

## **“THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARY MAGDALENE”**

**Matthew 28:1-10**

**March 19, 2017**

**Third Sunday in Lent**

### **Matthew 28:1-10 The Message (MSG)**

#### **Risen from the Dead**

28<sup>1-4</sup> After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God’s angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn’t move.

<sup>5-6</sup> The angel spoke to the women: “There is nothing to fear here. I know you’re looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.

<sup>7</sup> “Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ That’s the message.”

<sup>8-10</sup> The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. “Good morning!” he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, “You’re holding on to me for dear life! Don’t be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I’ll meet them there.”

We leave the Twelve disciples for a week to consider the confusing case of Mary Magdalene, the probable leader of the group of women who support Jesus in his ministry years. Her story is confusing, because the Gospel writers cannot agree on who she is and what role she plays in the overall story. Confusing,

because in First Century Jewish culture, about one-fourth of all women are named, “Mary.” It’s kind of like the name, “José,” in the Mexican culture, or perhaps, “John” in American Anglo culture. Of the total of sixteen women identified in the New Testament—that’s right, that’s all, sixteen—six of them are named Mary, including the mother of Jesus. There are so many women named, “Mary,” that we, the Gospel reader or listener, tend to get...confused.

Confusing, too, is the case of Mary Magdalene, because sloppy translations of the Bible carried forward to our present day have mis-labeled Mary, “the sinner,” as Mary the prostitute, when all the word, “sinner,” meant in the original Greek was, “a person who did not rigorously keep the Jewish law.” Bart Ehrmann, noted Bible historian, in his book, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, reminds us that a “sinful woman” could have been one who “ground her grain on the Sabbath or ate a bit of shrimp cocktail, for this would be someone who did not assiduously observe the law of Moses.” Yes, I know, we *always* were taught that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute who was made righteous and reborn through her relationship with Jesus.

If we watched *Jesus Christ Superstar* a gazillion times like I did growing up, we were taught, erroneously, that it was Mary Magdalene that anointed Jesus with

oil just before The Last Supper. If we saw the Martin Scorsese film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, we might remember from that version of the Passion Story that Mary Magdalene, having been accused of adultery, is saved by Jesus from being stoned to death. Not so either. The woman who anointed Christ was Mary of Bethany, not Mary of Magdala. And the woman rescued from stoning was not Mary Magdalene, but another unnamed woman. This story appears only in John's Gospel and was an addition by Scribes who most likely wanted the moral warning against adultery included in their "good news" account. Good news for whom?

Mary Magdalene was not the woman who was exorcized by Jesus of seven demons, not the wife of Jesus and mother of a secret love child of his as imagined in *The Da Vinci Code*, or a lower-class woman of ill-repute and no means. We have erroneously made her out to be all of these women over the course of Bible lore and history.

But let's listen to her story, in her own words, and see what she tells us that is meaningful for our own spiritual journey:

*I think I got rooked. Cheated. Dissed by the Gospel writers and misunderstood by the Church these last two millennia. For one thing, when I met*

*Jesus, I was not some poor wretch living on the streets in Galilee. I was not prostituting myself; I was not possessed by demons, and I was not being stoned for adultery.*

*I was a woman of means living in the First Century, but living under two oppressive layers of systematic misogyny. Women were not particularly respected either by Jewish men or by Roman ones. Most females did not own property or hold any positions of power, except as wives of powerful men. Men who were not our husbands or sons were not supposed to speak with us. Our opinions and judgment did not matter.*

*Jesus had a vision for a new world order, and this vision inspired me. He preached a message that gave women hope. He foretold that there would be an apocalypse. He said that the Kingdom of God would relieve the suffering of the oppressed, and women counted ourselves in that number. True, Jesus was a product of the age and his culture, and he picked twelve men to be his disciples, to be the new twelve thrones recreating the twelve tribes of Israel in the new order of things.*

*But women had hope through him. Women were treated well by him and given access to him and to his teaching. This was a rare opportunity for us, as we were generally not allowed to discuss the scriptures or the laws of Moses.*

