

**<sup>1</sup> Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, <sup>2</sup> and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, <sup>3</sup> and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.**

So we find here that Mary Magdalene was healed by Jesus, as the Lord had cast out seven demons. We also find here that she was a faithful follower, following the Lord from one city and village to another, and we also find that she and several other women were supporting Jesus financially out of their own private means. They are doing something to make money (perhaps even as the Lord is speaking from place to place), and then they are using those funds to provide food and shelter for the Lord as he travels. What we know is: Mary is healed of demon possession, she follows the Lord from place to place, and she also supports Jesus financially out of her own private means. The one other detail here is that she is from a place called Magdala, and this is to distinguish her from the other Marys in the New Testament. Magdala was a town up near the Sea of Galilee. We know Jesus spent a lot of time teaching and healing up there, so we assume that Mary was healed on one of those journeys.

The other reference (by way of background) is found in Matthew 27:55-56 (p. 1555). It's just a passing reference, and it comes almost as a footnote right after the Lord's death on the cross. Notice, please, Matthew 27:55-56, ***"Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him. Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee."*** The Bible tells us elsewhere that all of the apostles at some point had fled during the crucifixion, but we have these women who stayed there for the whole thing, including Mary Magdalene.

This morning, though, as we look at this request that came in from several of you, I want us to look at a passage in John 20 that gives us the clearest picture of who this woman really was, and the passage is found near the end of John, John 20:1-18 (p. 1695). Jesus has been crucified, he is buried on Friday evening, and we pick up with what happens next...

**<sup>1</sup> Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." <sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; <sup>5</sup> and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the disciples went away again to their own homes.**

**<sup>11</sup> But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. <sup>13</sup> And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know**

*where they have laid Him.”<sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).<sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and that He had said these things to her.*

As we look back at this passage, I hope we can keep our Bibles open as we bring out three lessons from this woman’s life.

I. **And the first lesson from Mary in this passage comes in the first ten verses, as we find that Mary is a PERSISTENT FOLLOWER.**

And this really continues from those passages in Luke 8 and Matthew 27. She is freed from the demon possession, she follows the Lord from town to town, she supports Jesus financially out of her own private means, she is with him all the way through the crucifixion, and so it is no surprise that Mary is one of the first to arrive at Jesus’ tomb on the first day of the week.

And again, this devotion to Jesus seems to have started when Jesus freed her from those seven demons. What did that look like? We are not told in Mary’s case, how those demons had affected her life, but we do know how demon possession affected some others in New Testament times. We think of the man possessed by **“Legion”** in Mark 5. Here was a man living among the tombs, and he could not be restrained by shackles or chains. The Bible tells us, in fact, that, **“Constantly, night and day, he was screaming among the tombs and in the mountains, and gashing himself with stones.”** And so there was self-destructive behavior. We also think of the young man in Mark 9. Here was a child possessed with a spirit that made him unable to speak. It would seize him, slamming him to the ground, causing him to foam at the mouth and grind his teeth. He would stiffen out. This spirit would often throw him into the fire and into the water. It would throw him into terrible convulsions.

Over and over again, we see demons in New Testament times making people’s lives absolutely miserable. We assume that perhaps something very similar was happening to Mary Magdalene. And this constant torment apparently caused her to live a life of almost complete loneliness. And I say this because so many other women in the New Testament are almost always described in terms of relationships. We think of Priscilla and Aquila. We think of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We think of Mary the mother of Jesus. And on and on. But Mary Magdalene is never described in terms of her family. Instead, she is always listed along with the other women who followed Jesus, and in all but one of those references, she is listed first, even ahead of Mary, the Lord’s own mother. And that is highly unusual. Some have assumed from this that Mary, then, perhaps was the oldest of the group, perhaps almost a mother figure among the Lord’s followers. And if that is the case, if Mary is older than Mary the Lord’s mother, that puts her in her mid 40’s or even 50’s at this time.

But the point is: Mary Magdalene was a faithful follower, going back to that time when she was freed from those seven demons. Of all people, Mary understood more than most, what life was like without the Lord. And so out of thankfulness, Mary followed Jesus for the rest of her life. Jesus meant everything to this woman.

