

Our goal to day is to find out what scripture has to tell us about Mary Magdalene. So it is only appropriate that we begin by saying the collect that has been written to observe her feast day:

Almighty God, whose blessed Son restored Mary Magdalene to health of body and of mind, and called her to be a witness of his resurrection: Mercifully grant that by your grace we may be healed from all our infirmities and know you in the power of his unending life; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## **Preview**

### **Four episodes in Mary's life**

- Mary Magdalene as a disciple of Jesus
- Mary at the Crucifixion
- Mary as she prepared Jesus' body for burial
- Mary who bore witness to the Resurrection

### **Significance for today**

Here's what we will cover today. There are four aspects to Mary Magdalene's life that we know about: she was a disciple of Jesus, she was at Jesus' Crucifixion, she prepared Jesus' body for burial, and she witnessed his Resurrection—and may have been the first to do so.

## About Mary Magdalene

- Mary Madgalene is mentioned 13 times in the New Testament (only in the Gospels)
  - Mark/Luke agree that she was a Galilean Jewish woman of means who Jesus had healed and who subsequently followed Jesus and financially supported him during his itinerant ministry
  - The Gospels agree that Mary Magdalene was a witness to the Resurrection

Here's what we know for sure about Mary Magdalene. Because of her name, we know that she was named Mary and was from Magdalene.

Almost one-fourth of all women in Palestine during Jesus' time were named "Mary." The nickname "Magdalene" would have been necessary to distinguish this particular Mary from all others. There is much confusion, even among New Testament scholars throughout the centuries. We tend to lump many of the Marys there together, and even to assume that Mary Magdalene was actually several of the unnamed women characters in the gospels. So it is important to say that Mary Magdalene was NOT the sister of Lazarus and Martha— THAT Mary was Mary of Bethany. We will return to this point in a minute.

There are 13 references to Mary Magdalene in the New Testament. All of them are in the Gospels, and many of THEM are synoptic parallel references to the same incident in all four Gospels. All but one of these references occur at or after Jesus' death. For example, Mark's gospel doesn't mention this Mary during Jesus' ministry, **only** at Jesus' crucifixion (Mark 15:40), where he refers to Jesus having healed her of seven demons. Luke refers to her briefly during Jesus' lifetime (Luke 8:1-3). However, both Mark and Luke agree that Mary Magdalene was a Galilean Jewish woman of means (that is, she had money) who Jesus had healed, and whom subsequently followed Jesus and financially supported him during his itinerant ministry. In the tradition of the Eastern Church, Mary is regarded as the equal of an apostle; the whole church (East and West) celebrates her as a saint (on June 22), because of the Gospels' unanimous report that she was a witness—perhaps the first witness—to the Resurrection.



This image is a painting by Paolo Veronese, created in 1547. This artist captures the essence of Jesus' healing of Mary of Magdala, an event which is recounted in Luke 8:1-3 <<read Luke 8:1-3>>



## Mary Magdalene and the egg



We also don't know how it was that Mary Magdalene was a woman with financial resources. We don't know whether she inherited her money, obtained it as a merchant or business-woman of some kind, or whether she married money. (We don't, in fact, know whether she WAS married.)

Later tradition builds on the fact that Mary Magdalene was a woman of wealth. The story is that, after the Ascension of Jesus, Mary was dining with the Emperor of Rome and discussing her witness of the Resurrection. The Emperor took exception to her witness, pointing to an egg on his table and saying, "Christ has no more risen than that egg is red." After making this statement it is said the egg immediately turned bright red.

I'm not telling you about this tradition because I necessarily think that this story happened, historically, but because it attests to Mary's wealth and status, that she might have access to the Emperor.

