

Reflection for July 22, 2020
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Several weeks ago, I happened to see two documentaries about the Suffragettes; I suppose because this is the 100th year since women had the right to vote. I found myself horrified at how these women had to fight for the right to vote. It was a battle against patriarchy for sure. They were put in prison, force-fed, actually they were treated much like those peacefully protesting for the Black Live Matter of these times.

When I went to do the reflection on Mary Magdalene, I found some real similarities in the *power of patriarchy* in her story.

Until recently, the popular portrayal of Mary Magdalene is perhaps the most maligned and poorly understood figure in early Christianity. Since the fourth century, she has been portrayed as a prostitute/public sinner who after encountering Jesus, repented and spent rest of her life in private prayer and penitence. In Christian art, she has been romanticized, allegorized, mythologized beyond recognition! She has been cast as the epitome of both sensuality and spirituality. Problem: it reinforces the unfortunate notion that sexuality, especially female sexuality, is shameful, sinful and worthy of repentance.

The actual biblical account of Mary of Magdala paints a far different portrait, than the “reformed harlot of Renaissance art.”

Nowhere in Scripture is Mary identified as a public sinner or prostitute. Instead, all four Gospels show her as the **primary witness** to the most central events of the Christian faith.

- 1) She traveled with Jesus in the Galilean discipleship, with Joanna and Susanna and supported Jesus’ mission from her own financial resources. (Lk 8:1-3)
- 2) In synoptic Gospels, Mary leads the group of women who witness Jesus death, burial, the empty tomb and his resurrection

That the message of Resurrection was first entrusted to a woman is regarded by Scripture scholars as one of the strongest proofs of the **historicity** of the Resurrection accounts. In Jewish law, women’s testimony was not recognized. If accounts of Jesus’ resurrection were fabricated, women would never have been included as witnesses.

In all four Gospels, Mary of Magdala’s name appears as leading the group that discovers the empty tomb; who the women were with her differs.

John’s Gospel names *only* Mary of Magdala as first discovering the empty tomb. She then ran to tell Peter and the other disciple who verify the tomb is indeed empty and leave. Mary remains behind, weeping and then receives Jesus’ first resurrection appearance.

The four Gospels were written for four very different Christian communities, over a 30-40-year period. That she is identically named in all of them indicates that she was widely acknowledged as the **primary** witness of the resurrection.

John's Gospel shows the Risen Christ as *sending* Mary of Magdala to announce the Good News of his resurrection to his disciples. That prompted the Church Fathers to name her as the "apostle to the apostles."

So, what happened? How come we 21st century Christians had never heard of Mary's strong discipleship role during Jesus' life?

Several possible explanations:

- 1) Common misreading of "seven demons gone out of her" (Lk 8: 1-3). To first century ears, this means: Mary had been cured of a serious illness, not that she was sinful. (At the time, poorly understood internal illnesses were commonly attributed to the work of evil spirits, although the presence of such illness was not necessarily associated with sinfulness.)
- 2) Common misinterpretation stems from fourth or fifth century attempts to identify Mary of Magdala with "the sinful women who loved much" (Lk 7:36-50), a woman who "had a bad name in town," washes Jesus feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, anoints them with precious ointment. The story of Jesus' Galilean discipleship with a woman accompanying him was right after this scene about the "sinful woman who loved much," and so they associate the two. Scripture scholars think it was unlikely that they are related.
- 3) By the third or fourth century, male Church leaders were suppressing women's co-equal leadership.

Why?

1. The Christian community was caught in the cultural conflict as it moved from worship in House churches (where Jewish women's leadership was accepted and felt to be appropriate) to worship in public places where women's leadership was deemed inappropriate. It was during this timeframe we see the memory of Mary of Magdala change from: a strong woman disciple and proclaimer of the Resurrection to a repentant prostitute and public sinner. (Some scholars believe this was done to minimize the strong leadership roles of women in the Gospels so as to discourage the leadership of women in the Church in the third and fourth centuries.
2. During the time of Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) – sixth and seventh centuries:
 - in his homilies we see an identification of Mary of Magdala as a repentant sexual sinner; this attitude achieved "official status." It appealed to popular imagination.
 - as knowledge of Jesus' many women friends faded from historical memory, the Jesus-women companion stories were combined. The anointing stories, Mary of Bethany, the woman with the bad name merged into one generic public woman sinner: Mary of Magdala.

So, from then to relatively recently, Mary of Magdala was known, not as the strong woman disciple who loved Jesus through his death and first witnessed his Resurrection and proclaimed the Risen Savior in the early churches, but as a wanton woman in need of repentance and a life of hidden penitence.

20th century biblical scholarship has restored Mary of Magdala's strong woman witness to us. Almost 2000 years of misinterpretation is now reversed. She can now once again be the inspiring role model for the 21st century disciples that she was for those who witnessed to the Risen Christ in the early Church.

Because of the new Scripture scholarship we enjoy today, Pope Francis recognized that the memorial of the Apostle to the Apostles should be **elevated** to a feast, in 2016, celebrated as are the feasts of the apostles.

For us, Mary Magdalene challenges us today—just as she did some 2000 years ago. Speaking to us from Scripture, she challenges our notions of what's possible with God, whom God chooses to be ministers; whom God calls to speak, preach and with whom God entrusts the Good News.

Following in the footsteps of the "Apostle to the Apostles," a growing chorus is making their voices heard. They are women called to serve in leadership, ministry in the Church. They are students and parents, victims of gun violence, calling for action. They are Catholics calling for justice for victims of clergy sex abuse, women telling their "Me Too" stories. They are migrants and refugees, speaking with their feet, telling us the horrors they've experienced and the new life they seek. They are people of every age, race, religion and situation in life speaking truth in love—often to power, challenging church and society.

Jesus' call was an inclusive one; he fostered a discipleship of equals.

We also see that Mary of Magdala's energy for ministry was that she had "seen the Lord." Her deep knowledge of Jesus through her time of companioning him during his ministry in Galilee prepared her to see the Risen Christ after the resurrection. It also energized her to go forth and share the Good News of his resurrection with his brothers, the apostles.

Hopefully our own prayer, our companionship with Jesus, is the source of our energy for ministry, too. Jesus has to be the center of our lives as he was for Mary Magdalene, so we too can say, having been sent forth to share the Good News, we have seen the Lord!

We too are witnesses that Jesus is risen and alive and still with us!