

John 20:11-18

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb, ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir,^[b] if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^[c] “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not touch 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.’ ” ¹⁸ 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.

For the next few weeks, I’m going to be preaching about some of the famous women of the Bible. Sometimes these women are overlooked in our discussion of scripture, which is too bad, because they have valuable lessons to offer us. They have inspiring stories that amaze and inform us to be better disciples of Jesus. Today I’m going to kick off this mini-sermon series with a discussion of the apostle Mary Magdalene. Although she is not mentioned as an apostle often, she should be, because she was the first messenger of the good news of the resurrection of the Lord.

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary Magdalene first appears as a follower of Jesus. At the time, Jesus was going through cities and towns with his 12 apostles and some women disciples, including Mary Magdalene. The women who followed him were cured of evil spirits and their infirmities, according to Luke. The gospel says that seven demons had gone out of Mary Magdalene. The account does not give any more information than that. It doesn’t say what the demons were, only that they were expelled from her. It is one of the many instances of Jesus performing miracles and healing the sick.

Not only were Mary and the other women followers of the Lord, they ministered to Jesus and the others “out of their own resources,” scripture says. That suggests that the women were of some financial means who served as patrons for Jesus and the apostles, according to the Harper’s Bible Dictionary.¹

At this point in her life, Mary Magdalene is a follower. She has encountered Jesus and he has healed her of the demons that had tormented her. She knows Jesus is special. He is special enough that she is supporting him and his apostles as they make their way around Galilee and Judea.

She is a committed disciple of Jesus. She has sacrificed her money and time to be a faithful disciple of her Rabbouni. She travels from town to town in this ancient land

¹ Harper’s Bible Dictionary, p. 607-608.

where comforts are few, and where her teacher encounters many critics along the way who want to see him fail. She followed him around and was “evidently among Jesus’ dearest companions,” according to scholar James D. G. Dunn.²

She is so faithful to Jesus and is so committed to him and in her belief in him, that she stays with him to the end. She is a witness to his crucifixion. She is brave. While the apostles hide out for fear of getting arrested because they are followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene is witnessing the death of her teacher, the man she gave up so much to follow. Her love of the Lord is so obvious that she weeps outside of the tomb. She is heartbroken that he has died.

And then her sorrow turns to joy. She has the honor of being the first person that Jesus appears to in our gospel reading today. Jesus didn’t appear first to Peter, or John, or James, or even his mother. He appeared to Mary Magdalene. Why? Perhaps he appeared to her first because she was among his most loyal followers. She was with him through thick and thin. She was a committed follower of the highest order. She traveled with him, presumably helped support him financially, and was with him in his darkest hour as he hung on the cross. And then Jesus told her to go to his brothers and tell them that he was ascending to his father, to my God and your God. Mary was the Lord’s first messenger after his resurrection. She was an apostolos, in the Koine Greek. Apostolos not only means apostle, but it also means messenger. Thus, Jesus sent Mary out to be his apostolos, his messenger of the good news of his resurrection to the rest of the disciples. She is an apostle to the apostles, as the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas described her. Aquinas writes that “she had the office of an apostle; **indeed, she was an apostle to the apostles** insofar as it was her task to announce our Lord’s resurrection to the disciples. Thus, just as it was a woman who was the first to announce the words of death, so it was a woman who would be the first to announce the words of life.”³

Sadly, that is where the story of Mary Magdalene ends. She is no longer mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. She only appears in the gospels. But let’s imagine for a little while what she was like after the Lord left our worldly existence. What do the things we know about Mary from scripture tell us about what she might have been like for the rest of her time on earth? It would tell us that she would continue to be an apostle, a messenger of the good news of Jesus Christ. Talk about a preacher you’d want to hear! I must think that she was in great demand to share her story all over the region. Can you think of a better speaker than to hear her experience of seeing the risen Lord? What was that like? Can you imagine how transfixed people would be hearing about that experience?

Mary Magdalene I know would have continued to be a great disciple. She would have been a messenger to the good news of the risen Lord. She would have been a great evangelist telling people about the risen Jesus, and about all that he taught in his ministry. She would have told everyone she met of The Way of Jesus, to love those who

² Jesus Remembered, James D. G. Dunn, p. 540.

³ Thomas Aquinas, <https://thomistica.net/posts/2019/7/22/apostle-to-the-apostles>

were shunned by society, to help the poor, the suffering, the sick, to visit the prisoners. She would tell everyone she met about the healings Jesus performed, and all the other miracles that came about because of him. And as a true and faithful disciple, she would have supported the ministries of the early church too with whatever treasure she had, the way she supported it while Jesus was with them on earth.

And I could see her as she got a little older and some Christian communities would be settled that she would lead her own church or community. How incredible would that be to have the pastor of your church be Mary Magdalene? I am grateful she could be ordained in our denomination and be a pastor in a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation today. I see the past female pastors here at Faith as spiritual descendants of the Apostle Mary Magdalene. I am grateful to the women ministers I encountered in my Christian journey who were instrumental in my faith formation. I will be forever grateful to Pastor Nanette Sawyer and Pastor Shannon Kershner at Fourth Presbyterian Church and Rev. Dr. Cynthia Lindner at the University of Chicago for their example and their encouragement. They are all spiritual descendants of the Apostle Mary Magdalene. We are all spiritual descendants of the Apostle Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the risen Lord.

Mary Magdalene I'm sure continued to be an amazing apostle. She was given the great gift of witness to the resurrection. She was a messenger unlike any other. I am sad we do not have a record of the rest of her life, but the stories we do have I believe allow us to get an idea of what her activities would have been.

There is no doubt that Mary was a faithful disciple the rest of her days. How could she not be considering all that she witnessed? Let us follow her commitment of time, treasure and talent, for our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us follow the commitment of the discipleship of the Apostle Mary Magdalene. Let us lean on her faith, and deepen our faith, and follow the example of this great woman and apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us keep Mary Magdalene at the forefront of our minds and hearts and use her as a role model for discipleship.

Amen.