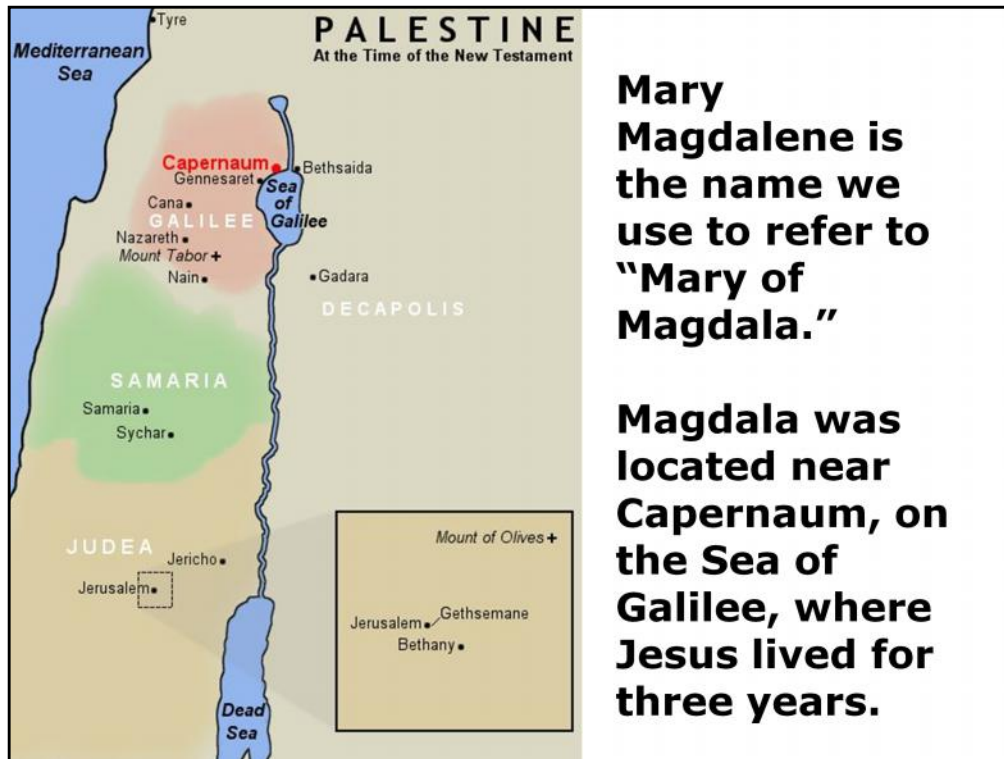
## **Mary was a disciple**

- As Jesus moved throughout the country, teaching and talking about God, he was accompanied by a group of women.
- Mary Magdalene was the main woman in this group.

Returning to Luke 8:1-3, Mary Magdalene is listed first among the women mentioned. This is the case in almost all references to her in the New Testament; most scholars think that this means that she was a leader among Jesus' followers, if not of all the disciples, then certainly among the women.

Notice also that Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, was another woman of means whom Jesus had healed. We don't know what Chuza, her husband, thought of his wife giving his money to Jesus to support his ministry.

Elaine Pagels, a New Testament scholar today, says that Mary Magdalene was "air brushed" out of the accounts in the Gospels about Jesus' life. She thinks that this is because Peter and Mary squared off after Jesus' Ascension, and Peter won. We will return to this thought in a moment or two.



We don't know where Mary Magdalene's healing took place. Magdala was a city located about "10 hard miles" from Capernaum, where Jesus made his home after being chased out of his home town of Nazareth. Some scholars reckon that Jesus lived in Capernaum for almost three years, between 25 and 27 CE. Because the New Testament account do not mention Jesus having visited Magdala, many scholars assume that Mary Magdalene heard of Jesus' abilities as a healer and made the hard trek to Capernaum to meet Jesus. The operative word here is "assume;" we just don't know.

Jesus' home town of Nazareth, by the way, was a town of 200-300 people in Jesus' day, a very small place that wasn't even on any of the maps of the time. Mary's home place of Magdala was much larger, a city. Josephus, the first century historian, said that Magdala was surrounded by a large wall, that there were two grain markets, a major aqueduct for water, a Greek-style theater, and a hippodrome for public races, one that would hold 10,000 people. The city was located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and it was best known for two things: it was a major fishing industry center renowned for its pickled sardines, and it had a very large tower. In fact, the Aramaic word "madgala" means "tower."