We think of Mary, then, and her devotion to Jesus, and I think we have a reminder here to think back to our own salvation, to think back to what the Lord has done for us. Has the Lord freed us from sin? Has the Lord saved us from some terrible situation? Has the Lord brought us safely through an illness or accident? If so, then we, like Mary, serve the Lord faithfully, thanking him constantly for what he has done for us.

Mary, then, is a persistent follower, and as a faithful disciple of Jesus, she is among the first to go to the tomb, early on that Sunday morning. The text tells us that she arrives at the tomb ***“while it was still dark.”*** That’s early! She got up before the sun. This man who meant so much to her life had been murdered, his body was in the tomb, and she came (according to Mark’s account) to help anoint his body with spices. As you remember, the burial had taken place rather quickly on Friday evening, since it was the Passover. And because it was Friday, and since the Sabbath started at 6 p.m., Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had wrapped the body in myrrh and aloe (about a hundred pounds worth), but they had buried the body rather quickly. The tomb was sealed by the Romans, but the embalming process wasn’t done yet. So these women showed up on Sunday morning to add to what was already done. They had no idea what had happened. Mark tells us they were worried along the way concerning who would move the stone.

But in this passage, Mary arrives, and the stone is already gone. She then goes and gets Peter and John and says, ***“They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.”*** Her concern is that somebody has taken the body. We know the Romans haven’t taken the body, so she’s thinking that perhaps the Jews have taken the body for some reason, perhaps to put it on public display, perhaps to abuse the Lord further. But the body is not there. Peter and John show up, they don’t see the body. They see the empty grave clothes, which is rather unusual. If someone had taken the body, they would not have taken the time to unwrap it (especially if it had been wrapped with what is basically 100 pounds of very sticky sap or resin). Peter and John leave, but Mary Magdalene stays behind. She is a persistent follower. She is with Jesus to the end, and even beyond.

**II. And that leads us to a second big idea: Not only is Mary a persistent follower, but we also find in this passage that Mary Magdalene is A SINCERELY GRIEVING FRIEND (verses 11-16).**

On this morning, Mary sees everything through the tears of what she has just experienced. She has seen her Lord crucified, and on this morning she is not expecting good news. She is there to see a body, and when the body is missing, this woman assumes the worst. Even though Jesus has promised a resurrection over and over again, Mary is not looking for a resurrection. She is looking for a body. Her heart is completely broken. What amazes me here is that the empty tomb is the best news this world will ever know, but Mary does not see it that way! She is torn up.

So, the other disciples leave, but in verse 11, Mary continues ***“standing outside the tomb weeping.”*** She stoops to look in the tomb, she sees the angels, they ask why she is weeping, and she says to them, ***“Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”*** At that point, she turns around and sees Jesus, but she does not recognize this being as being Jesus. She thinks that he is the gardener! Now, many of us might be wondering: How in the world can Mary not recognize the Lord? There is the possibility that Jesus in some way hid his identity from Mary for a bit. He seems to have done this later in the day with the men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. Another possibility is that we are still in those few minutes between dark and sunrise, combined with the fact that Mary is grief stricken and in no way expects to see Jesus here. Combined with this, there is also the possibility that the Lord’s body is somewhat disfigured due to the crucifixion. We think, “No! This is a brand new body!” And yet we think about what happened a week later

(down in verse 27) as Jesus invited Thomas to put his finger in the hole in his side and to see and feel the nail prints in his hands. The Lord's body was somewhat different from the last time Mary had seen him alive.

I think of something that happened a number of years ago when my grandmother had a stroke. They had moved her to a nursing facility, and we drove down there to see her. I checked in at the desk, they told me what room she was in, so I went down the hall, I looked in the room, and she was sitting there in a wheelchair looking out the window, but I did not recognize my own grandmother. It hadn't been that long since I had seen her, but she was different! My grandmother always kept her hair in a big "poof." But this woman in the chair did not look like how I expected her to look. Her gray hair was in a ponytail. I'd never seen my grandmother in a ponytail in my life. It took me a little while, then, to recognize my own grandmother. And maybe that is some of what Mary is going through here. She is torn up in grief and fails to recognize Jesus. She thinks she is talking to the gardener.

