

First Presbyterian Church Adult Education
Characters in John's Gospel
Mary Magdalene
January 25, 2009

Background Information about Mary Magdalene

Luke 8.2

8Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them* out of their resources.

Witnesses of the Crucifixion

Matthew 27.56

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. ⁵⁶Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Mark 15.40-41

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

John 19.25b-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

The Empty Tomb Tradition

Matthew 28.1

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Mark 16.1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' ⁸So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid

Luke 24.10

¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

John 20.1-18

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 the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Resurrection Appearance to Mary Magdalene

¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^{*} into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^{*}

'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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." '

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Class Discussion Questions

1. Read all the texts in the parallels about Mary Magdalene. Summarize what John does and does not tell us about her.
2. How does Mary Magdalene change through the episodes in John where she appears? What is happening with her faith, understanding, service to others?
3. What do you make of the fact that John only mentions Mary Magdalene and no other women in his resurrection narrative?
4. What was Mary's purpose in coming to the tomb at the time she did as narrated in John's gospel?
5. What do we learn through Mary's experience that helps us also believe in the resurrection of Jesus?
6. Song of Solomon 3.1-4 reads:

Upon my bed at night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.*
2'I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.'
I sought him, but found him not.
3The sentinels found me,
as they went about in the city.
'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?'
4Scarcely had I passed them,
when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go

7. Do you believe that this Old Testament text is in any way related to John's resurrection narrative? If so, what is implied about the relationship between Mary and Jesus?
8. Why does Mary Magdalene want to "hold" Jesus?
9. In past classes we've questioned whether other characters in the Fourth Gospel are true disciples. Is Mary? Why and why not?

General Information

Mary Magdalene is described, both in the canonical New Testament and in the New Testament apocrypha, as a devoted disciple of Jesus. Mary Magdalene's name may identify her as "of Magdala"—the town some believe she came from, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. She is the only consistently named person in this role throughout the gospel narratives.

Mary's has been called 'Apostle to the Apostle' a title that likely comes from the fact that she is the first witness to the empty tomb, and the first to share the good news with Jesus' other close disciples. Because Mary Magdalene has a common name, she has historically been confused with Mary of Bethany and the woman sinner who anointed Jesus' feet. These characters and other women in the NT named Mary are all different people.

Many modern writers have come forward with claims that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus. Sources like the Gospel of Philip depict Mary Magdalene as being closer to Jesus than any other disciple. However, there is no known ancient document that claims she was his wife; rather, the Gospel of Philip depicts Mary as Jesus' *koinonos*, a Greek term indicating a "close friend." "companion" or, potentially, a lover.

Not surprisingly, the life of the historical Mary Magdalene is the subject of ongoing debate. Christians throughout history have venerated Mary Magdalene as a beloved female saint, second only to the mother of Jesus, and as an exemplar of faithful witness to Jesus and as a social parable for the position and faithfulness of women,

Teacher's Instructions

Be certain to reproduce the three handout sheets in advance of the class, staple them together in proper order, and distribute them to the class. At the beginning of the class session let the participants read all of the biblical citations as they are laid out on the handout sheets. Consider discussing the logic and the value of laying out Gospel texts in this parallel format. Bear in mind that your strategy is to listen to John for his distinct message about Mary. Use the background information as you see fit.