

## **Mary Magdalene**

### **John 20:1-18 by Patty Friesen (Aug 30/15)**

The last time I was on a sabbatical I read *The DaVinci Code* because sabbaticals are about reading fluff. The bestseller was the rage in 2003, establishing that Leonardo DaVinci's famous painting of the Last Supper where the very feminine disciple at the right hand of Jesus isn't believed to be John, the beloved disciple but is believed to be Mary Magdalene, Jesus' right hand woman as it were. *The DaVinci Code* describes Mary Magdalene as Jesus' lover and mother of their child which was covered up by the Catholic Church. It proposes that there are still descendents of Jesus and Mary in the world. Patrick and I were in a monastery looking at DaVinci's painting of the Last Supper and discussing the feminine disciple when an Italian priest overhearing us, came up to us and said, "Dat DaVinci Code is all \*###\*" - bleeps with an Italian accent.

I don't believe the conspiracy theory either but it makes one wonder what did happen to Mary after the resurrection. After John 20, she disappears from scripture, not mentioned again by name in Acts or the Epistles. As Peter charged into the empty tomb after her, he also charged into church leadership. I have to wonder what the early church would have looked like if Mary had led it or if she and Peter had co-led it. It is as if Mary has been erased from the pages of early church history and I want to reclaim the power of her voice, her experience, her testimony, her leadership of the women disciples and her devotion to Jesus. We need Mary as a strong female friend of Christ and a strong female presence in scripture. We need her example of strength and courage.

Also on that 2003 sabbatical, I spent a lot of time in art museums, nurturing my spirit through art. The Virgin Mary of course, gets the most canvas time as the blessed

Mother of Christ and “holy Woman.” But the next biblical female to get the most canvas time is Mary Magdalene, who bears the image of “unholy Woman” or prostitute redeemed by Christ. She is portrayed in art as having long curly red hair because we all know redheads are sexy and she is often dressed in red, if she is clothed at all. Usually her clothes are falling off of her. Renaissance artists like to paint her so they had an excuse to paint nudes and get paid for it by the church! Mary Magdalene also ends up being a composite of all the women of the Gospels. She is confused with Mary of Bethany, the woman caught in adultery and the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus feet. She is a three in one woman in art history.

Our century has produced the least amount of religious art as the church as decreased as a patron of the arts, so Mary Magdalene has slipped into obscurity in our time. She makes a few modern appearances in movies like Jesus Christ Superstar, Jesus of Montreal, the Last Temptation of Christ, and Mel Gibson’s The Passion but again these images lock her into sexualized images or imagined love affairs with Jesus.

Who is Mary Magdalene really? What does scripture say of her and how can we reclaim her original New Testament status as chief female disciple, apostle to the apostles, first witness of the resurrection and a woman of independence, courage, devotion, action and love – someone to emulate in her relationship to Christ.

We first hear about Mary in Luke 8 where Luke describes the women who accompanied the twelve disciples who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, listing Mary of Magdala first. Unlike the other women listed who are described in their relationship to men; the wife of Susa or the sister of Lazarus or the daughter of Jarius, Mary is independent of any man. She is no one’s mother, wife sister or daughter. She is

merely described as where she is from, the city of Magdala. Magdala was a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee known for its' licentiousness. This still doesn't necessarily make Mary a prostitute any more than being from Texas makes you a cowboy. It is believed that she had seven demons from which Jesus freed her. Writer Kathleen Norris reflects that Mary had seven demons, one for everyday of the week and how practical that was. But there is nothing inherently sinful or promiscuous about having a few demons. Her sexualized image in art may be a projection of historians simply because she was unattached. It says a lot about Jesus that he had such interesting women friends.

That all Jesus' significant women are named Mary seems a bit sexist, like the New Testament writers couldn't remember their names or couldn't distinguish between them so named them all Mary. Theologian Cynthia Bourgeault carefully distinguished the many women named Mary in the New Testament and concluded that in a very real way they are all the same person. In actual effect of these Marys is that there is only one archetypcal Mary, and she represents faith and trust in receiving Jesus and letting him change her life. She is always saying, "Let it be!"

Maybe the New Testament writers were smarter than we think and left these women intentionally ambiguous so they could operate on the unconscious level. A heart open to the power of a good metaphor like Mary Magdalene, open to the feminine, open to intimacy will respond to Jesus in the same way that she did. Metaphors can really change us at a deep level if we can allow them access. If Jesus is the Divine Gift of God and how the gift of salvation is given to us, then Mary represents how we receive this gift. She makes it clear that this gift is received in lowliness and humility, as one who is rejected by the rest of society. (p. 256-259, Richard Rohr, Eager to Love.)

Mary Magdalene appears most prominently in the Gospels at the cross, always listed first as if she was the leader of the women disciples. She was the first disciple to return to the tomb to hold wake for Jesus and the first to speak the truth of the risen Christ. In the religious institutions of that day, women were not considered reliable witnesses, yet all four Gospels rely on her resurrection account.

After the resurrection, Mary Magdalene disappears. Tradition has it that she went out into the desert and somehow made her way to France where a village claims to have a relic, the skeleton of her thumb. Actually they have three thumbs, so who knows which are Mary's. She became the patron saint of prostitutes but I'd also like to think of her as the patron saint of independent, courageous, unattached women. She is the patron saint of good friends, steadfast and faithful friends. She is the patron saint of truth-tellers, of everyone who has told the truth of their experience, only to be disbelieved and discredited.

Mary is a witness to the resurrection and she is a resurrection into new life herself. She calls us to remain close to Jesus, to dwell in God, to live in communion with other disciples and to be a risk-taker for the gospel.

Let us pray: Living God, thank you for the resurrections we witness around us and which draws forth new life in our own lives. May we give faithful witness to what you've done for us as honestly and courageously as Mary Magdalene. Amen.