Long after Jesus' time Magdala came to be known as a resort city, and it came to have a reputation for loose morals and profligate lifestyles. This was NOT the case in Jesus' time, but this is one of the factors responsible for Mary Magdalene gathering a posthumous reputation, long-after-the-fact, as a "loose woman."



We can see this in some of the artists' conceptualizations of Mary Magdalene through the centuries. The painting on the left is by Titian, and the one on the right by Anthony Frederick Sandys. And these are some of the tamest paintings of the genre—I chose these because in these painting Mary has all her clothes on!

Modern historians reckon that Mary Magdalene was NOT a loose woman or a prostitute. In between Jesus' time and our own, though, the church has regarded her as such, in part due to conflation (mushing together) of several stories about unnamed women in the New Testament, assuming that they were all the same person. For example, Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* AND Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* both identify the woman who Jesus saved from being stoned for adultery and the woman who anointed Jesus with perfume as Mary Magdalene. There is no credible reason for making this leap, yet it often happens in popular accounts made long after the fact—in our day, and in fact since Medieval times.



## Mary Magdalene confusion

**“The Magdalene,”  
this painting by  
Bernardio Luini, is  
an example of the  
centuries-old  
confusion  
between Mary  
Magdalene and  
the woman with the  
alabaster jar**



Scorce and Gibson certainly were not the first to confuse Mary Magdalene in this way. This, for example, is a painting of Mary Magdalene by Bernardio Luini that claims her as the woman who anointed Jesus with perfume from an alabaster jar.

My point is this: scholars no longer think that Mary Magdalene was a “loose woman.”

## Mary Magdalene's great gospel moments



- Mary witnessed Jesus' Crucifixion
- She was present at Jesus' burial
- She witnessed Jesus' Resurrection

It is in the moments of Jesus' death and Resurrection, though, where Mary Magdalene figures prominently in the Gospel accounts. This is because Mary was one of several women who actually stayed during Jesus' Crucifixion—unlike the male disciples who apparently took a powder during that event. It was the women who hung around, and again, Mary Magdalene is listed as first among them.

<b>Mark 15:40-41</b>	<b>Matt. 27:55-56</b>	<b>John 19:25b</b>
There were also women looking on from a distance;	Many women were also there, looking on from a distance;	Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus
among them were <b>Mary Magdalene</b> , and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.	Among them were <b>Mary Magdalene</b> , and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.	were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and <b>Mary Magdalene</b> .
These 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.	they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.	

Let's look at the actual gospel accounts of the women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion.

The first to be written down, about 50-60 years after Jesus' death, is Mark's account. He says <<read Mark 15:40-41>>.

Matthew's account was written some 15 years later than Mark's, and is based, in part, on Mark's account, so it shows many similarities to Mark's version of the story. <<read Matthew 15:40-41>>.

<<read John 19:25>> Notice in John's account that the women were much closer to the cross when Jesus died than in the earlier accounts. Also, notice that Mary Magdalene has been moved to last place in the listing of the women. The Gospel According to John was written much later than the other three Gospels, and it shows how the tradition was developing in relation to both Jesus' mother Mary and to Mary Magdalene.