And to the gardener she says, ***"Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away."*** She is so upset, she is offering to singlehandedly carry a grown man's body! And at that point, Jesus says, "Mary!" Mary then responds with ***"Rabboni,"*** a word meaning, ***"My Great Teacher!"*** Guy N. Woods, a scholar in the church a generation ago, explains that "Rab" means "teacher," "Rabbi," means "my teacher," and "Rabboni" means "My Great Teacher." Mary acknowledges Jesus as her greatest teacher. Most of us have our favorite teachers. I think of Earl Edwards and David Lipe from Freed-Hardeman. These are men I could sit down and listen to for hours, just hanging on every word. That is the way Mary thinks of Jesus. He is ***"my great Teacher."***

He calls her by name, and her grief, then, is transformed into great joy! But the point here is: Mary grieved. She was sad. She was torn up over the loss. She did not fake her way through it. She did not ignore what was happening here. But she openly wept over losing Jesus. She openly wept over losing the body. And there is a great lesson here for us. It is healthy and normal to grieve over a loss.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene first? Why didn't he appear to his own mother? Why didn't he first appear to Peter or one of the others? Why appear to a woman? In that society, women were not allowed to testify in court. There was even a debate among the scholars at that time as to whether women had souls. Why didn't Jesus appear to Pilate or King Herod? We aren't told for sure, but I'm wondering if it's not because Mary needed him the most. Even after everybody else had left, Mary stayed there crying. We think of God's promise in Isaiah 25:8, ***"He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces...."*** And so the point is: Mary sincerely grieved the Lord's death – honestly and even publicly, and the Lord helped her through that. Just as he will help us through grief today as well.

### III. **There is a third and final note we need to make on Mary's life, and that is: Once she saw the Lord, Mary transformed into an ENTHUSIASTIC EYE-WITNESS.**

In verse 17, Jesus has to tell Mary to, ***"Stop hanging on to me!"*** [paraphrased]. The KJV and some of the older translations have Jesus saying, ***"Do not touch me!"*** And some have used this to suggest a contradiction – Why did Jesus tell Mary not to touch him but he told Thomas to touch him? But the idea is: Mary was hanging on! And Jesus was basically saying, "You need to let me go! We still have 40 days together, and we have so much to do in a very short time. So you need to let me go!" And the command is, "Go, and explain all of this to my brethren" [paraphrased]. Mary, then, leaves and explains to the apostles, ***"I have seen the Lord."***

The main idea for us here is: This experience of seeing Jesus needs to be shared. This is not something Mary could've kept to herself, and so she shares it immediately. It is good news. And the lesson for us is: We have the same good news, and the good news still needs to be shared. It is so easy for us to share an opinion on a favorite restaurant or a great movie, but the good news about Jesus is so much more important than that. Jesus meant everything to Mary, Jesus means everything to us, and so we need to be sharing it just as she did.

Just as Jesus freed Mary from those seven demons, Jesus has freed us from our sins. Who have we told about that? Holding on to Jesus is what came naturally to this woman, but what she really needed to do was tell, and the same goes for us. We need to be telling.

### **Conclusion:**

And that is where we leave today's lesson: Mary goes out and tells the disciples that she has seen Jesus. Someone has described Mary as "the apostle to the apostles." We started this morning by noting that Mary Magdalene has an undeserved and rather rough reputation. We have no evidence from the Bible that she was ever a prostitute. We have no evidence that she ever married Jesus. But we do know that she was a **PERSISTENT FOLLOWER**. She was a **CLOSE FRIEND** who **SINCERELY GRIEVED** over the death of Jesus on the cross. And yet ultimately she also became an **ENTHUSIASTIC EYEWITNESS**, in fact, the first eyewitness to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. In Mary Magdalene, we have the picture of a woman broken down and beat up by life, who finds Jesus, is released from her past, and who goes on to be one of the Lord's most faithful disciples. And in Mary Magdalene, I would suggest that we have a picture of what our lives need to look like. We are burdened down outside of Christ, we find the Lord, we turn, and we are then sent out to tell others.

This morning, we as Christians are doing what Mary did here by inviting all of you here today who are not Christians, to consider following the Lord. He died, he was buried, he did come back from the dead, and his message to us today is that we are to repent of our sins and be baptized into him (buried in water) for the forgiveness of our sins. If you would like to study further, we hope you will let us know. But if you are ready to accept and obey the good news right now, you can talk with me right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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