



# MARY MAGDALENE: A FAITHFUL DISCIPLE

**BACKGROUND  
SCRIPTURE**

Mark 15:40; 16:1-9;  
Luke 8:1-3; John  
20:10-18

**VERSES TO  
REMEMBER**

The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits. (Luke 8:1-2)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Feb. 8	Jesus Appears to Paul	1 Corinthians 15:1-11
T	Feb. 9	Present with Jesus at the Cross	John 19:25b-30
W	Feb. 10	Spices Prepared to Anoint Jesus' Body	Mark 16:1-8
Th	Feb. 11	Mary Magdalene Finds Tomb Empty	John 20:1-9
F	Feb. 12	Angel Confirms Jesus' Resurrection to Women	Matthew 28:1-10
Sa	Feb. 13	Jesus Appears, Disciples Sent into Ministry	John 20:19-23

**STEPPING INTO THE WORD**

I have twice been called for jury duty, and both times I got to serve on a jury for a trial. The first time, one of the attorneys gave the jurors a long speech about listening only for what the witnesses had actually seen and heard. During the trial, both the prosecuting and defense attorneys occasionally had to remind the witnesses to avoid conjecture but to stick to only what they had seen and heard.

My jury experiences gave me a new understanding of the Christian call to be witnesses. We are called by God to report to the people around us what we have seen and heard, specifically what we have seen God do and how we have experienced God speaking. God acts in our lives and in the world. We see it. We are called to testify to it.

We frequently talk enthusiastically about our experiences with others. We may describe the delicious taste of the fresh vegetables from the farmer's market. We may tell our friends about our new furniture or the new craft shop in our neighborhood. We constantly function as witnesses, so spending

some time pondering the ways we witness to God's truth and God's love can be fruitful.

In the trials in which I participated, the witnesses were a mix of men and women. In Jesus' time and for many centuries afterward, only men could testify at trials. Even today, research reveals that the testimony of women expert witnesses is sometimes viewed by juries and judges as not authoritative.

Jesus shows himself to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection and asks her to testify to the male disciples that he will soon ascend to his Father. In a culture in which women could not be witnesses in court, this command from Jesus to Mary is shocking. Jesus trusts her to report what she has seen and heard. He trusts her to be a faithful and accurate witness. He honors her with this commission.

*Steadfast God, help us to be faithful witnesses, testifying to our own experiences of your loving way in the world. Amen.*



#### SCRIPTURE

Luke 8:1–3; Mark 15:40; John 20:10–18

**8:1** Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, <sup>2</sup>as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, <sup>3</sup>and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

**Mark 15:40** 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.

**John 20:10** Then the disciples returned to their homes. <sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and 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. <sup>13</sup>They 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." <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing

*Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.*

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, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).<sup>17</sup> Jesus 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.’”<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

### **A TRAVELING BAND OF MEN AND WOMEN**

**A**fter Jesus called his twelve disciples, they traveled with him as he preached the gospel and healed people. The Gospels record their travels around the Galilee region and down to Jerusalem, with occasional forays into Samaria and up the coast into what is now Lebanon. This pattern of traveling with disciples was common for a rabbi. Luke names three women who also travel with Jesus and the disciples: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. These women, and “many others,” had been healed by Jesus along the way. Not only do these numerous women join the disciples in traveling with Jesus, some of them also provide for the financial needs of this traveling band (Luke 8:1-3).

Mary had been healed from seven demons. We don’t know where that happened, but we do know she came from Magdala, about three miles north of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, and about seven miles south and west of Jesus’ home base in Capernaum. We assume she continued to travel with Jesus, because she is there at the crucifixion with two other women.

The four gospels describe the scene at the tomb on Easter morning in different ways (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18). John’s Gospel shows us Mary at the tomb having a private moment, eyes filled with tears at the magnitude of her loss. As she cries, she bends over to look into the tomb. To her surprise, two angels are sitting on the platform where the body should be lying. They ask her why she is crying, and she tells them someone must have taken away Jesus’ body, and she doesn’t know where it is.

She turns back toward the garden and sees a man she assumes is the gardener. He repeats the angels’ words, “Woman, why are you weeping?” (John 20:15). He asks her who she is looking for. Because he is there at the tomb, she thinks he must have been

involved in moving Jesus' body, so she asks him to tell her where the body has been taken.

This man says Mary's name, and in that moment, she recognizes him as Jesus. He tells her not to grab hold of him because he will soon ascend to his Father. He has a specific message for her to tell the other disciples: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (v. 17).

Mary returns to the group of disciples and tells them she has seen Jesus.

**?** Try to imagine Mary's thoughts and feelings as she follows Jesus with the disciples and other women, when she watches Jesus die on the cross, and when she meets him after the Resurrection. What do you think and feel?