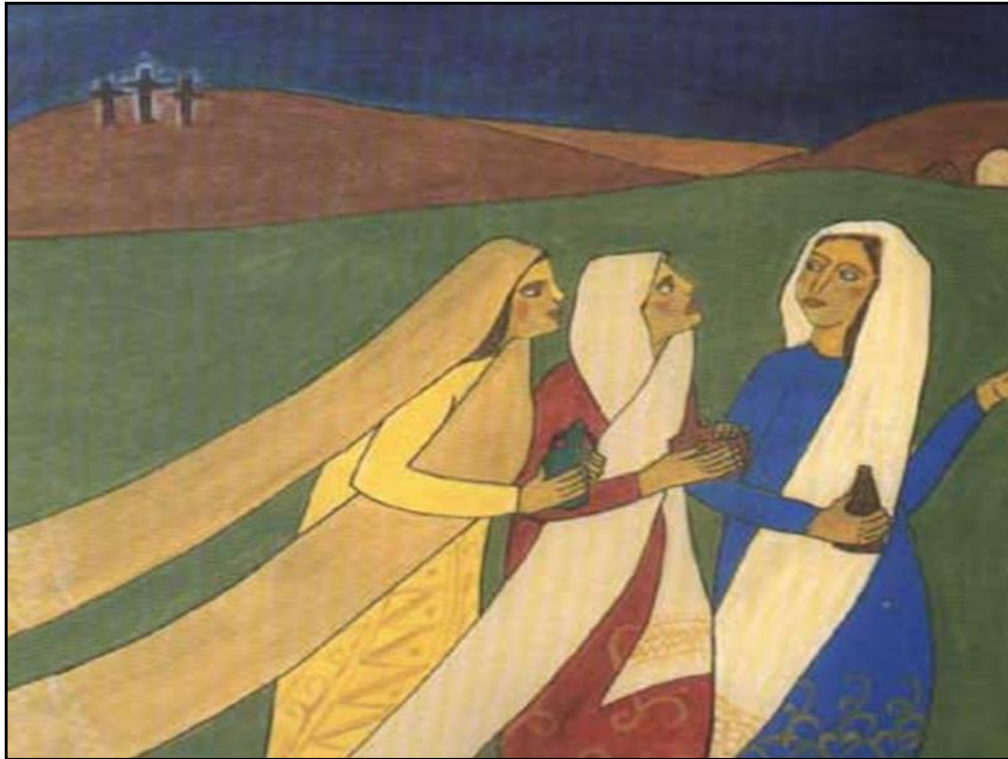


Mary was  
present at  
Jesus'  
burial

Mary didn't just witness Jesus' death, though. Here's Mark's account of what happened next <<Mark 15:46-47>>.

Matthew's account, in chapter 27, is very similar, except that he says, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb."

This depiction shows three women, and they are a LOT closer than the biblical stories portray.



So the women knew where Jesus' body was entombed. Mark and Matthew say that as soon as the Sabbath was over Mary Magdalene and another Mary went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. <<read Mark 16:1, then Matthew 28:1>>

In Mark's gospel Mary went with two women, one who was also named Mary and one who was named Salome. In Matthew's gospel it was just the two Marys who went to Jesus' tomb.

This depiction shows THREE, not two women, meaning that it depicts the story as told in Mark's Gospel.

Can you think of any OTHER reason why this artist would choose to show three woman on their way to the tomb? <<magi connotation>>





This scene depicts what happened next, as told in Mark 16:9-11: “Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to **Mary Magdalene**, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.”

Notice in this depiction how Mary is rejoicing, while the others are still mourning!



We learned of Mary Magdalene's healing in Luke, but haven't heard of anything about her since. Now, in Luke chapter 24 we hear of her again, where she and other women are the first to witness Jesus' Resurrection. <<read Luke 24:1-12>>

This painting depicts the Lukan account ... Well, actually, it combines some of the story from the Lukan account and the one in John, because it is in John where Jesus is present and he tells Mary Magdalene not to touch him.



