

The Prostitute Turned Preacher



By Ben Godwin

Only a handful of women dared to visit Jesus' tomb as Easter Sunday dawned. The male disciples, minus Judas, were hiding in fear lest they should be crucified next. The Gospels accent different details so it's helpful to read all four to get a full picture. Mary Magdalene is so designated to distinguish her from eight other women named Mary in the New Testament. From the town of Magdala on the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee, not much is known about this Mary. There are only about a dozen references to her in the Gospels. But as you piece the puzzle together, an inspiring image emerges.

- **Mary's Conversion.**

According to Luke 8:2, Jesus delivered Mary from seven evil spirits. Whether those demons corrupted her mind or her morals or both is up for debate. Some commentators believe she is the unnamed and uninvited "sinner" mentioned in Luke 7:37 who crashed a dinner party Jesus attended. That woman believed to be a prostitute, anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and washed them with her tears of repentance. Simon the Pharisee, host of the dinner, objected that Jesus would allow such a sinful woman to even touch Him. Her many sins were graciously forgiven. No words were recorded of that woman, but her repentant actions spoke much louder than words ever could.

Others have tried to connect Mary with the Adulteress Woman who was drug before Jesus with the intent to stone her until He intervened (John 8). Of course, these attempts to identify Mary are purely speculation. There is no doubt that Mary was delivered from demonic influences and began a new life of devotion to follow Christ. After her dramatic deliverance, Mary, along with several other wealthy women, "ministered unto Him of their substance." (Luke 8:2-3) Apparently, she donated money to His ministry. Perhaps she cooked food, washed clothes, or ran errands for Jesus and His disciples. The fact that she was free to follow Jesus suggests that she was unmarried and childless.

- **Mary's Commitment.**

Though more of a supporting cast member, Mary's character comes to the forefront in the Easter narrative. When all of His male disciples forsook Him and fled, Mary, with deep devotion, followed Jesus to the bitter end of His crucifixion. Consider the degree of commitment to Christ she displayed: Mary was close to the cross when Jesus died (John 19:25), Mary participated in Jesus' burial (Matthew 27:55-61), Mary was the first to discover the empty tomb (John 20:1), then she ran to inform Peter and John that Jesus'

body was missing (John 20:2). They, of course, did not believe her at first, not that she made the most credible witness given the problems of her past.

One Bible commentator notes, “Ancient Jewish men did not accept women as reliable witnesses for most legal purposes and this cultural tendency may have further moved John and Peter to look for themselves...The witness of women was worth little in Judaism; that Jesus first appears to a woman would not have been fabricated and shows us how Jesus’ values differ from those of His culture.” (The IVP Bible Background Commentary, Craig S. Keener)

One must wonder why, of all people, did Jesus appear first to Mary Magdalene after His Resurrection? One answer is simply grace. One could argue that she was least deserving given her track record. But Jesus often deliberately sought out the despised and downtrodden of society to reveal His love to them. Another simple principle may have been at work here—“Seek and ye shall find.” She was the first to the tomb on Easter morning, so her search was rewarded. God rewards those who diligently seek after Him. Of course, Mary expected to find a corpse to anoint with spices. Instead, she had a face to face encounter with her risen Savior.

- **Mary’s Clinginess.**

Mary didn’t recognize Jesus at first, supposing Him to be the gardener. She, as preachers observe, was more right than wrong—He was the One Who planted a garden eastward in Eden at the very dawn of time (Genesis 2:8). When Jesus spoke her name, she knew the voice of her Master and threw her arms around Him, so much so that Jesus restrained her by saying, “*Touch me not.*” The Greek word translated “touch” here means, “to attach oneself to, to fasten to.” Other Bible versions render this phrase, “Stop clinging to me” (NAS), “Do not hold onto me” (NIV), “Do not cling to me” (NKJV). Mary must have been thinking, “I’ve lost You once, I don’t ever want to lose You again.”

Some extremists interpret this passage to mean Jesus and Mary had some kind of scandalous, romantic, and even sexual, relationship. Books and movies such as *The Da Vinci Code* have made preposterous claims that Mary later became Jesus’ secret wife and they had a love child together. This recycled rumor (Hollywood hogwash) was condemned as heresy by the early church fathers. The reason Mary clung to Jesus was not some perverse sexual overture. Rather, it was a deep gratitude for how He transformed her life and, after seeing Him crucified and buried, pure elation that He was indeed alive and well again. She couldn’t let Him go. Would to God that more people were like Mary—that they would get a hold of Jesus and not let go!

Mary Magdalene was almost certainly one of “the women” among the 120 disciples who received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). According to tradition, she continued to be a bold witness for Christ, leading many idol worshippers to salvation. It is said that she retired to a life of seclusion after many years of public preaching. Many other unproven legends of her abound. Mary Magdalene—the prostitute turned preacher—was the first to proclaim the Easter message. She owed much. She gave much.

She loved much. She served much. Once tormented by evil spirits, she was transformed by Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit. What a remarkable testimony of God's grace!

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