### A MALIGNED WOMAN

What the Bible says about Mary Magdalene comes from the stories highlighted in this lesson. We know her hometown, that she was healed from demons, that she traveled with Jesus—along with the male disciples and other women—and that she was at the cross. We know she met Jesus by the tomb after the resurrection, and her tears indicate that she cared deeply about Jesus. We know Jesus gave her a mandate to tell the disciples that Jesus would ascend to heaven. She may have contributed financially to his ministry as some of his women followers did.

In a sermon in the year 591, Pope Gregory the Great said that Mary Magdalene was the same woman who poured ointment on Jesus' feet (Luke 7:37–38). That woman is identified as a sinner, and from that time on, Mary Magdalene was often viewed as a prostitute. When the Eastern Orthodox and Protestant churches broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, they did not officially affirm this view of Mary, and in 1969, the Roman Catholic Church admitted that the Bible does not promote the description of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Today, Mary Magdalene is viewed as a saint by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Anglican churches. Her feast day is July 22.

Despite this change in the official view of Mary by the Roman Catholic Church, the historical view of Mary as a prostitute still carries some influence. I know I always heard that Mary was somehow immoral. In addition, Dan Brown's 2003 best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, complicated Mary's identity further by

presenting the idea that Jesus and Mary had children together. Brown drew on an ancient document discovered in 1896, “The Gospel of Mary,” as well as the “The Gospel of Philip,” discovered in 1945, both of which portray a level of intimacy between Jesus and Mary that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Dan Brown chose only one possible interpretation from those documents, and his view obviously has no grounding in the Bible.

The popularity of sexualized views of Mary raises the question of what love looks like with and without sexual overtones. Perhaps viewing Mary’s love for Jesus as completely asexual is unrealistic. However, turning Mary’s love into a mostly romantic, sexual love makes significant leaps from the biblical text. All Christians have to explore our call to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We have to ponder and pray about what this call looks like as we live in physical bodies.

**?** What messages and subtexts about Mary Magdalene have influenced your view of her? Of the ways Mary is described in the Bible, which are most meaningful to you?

### STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

We have several decisions to make in order to consider the significance of Mary Magdalene and the relevance of her model today. First, we have to consider whether we will look only at the New Testament descriptions of Mary or whether we will be influenced by Gregory’s sermon identifying Mary as a prostitute, as well as documents ranging from ancient texts like “The Gospel of Mary” to recent fiction like *The Da Vinci Code*.


In the New Testament, we see a woman who travels with Jesus along with other women, as well as male disciples. She cares enough about Jesus to be at his crucifixion and his burial site. He respects her enough to commission her to bring a message to his disciples.

From the New Testament portrayal of Mary, we are challenged to care deeply about Jesus, spend time with him, and follow wherever he leads us. We are also challenged to see Mary as a commissioned witness to Jesus’ resurrection, a person Jesus respects and honors. The encounter at the grave reminds us to honor women as equal truth-tellers with men. We who are women can hold our heads up high and respect our own gifts. Both men and women may need to embrace the challenge of honoring and respecting the contribution of women.

The sexualization of Mary in church history and fiction presents an additional challenge. Both men and women are sexual beings, yet we are more than sexual beings. We must develop a view of Christian discipleship that includes sexuality but also honors all of human life. We are complex beings with hearts, minds, and physical bodies that make sexuality possible but also accomplish many other tasks. Our whole beings belong to God, and to focus only on sexuality is just as limiting as to ignore it.

Viewing Mary as a past prostitute or as Jesus' lover, and maybe even the mother of his children, may make her seem more real to modern readers or make Jesus seem more human. However, I worry that these ways of interpreting the story of Mary from Magdala simply add more weight to the common perspective of women as primarily sex objects. A woman was the first witness to the resurrection. We must not let our culture's tendency to sexualize women rob us of the significance of this event that took place in a culture where women couldn't testify in court.

Mary's love for Jesus, which motivated her to stand by him at the crucifixion and look for him, crying at the tomb, can be a model for all of us.

 How do you want to view Mary Magdalene? What do you think she teaches us?

### SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Although popular culture has taught that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, this is stated nowhere in Scripture.
2. The women who supported Jesus' ministry financially (Luke 8:1-3) witnessed his crucifixion from a distance (Mark 15:40) and quite possibly were those who gathered with the disciples and Jesus' family after the Resurrection (Acts 1:13-14).
3. Jesus' words to Mary after his resurrection has been translated as a command not to touch him (John 21:17). Most likely, viewing it as a command not to keep holding on to him is a superior translation. This would mirror the thought expressed to his disciples earlier. Unless Jesus returned to the Father, he could not complete his mission by sending the Holy Spirit (John 16:7).