# Thinking about Mary Magdalene

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*John 20:1-18*

**20:1** Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. **2** So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” **3** Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. **4** The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. **6** Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, **7** and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. **8** Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; **9** for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. **10** Then the disciples returned to their homes.

**11** But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; **12** and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. **13** They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” **14** When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. **15** Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” **16** Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). **17** Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” **18** Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her. [[1]](#footnote-1)

I’ve been thinking a lot about Mary Magdalene.

I’ve been thinking about a lot of nonsense that has been written about her.

For example, that’s she was Jesus’s wife or girlfriend or lover.

No early text, Biblical or not, ever says that Mary was Jesus’s wife or girlfriend. This is just silly, so put away your Jesus Christ Superstar albums or Dan Brown novels.

Or that she was the woman who pours perfume on the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair, mentioned in John 12. That was Mary of Bethany. Mary Magdalene is Mary of Magdala, not Bethany. Well, there **are** a lot of Marys mentioned in the gospels, and it’s hard to tell them apart.

What do we know about our Mary, Mary Magdalene?

One thing is that she had experienced a great healing. Jesus cast seven demons out of her (Luke 8:2).

Another thing is that, unlike many of those whom Jesus healed, she took the next step and began to follow him, along with a company of other women whom Jesus had healed (Luke 8:1-3). So, along with the twelve disciples, there was this band of women, who also walked alongside him.

And that she, along with this band, apparently had some financial means, because they helped provide for Jesus and his followers.

So, Mary Magdalene was a dedicated follower of Jesus. But where Mary’s dedication to Jesus really shines is in the last week of Jesus’s life.

When you think about the twelve disciples, the stories we get are not great. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss of peace. Peter betrays Jesus three times, more and more vehemently denying he was Jesus’s disciple.

But Mary stays close.

Do you remember when Jesus was forced to carry his cross to his place of execution? He was so weak, that the Romans forced a man, Simon of Cyrene, to carry that cross. In the background, there is a group of women “beating their breasts and wailing for him” (Luke 23:27). It is likely that Mary was one of their number.

Because a little later on, as Jesus is dying, we are told Mary is standing there, along with Mary the mother of Jesus and others.

She, who provided for Jesus out of her own means, could now only offer her presence. She, who walked from place to place with him, could only stand and watch him die.

And when they took Jesus’s body down, and laid it in a tomb, she followed him once again, and saw where they put the body. (Luke 20:55)

And then she waited, for it was the Jewish sabbath, and she was force to rest. And, I imagine, force to reflect on the awful events of previous two days.

Sunday comes. And that’s where our gospel reading picks up the story. Mary goes to the tomb. From the other gospels, we know that Mary Magdalene didn’t go alone. But John puts a spotlight, as it were, on Mary.

She gets up early, as early as she can. It is still dark, and she comes to the tomb. The stone in front of the tomb is gone, and she is in despair. Someone has taken his body away, and she doesn’t know where it is. She, who provided for him while he was alive, has had the comfort of caring for him in his death taken away. In John’s account, Peter and another disciple come to the tomb, find it empty but neatly arranged, and they understand that he has been raised from the dead.

But Mary, standing outside, is inconsolable. She weeps, and she weeps. And she looks inside, and sees – what does she see? We know they are angels, but did she? – she sees two angels, one where the head should be, and one where the feet should be. She is crying so, that their reaction is to ask her why she was weeping.

“They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where to find him.”

Jesus has been the center of her life. She has followed him, cared for him, stood with him in suffering and death, and now, this final act of connection, as she sees it, has been taken away.

I think many of you know what this feels like. When Bess had her pneumonia recently, she was sleeping and so still at one point, I feared she had died. In one part of my mind, I knew it couldn’t be the case. But my heart outraced my mind, and I felt something of Mary’s despair.

But Mary turns around, and sees – what does she see? We know that it is Jesus, but she thinks it is a gardener – she sees Jesus. Jesus knows all, feels all, but still asks her the same question: why is she crying? Because she thinks he is a caretaker, she hopes he knows where the body of her Lord is.

But then Jesus speaks her name: Mary. Of all the people of the world, this Mary. Of all the women who followed him, Mary. Of all the Marys, Mary. Not “Mary of Magdalene,” but Mary. And it surprises her to the depths of her being, and she cries out in her mother tongue: Rabbouni. She is known, and she now knows him.

It is Jesus, who healed her. It is Jesus, whom she followed. It is Jesus, whom she saw die. It is Jesus, whose dead body she followed to the tomb. It is Jesus, whose dead body went missing. Jesus, alive.

And she naturally wants to cling to him, to hug him, to hold on to him, but he says no, that he is still in the middle of this strange and super-miraculous process of being raised from the dead. But he gives her a command, to tell the disciples and tell them what is happening, that he is ascending to the Father, to God; their Father, their God.

And so she does: she goes back to the apostles and tells them what happened: “I have seen the Lord.”

And this is the last we hear of her. Undoubtedly, she was among the disciples to whom Jesus appears, and undoubtedly, she was among the early Christians we read of in the book of Acts, but we don’t hear of her by name.

When I think about Mary Magdalene, I am struck about how ordinary she was, in many ways. I think she could have been any one of you.

But she made all the right choices.

* When she was healed, she knew she should follow Jesus, and she did.
* When she saw that Jesus and his followers were in need, she helped to meet that need.
* When her beloved teacher was taken, tortured, and died, she stayed by his side.
* When the body of her Lord was taken away, she planned to do the right thing in preparing his body.
* When the risen Lord told her to tell the others he was alive, she did.

When I think about Mary Magdalene, I am also struck how she is usually in the company of other friends, other women.

When I think about Mary Magdalene, I am also struck by her simple declaration to the other disciples: “I have seen the Lord.”

Did you know that sometimes Mary Magdalene is called “the apostle to the apostles”? An apostle is someone who is sent by Jesus to tell the good news, and Mary was sent by Jesus to tell the good news to those who would in turn do the same.

If Jesus had risen, but Mary and the others hadn’t been there to witness it, what would have happened? In God’s good timing, and out of Mary’s obedience, there were witnesses at the tomb. You could even trace the start of the church to Mary’s telling Peter and the other disciple that the body was gone and Mary’s witness that she had seen the Lord. It’s interesting to think of Mary as the first apostle.

But mostly Mary Magdalene was just an ordinary disciple, doing what she was supposed to do. When she was healed, she responded by following. When she saw a need, she tried to meet it. She gathered together with the other disciples. She stayed close to her Lord. In tragedy, she remained behind to comfort and grieve together.

But this meant that she was in the right place to see the risen Lord, and to bring this good word to the other disciples. This ordinary woman gets caught up in, and becomes and actor in, extraordinary things.

So, this makes me wonder: all of us are pretty ordinary. All of us have ordinary opportunities to do what Mary did: be grateful to God when God does good things for us, respond to needs when we see them, stand by those who are grieving, and grieve together, to simply say, “I have seen the Lord.”

And I wonder: what extraordinary things will God do based on your obedience? How are you being caught up in, and becoming an actor in, extraordinary things?

The Lord is risen.

*He is risen indeed.*

1. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Jn 20:1–18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)