

## ***The Very First One***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 19, 2025 – Morning worship

Text: John 20:11-18

Since we've spent the last two Sundays reflecting on women who played significant roles in the Nativity stories of Luke's Gospel, it's probably not a big surprise that today we're looking at one of the most important women of the Easter stories. Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is one of the most enigmatic women in the entire Bible. As the one person all four Gospel accounts of the Resurrection agree was present to witness the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene holds a central place, albeit a controversial one, in the pantheon of saints. Hers is a name we recognize immediately even without fully knowing her story. We think we know her, but do we really? Or are the echoes of so many fantastic claims made about her over the millennia what give us that sense of familiarity with her, even if we're not sure why. The theories of who Mary Magdalene was, and what the nature of her relationship with Jesus entailed have dominated how she has been remembered. We would be hard pressed to name another biblical woman who has been the subject of so much misinformation as she has been and continues to be. For that reason alone, she is worthy of our spending time with her story as we make the effort to figure out who she really was. Certainly, there has been no shortage of those who have wanted to tell us who she was.

Learning more about Mary of Magdala begins with this most basic point of information – a more accurate description of her name than treating “Magdalene” as her last name. It was not. Mary was the most common woman's name in Jesus' time and, in fact, there are several Marys who are part of Jesus' story. His own mother was, of course, Mary. And then there was the woman the text refers to simply as “the other Mary.” Oh dear. Then we have Mary Magdalene, the most significant woman in Jesus' story, second only to his mother.

Most likely this is the reason that her name was expanded to include some further descriptor which in her case was the town of her birth, Magdala. This was a small fishing village on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.<sup>1</sup> Thus, she first became Mary of Magdala which morphed over time into Mary Magdalene. The confusion over her name is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to who Mary Magdalene was, and who she wasn't. Biblical scholars and historians do agree she was a real person. She also first appears in Jesus' story when she is identified as one of the women healed by Jesus according to the Gospel of Luke. Immediately following this account, she is then identified as one of the women traveling with Jesus and the disciples. This text says that Jesus cast seven demons out of her but the exact nature of those demons is not clear. Some scholars think she was suffering from a deep depression but, personally, I don't think it matters why she needed Jesus to heal her. It only matters that she did need his healing and from then on, their relationship continued to grow. She is listed in Luke as one of the women whose resources were used to fund Jesus' traveling ministry with the twelve, so we can safely assume she must have had some source of wealth which also gave her a measure of independence, unusual for women in that time.

We also know from the texts she did not get along with Simon Peter who seems to have disapproved of her closeness with Jesus and the leadership role she seems to have fulfilled in the earliest gatherings of Jesus' disciples. We know this friction between Mary Magdalene and Peter did not improve after Jesus's death on the cross, perhaps because she stayed to support Jesus to the very end while Peter did not. We know that she is the one constant in all four Gospel accounts of the Resurrection, playing an especially prominent role in John's gospel as the first one to encounter the Resurrected Christ in the Garden, the very first person he spoke with. We know that she

---

<sup>1</sup> [Mary Magdalene - Wikipedia](#)

remained active and prominent in the life of the earliest gatherings of the followers of Jesus, to the extent that she became known as the apostle to the apostles or even as the first apostle. She figures prominently in the gnostic gospels, where some of the rumors of her supposedly romantic relationship with Jesus first took root and grew over the millennia to fantastic proportions, as evidenced in such works of fiction as Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. This excellent novel makes the claim that not only were Jesus and Mary Magdala intimately involved, but also that she was pregnant at the time of the crucifixion later giving birth to his child after having been shipwrecked in France. This story, though entertaining to consider, is pure fantasy.

This is not the only fictional story about Mary Magdalene, although it is no doubt the most well known, thanks to the novel and the hit movie of the same name. Unfortunately, she has been the subject of much additional misinformation including being repeatedly misidentified as certain sinful women Jesus encounters during his ministry. For example, she is not the woman with the alabaster jar who anoints Jesus' feet in the story appearing in Luke's Gospel. Nor is she the woman caught in adultery saved from stoning by Jesus. Nor was she ever a prostitute despite being erroneously identified as such by Pope Gregory I in a sermon he preached in 591 CE when he conflated Mary Magdalene with the prostitute who anointed Jesus. Once this assertion was made, the early Fathers of the Catholic Church just ran with it. So, it didn't take very long before Mary Magdalene went from the very first person who witnessed the Resurrection and who spoke first with the Risen Christ to being seen as a pathetic, sinful disgrace whom Jesus did what he could to heal her of sin. It was never true. Yet somehow that taint of sin, once attached to Mary Magdalene never went away.

But neither did the church's fascination with her. Something about this mysterious woman who was the first to witness the Risen

Christ just refused to stay in the background where the early church Fathers tried to put her. The earliest paintings and sculptures of her emphasize her beauty and overt sensuousness. Again, we can safely assume this is because she was, after all, seen as a prostitute, with her sensuality as her stock in trade. These medieval and Renaissance artists took full advantage of the fact that no one really knew what she looked like. Thus, artistic imaginations have run wild depicting her as blond, brunette, raven haired and even as a redhead. She is beautiful too, not to mention voluptuous and often depicted as staring at Christ with love struck eyes, despite there being no real evidence that any kind of romantic relationship ever existed between the two of them. Apparently, it was inconceivable that Jesus and Mary Magdalene could just have been really good friends, united in their desire to understand and live out God's vision of shalom for the world. I mean, how could a mere woman have possibly understood these radical new teachings of Jesus if the male disciples were struggling so much? This was and still is the unspoken question that has dogged Mary Magdalene's trail through history.