*I led a group of women who “served him.” This meant that we funded, from our own treasures, his traveling ministry. We paid for lodging and for food, for the occasional beast of burden, and for clothing for him and his disciples. As a roaming preacher without means, he needed us and we were happy to serve his ministry in this way. I was the leader, and that is why I am named first in lists of women found in the Gospel stories.*

*So, let’s debunk the stories that I used to be a woman of ill-repute. I was Mary, proud Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdalene, and I was the First Christian. That’s right. I was the first Christian.*

*My brother in Christ, Peter, God bless him, was “The Enthusiast.” Wherever Jesus was found, there would be Peter as well, asking questions, making pronouncements, and evangelizing others before he even knew what that meant. Lovable, funny, passionate, and dedicated was he. That is, until he lost his nerve and saved himself by denying Jesus. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, Peter was nowhere to be found.*

*Another of my other brothers in Christ, the one who walked and talked with you last week, was "The Silent Witness," James. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, after Jesus was raised from the dead, James became a powerful preacher and evangelizer in his own right.*

*But he, too, was nowhere to be found on that fateful Friday when they crucified My Lord. And I get it; they were targets themselves, wanted men who hid away so as to not get caught and killed. They had more work to do for the cause. They had to save themselves so that the Word would live on.*

*Precisely because few people gave a second look to women, lowly women, we were freer to come and go as we wanted. Mary, the mother of Jesus, felt she had to be at Golgotha; she needed to grieve her son. I wanted to be with her. I didn't want to watch my Lord suffer, but I did not want her going there alone. And no one bothered us there.*

*We wept and we wailed; I thought my very heart would be ripped from my chest as I watched him suffer. Though it took a short time, it seemed like his agony went on forever. And then his passion ended, and ours began. Our suffering began with his death on the cross.*

*As women of faith, however, our work was not done. On Sunday after our Sabbath, we went to where they had laid him in a tomb. It was our work to stand vigil for him. It was our calling as women to stand by the tomb until the men came to bury him. When we got there, however, we witnessed a miraculous and shocking experience!*

*The earth rattled and rolled under our feet. The tomb guards were panicked, but they were frozen in place like statues. We wanted to run away, the other Mary and me, but an angel—a goodness to mercy angel! —appeared before us and told us to “calm down.” The angel told us not to be afraid, and it showed the empty tomb to us, the one where we had witnessed Jesus being laid just three days before!*

*This is glorious! The angel spoke to US, not to the male guards. The angel showed WOMEN first the good news of the resurrection!*

*This angel told us that our Lord had been raised from the dead. We couldn't believe it! It told us then to go tell the disciples, that Jesus wanted to meet with them in Galilee.*

*We started running down the road, anxious to tell our brothers in Christ that this thing—this miracle—had happened. But as we got a little ways away, Jesus himself showed up on the road beside us. I couldn't catch my breath, I was so stunned and so excited, so happy, and so.... confused!*

*Jesus looked like his old self, only not so tired, not sad, not scared, and no longer in pain. He looked.... glorious to us! I didn't want to let him go—would you? I must have been clinging to his cloak, wanting to touch him to make sure he was real! And then he said, a bit impatiently, "Woman! Stop clinging to me!" But then he smiled at us, and in a softer voice, said, "Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee. I will meet them there."*

*Poof! Then he was gone. And gone was I from the Biblical narrative. The First Christian. The first person to see the resurrected Messiah. I saw him; I touched him; I spoke with him; and then we both disappeared. He went on to Galilee—how, I do not know, and I walked off the pages of the Biblical text, never to be heard from again.*

*Paul never mentioned me. Peter never mentioned me. Luke never mentioned me in the book of Acts, either. But I know what I did and what I saw. I was faithful to Jesus to the end, and back again. I guess it just goes to show you that*

*you don't need to be a celebrity or a saint or an icon to be a Christian. You just need to believe what you know to be true. You just need to see what happens in your own life, how Jesus or God or Spirit shows up and tells you to calm down and get to work building God's kingdom.*

*You don't need to be Peter or Paul. You don't need to be the Pope or a big-time TV preacher. You can just be one of the countless Marys, Johns, Josés, or Sallys in your world, and you, too, can make a difference for God ∴. You just have to show up for God.*

*May it be so.*