

Mary Magdalene

Let us first review the story of Mary Magdalene in the context of history (or her story). At its best, this could confuse us more than help as we look at what happened to make this most important person— Mary Magdalene, almost disappear from the records of the early establishment of what has come to be called Christianity. Or, as many today refer to as the founding of the Jesus Movement.

Like most of you, when I was taught history, the time line used was linear. In other words, it stretched out in a straight line from point A to B or from the birth of Jesus to whatever was the current date we were in school. However, it would have been better if the teachers had held up a slinky toy or what might be called more accurately, a helix. Historical events in retrospect, or as reported by the victors as later historians, is messier.

It is so as well, with the early events as recorded in retrospect by those writers whose stories ended up being accepted as the one and only “true record” of Jesus life, works and words and those of his followers. These are thought only to be found in what we call the letters and/or Acts of the Apostles, following the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But this is not the whole story by any means for much more was written and recorded.

Culturally, we know that during this period in human history (Roman occupation of Israel) women were relegated to the home front and were under the control of their fathers, husbands and even brothers if the former were not around. A few of course, had access to wealth as there are always exceptions but by in large they were not accorded civil rights nor allowed to publicly participate in religious or political activities and ceremonies as key figures. they might dance like Salome but not rule!

On to this scene walks Jesus. I say “walks” for it is very clear that he travelled many long distances by foot and only once we know of he was recorded as riding....and that was into Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey.

I really want to say that Jesus burst onto the scene, because in retrospect that was the impact of his walking and talking and healing and teaching over the three short years we know of, that he ministered and changed the hearts and minds of so many.

One of the significant impacts of his public and I suspect private manner, was including women in his fellowship and ministry. He treated women as colleagues, companions, friends, disciples and eventually some as apostles— those called to share the Good News of God’s love for God’s creation—and for all people!! While the journey to becoming a true disciple was not easy nor even safe, it was open to all—rich or poor, whole or broken, male or female and as Paul was to write “Jew or Gentile”.

Mary Magdalene was mentioned several times in the gospels and most often when women were named she was listed first, which might denote her special role. She was also mentioned in Luke as one who had been healed / cured by Jesus of seven demons. Most importantly, she was listed as witnessing to Jesus crucifixion and later at his tomb was the first to encounter his “risen” presence of Jesus and was told to tell his followers that he (Jesus) “...is ascending to my God and your God.” For this act, she was for many years considered the “apostle to the apostle” and remains so for the Eastern Orthodox Church.

However, over time the cultural norms crept into the Jesus Movement after Jesus death and eventually women were yet again being held back from fully participating influential members or leaders. The letters ascribed to Paul for example, witness this change. In the earlier and bona fide Pauline writings, women were Deacons and companions to Paul and called to read his letters to the newly established churches. But later, letters written by followers, using Paul’s name, declared that women should be silent in church!

There are many other examples of this change within scripture from Jesus’ actions of accepting fully women within his ministry to the impact of church leaders silencing them. By the fourth century Pope Gregory the “great” sealed Mary’s fate, for example, by describing her as essentially a penitent fallen woman, declaring her life before her healing had been sin filled.

Many "gospels" were written by followers in the First and Second Century, but only a few made their way into recognized collections which became what we call "The New Testament." Those not included were mostly destroyed but some were hidden and discovered within the last two centuries and hopefully there are more to come. Among them to date: The Gospel of Thomas (a series of dialogues), the Gospel of Phillip, The Gospel of Peter and for us to focus on briefly today, a remnant of the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, which is also a dialogue rather than a narrative. These have been studied by biblical scholars and offer us further insight into the works and words of Jesus and of those who sought to spread the Good News far and wide to their known world.

Angela read for us today a few selections from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. This is a short gospel and a third of it is missing. Its affirming that three copies have been found in different cities, attesting to its importance and use in the early days of the the Jesus Movement.