But what of our questions for Mary Magdalene, right here this morning? What would we ask this woman if she were here with us in this moment? Would we want to know what it was like to step into that empty tomb and know her beloved friend was gone, without any explanation? Remember, no one had any experience with resurrection before this point. She literally had no frame of reference for what she was experiencing. All she knew was that Jesus' dead and battered body was gone. This is why she is convinced that someone had taken away the body. She had no other frame of reference which would allow her to ask anything else. Never mind the two angels asking her why she was weeping. They weren't being helpful at all. Jesus was just gone. And she was beyond distraught that his dead body was missing. This is why, when she turns around and sees Jesus, it doesn't register with her that it's Jesus. This would be another one of my questions.

Why didn't she recognize him until he spoke? Did he look so different? Or was she just so over-wrought that she was barely functioning. Then he spoke to her, calling her by name and she knew it was him. What must she have been thinking in that moment? We know she wanted to hug him and he wouldn't let her. Instead, he sent her on to the disciples with a message about where he would meet them. And, faithful disciple that she was, she immediately took off to deliver it.

As much as I'd like to talk with her about all of this, there's another question I'd be even more anxious to ask her. And this is a question I think we've all wanted to ask someone at some time in our lives. I'd want to ask her how it made her feel to know that as the years went by and her role in the life and ministry of Jesus was minimalized more and more. How did she deal with knowing that the disciples and no doubt others wanted to diminish her because they were unable to understand her relationship with Jesus. She was there for most of Jesus' itinerant ministry years, and she paid for a lot of it – all those meals purchased, places to stay paid for, clothing secured. She and a handful of other wealthy women literally bankrolled Jesus' and the disciples for those three years on the road, teaching, preaching, healing and performing miracle after miracle. How did she feel when, after he was gone from this life, the disciples acted like none of that counted for anything. She was there when Jesus died. She and the other women stayed by the cross as he died, to the bitter, awful end. She was prepared to go back into the tomb, which by then would have smelled awful, to finish preparing the body for burial with supplies she purchased when she found the empty tomb. She talked with the Risen Christ – the very first one to do so in John's Gospel. And yet, in a matter of days, none of that mattered to the disciples. Talk about being taken for granted! Talk about being overlooked and disregarded, not to mention discredited in those later years when she was identified by too many as a prostitute! This was undoubtedly a

rumor that was circulating during her lifetime. Yet she didn't let it phase her, deter her in what she saw as her role in securing the legacy of this extraordinary man Jesus she had called friend. How did she handle all that? How did she not lose sight of God and who God needed her to be as this new faith tradition was coming into existence after Jesus ascended to God in heaven? How did she let go of her anger and resentment so that she could reach out to God, despite all the people who wanted to deny what she had already done?

I don't know how she did it. Think about it. Reflect on the times in your life when you felt underappreciated and taken advantage of. How did you feel when someone else was given credit for work you did? I know from personal experience that this is a most infuriating situation, not to mention surprising. I had been invited to the UCC denominational offices in Cleveland to work on a special writing project for a new educational track they were hoping to launch in an unreasonably fast time line. Never one to turn down a chance to work with other writers, I was excited to go. We worked hard and over the space of about four business days, we came up with the outlines and content for the proposed book. Some final editing was needed but as we left for home, that final editing process was murkier than it should have been. So, imagine my surprise when the final book came out in print later that same year, and I realized my work was included word for word but I was only mentioned in the acknowledgements as someone who "contributed." One of my co-writers had been chosen to edit the final work into the book manuscript without any input from the other writers, myself included. And he listed himself as "author" of this book, not editor. I was angry, so angry I couldn't see straight. I was also deeply hurt because this person had been someone I trusted. I actually reached out to him to see what the heck had happened with this project and he sputtered some kind of nonanswer. I felt betrayed and angry and I vowed never to write for the UCC publishing branch again. And I haven't. What I have since realized is that nobody cared.

Not really. The book was a flop. The guy who claimed authorship never published again. The UCC staff member who organized the entire project was fired. All of this for what. My anger and resentment about other people taking credit for what I did led exactly nowhere.

Somehow, some way Mary Magdalene already knew this. And she did let go of it, somehow. We know she did because in the gnostic gospels, it becomes clear that she remained a leader in the early church. She was known and respected. And Peter still didn't like her. She just didn't let any of it get to her. She knew she couldn't if she wanted to be faithful to what she knew beyond doubt that Jesus had expected of her. This is the wisdom Mary Magdalene offers us. If she were here this morning, she would tell us to keep focusing on Jesus and the work Jesus was doing, the work Jesus wants us all to continue. She would tell us to keep praying, enfolding all we do, all we are hoping to accomplish in the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. She would tell us that Jesus is counting on each one of us to care for those in need without judging why the need is there in the first place. If someone is hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them a drink. If they are sick, take care of them. If they are lonely, give them a hug. She would also tell us to forgive all those people who take us or our work for granted. She would tell us to forget about not being thanked for all we have done to help them. She would tell us that keeping score of what we do and others don't do is never a Jesus thing to do.

That, dear ones, is the gift and blessing of Mary Magdalene. She was the very first one I can think of in the Bible who took all of Jesus' teachings to heart and allowed herself to be fully transformed by them. Mary Magdalene was the very first person to answer the call from Jesus without counting the cost, literally and figuratively. She never worried about not getting credit from others for what she did. She took no notice of who liked her and who didn't. She stayed focused on Jesus and what Jesus was asking of her. And that, dear ones, made all

the difference for her and for us who reflect on her story still today. Who was she really? Our ability to answer that question with any real certainty is limited at best. In the final analysis though, I am confident Mary Magdalene would be the first one to say none of that matters as long as we, you and I, do our best to love and follow Jesus. That was good enough for her and it's good enough for me, dear ones. What about you? Amen.