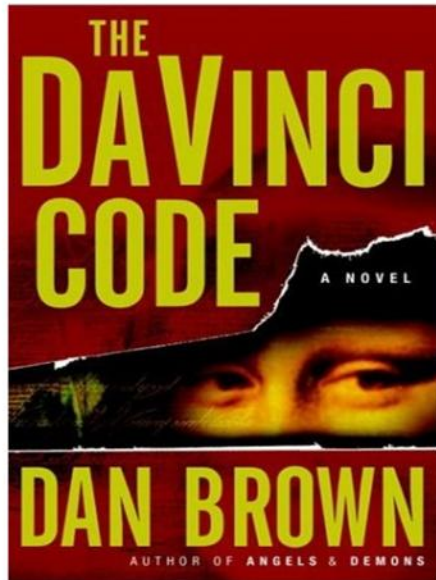
This icon by Sister Mary Charles shows **Mary Magdalene** telling the apostles about her experience of meeting the risen Lord. All four gospels tell of this event:

- Mark 16:13
- Matthew 28:8
- Luke 24:9
- John 20:18

The apostles did not believe Mary's words, according to the accounts in Mark and Luke. However, the disciples believed when they saw Christ for themselves.



## Were Mary and Jesus intimate?



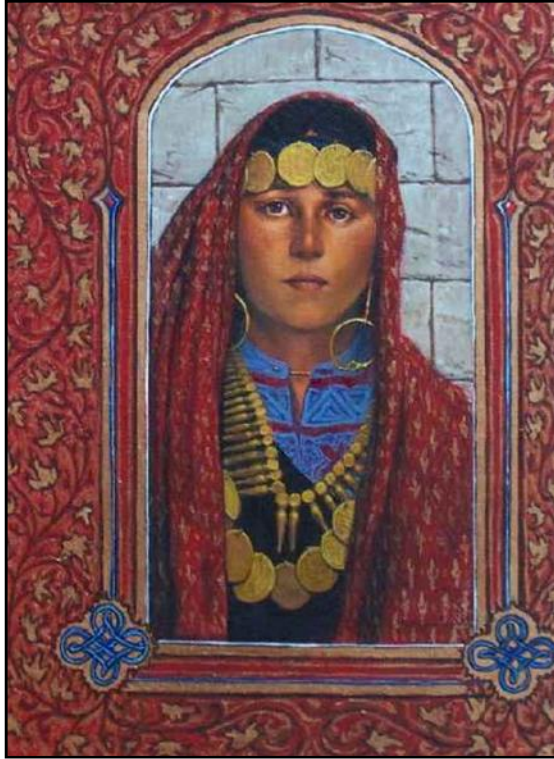
This idea comes from the Gnostic gospels, which were rejected as scripture



So that's it, that is all that the gospels tell us about Mary Magdalene. However, she has captured popular attention throughout the centuries since she lived. This is largely because of her depiction in the Gnostic gospels as a person who was an intimate of Jesus: his mistress, his wife, the mother of his child, you name it! Mary is a key figure in some of these books—including one book called the Gospel of Mary.

These books depict Mary as a “Completed Gnostic,” one to whom Jesus revealed everything, and one who understood all that Jesus taught. In one book Peter steps forward and says to Jesus, “My master, we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way and does not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time.” (*Pistis Sophia*, 36) In another, the Gospel of Thomas, Simon Peter says, “‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’”

I do not quote these writings to espouse them as truth. Indeed, they reveal a view of Christianity that the church has consistently and explicitly rejected. However, they do expose the struggle that took place in the very early church over the place of women in the church, and the place of Mary Magdalene in its memory.



## Significance for today

- Let Jesus heal you
- Follow Jesus
- Persevere, even when things look grim
- Become a witness to Jesus' Resurrection
- Tell others, even if they don't believe you

Our “take-away” for today from the story of Mary Magdalene is straight-forward:

- 1) Let Jesus heal you; walk 10 hard miles to reach him if necessary, but let him rid you of your demons.
- 2) Don't go back to “business as usual,” but become Jesus' disciple by following him and participating in, as well as financially supporting his ministry.
- 3) Persevere, even when things look grim. Mary Mag didn't abandon Jesus, even when it appeared that he was a “goner.” She attests that we need to have faith.
- 4) Bear witness to Jesus' Resurrection. Tell others, even if they don't believe you. But if you can get them to come see for themselves, they will believe.