There are Four short passages of dialogue that we have and each offer some very important and even exciting interpretations of what Jesus meant and wanted his followers to share.

These are challenging sayings and unlike a story that carries you along, they require reading and re reading and are best explored through some dialogue and discussion with others to peel back the deeper meanings that live within the exchanges.

In the first section, with the initial six pages still missing. we have Jesus giving final instructions/teachings to his disciples and Peter asks Jesus a series of question. Finally, Jesus gives to all those listening these words:
"May my Peace reside within you...the Son of Humanity already exists within you. Follow him, for those who seek him will find him."

These are comforting and reassuring words to know that the Spirit is alive within each of us and that we are not alone. We are to seek him and he is there to be found. However, this requires work, work on the self to let go of the which limits us (false self) and listen to our true self...listening to the heart beat of the Divine.

Jesus tells his follows that we are to go forth and proclaim the Good News and NOT to add any further rules nor issue more laws.....least we too will be dominated by them. Did we listen?? Of course not, the Church has gone ahead and issues more laws and rules. We might call them Cannons with amendments. Many of these make the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Numbers seem like preambles to what has been set forth by Christian Churches of every denominations down through the centuries.

In the Second section, we see Mary in the role as a comforter for the disciples are fear-filled..."if the Romans and the Temple authorities did not spare Jesus how will they ever leave us alone?" they ask.

Mary arose and embracing them all, as her brothers and sisters said, "Do not weep and grieve nor let your hearts remain in doubt for his grace will be with all of you, sustaining and protecting you. Rather let us give praise to his greatness which has prepared us so that we might become true human beings." As Mary said these things their hearts were opened toward the Good and they began to talk about the meaning of the the Saviour's words.

Then in the Third section Peter asks Mary to share what words that the Saviour who greatly loved her above all women (Peter declares) might have told her that they have not heard. Mary agrees and shares a visionary encounter she has had with Jesus his first comment is "Blessed are you since the sight of me does not disturb you!" This might be a reflection of her encounter outside the tomb.

From there the description given seems to be expressing the soul's progress and maybe a journey like Dante. The soul faces off the forces of desire, darkness, ignorance, the physical body and the collusion of Rage...all those might be part of the seven deadly sins she (Mary) was healed...and ones all of us today wrestle with as well. There is nothing more-deadly, for example, than righteous anger!

In this visionary encounter the Soul rejoices for it can declare, "What had bound me has been slain. What encompassed me has been vanquished!" In other words, Jesus' descent has successfully rebuffed the dark forces and he has ascended once and for all....into the realm of Eternity...

In the last section, which is essentially Peter's response, is rejection...finding it too difficult to accept that Jesus would share such significant insights and experiences to her....a woman. Mary weeps, rather than lashing back at him and asks if he thinks she is lying.

But Levi one of the disciples confronts Peter: "You have always been quick to anger, Peter and now you are questioning her in exactly the same manner... If the Saviour considered her worthy who are you to reject her? We should be ashamed of ourselves as he taught us we should be clothed with the cloak of true humanity...and following his command announce the Good News without burdening it further with rules or laws he himself did not give..."

After Levi said this they too departed and began to teach proclaiming the Good News."

Like we say in our bulletin "This service is over and our service begins." With these words that were written ---now let it be done!

The Rev. Linda A. St. Clair, PH.D.

Bibliography

The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Man at the Heart of Christianity, Cynthia Bougeault.

The Luminous Gospels: Thomas, Mary Magdalene and Philip, Lynn C. Bauman, Ward J. Bauman and Cynthia Bourgeault.

The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle.
Karen L. King.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, Jean-Yves LeLoup.

Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor, Susan Haskings

The Acts of Jesus: What did Jesus really do? Robert W. Funk and The Jesus Seminar.

The Birth of Christianity, John Dominic Crossan.

"Who was Mary Magdalene?" by James Carroll. Smithsonian Magazine, June, 2006.