

## Lent Compline Talks 2019

### St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris

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#### Lent 2: The resurrected Christ appears to Mary Magdalen

In this series of Lent Complines we are looking at what is now called the 'back story' of the various resurrection appearances of Jesus. The first of these was to Mary Magdalene. In Mark (and in all 4 gospels) we read that Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought aromatic oils to anoint the body. In Mark there are two different passages - in the first the women are confronted with the empty tomb, are told by a youth in a white robe that Jesus has been raised and to tell the disciples; but they fled 'beside themselves with terror' and say nothing to anyone. Then there is a later added passage that the resurrected Jesus "appeared first to Mary of Magdala from whom he had formerly cast out seven devils. She went and carried the news to his mournful and sorrowful followers, but when they were told that he was alive and that she had seen him they did not believe it" John 20 has a much longer passage in which Mary stays behind, weeping, is approached by a man she thinks must be the gardener who she asks what has been done with the dead body, and it is only when the risen Jesus says "Mary" that she recognises him and says "Rabbuni" (teacher).

There can be few more enigmatic figures in the gospels than Mary Magdalen, or one for whom subsequent generations have attributed such diverse interpretations. What, I wonder is your view of Mary called Magdalene? A woman devoted to Jesus' ministry, a promiscuous sinner, or both? Who was this woman who was clearly VERY close to Jesus - indeed who some claim was married to Jesus - the Cathars in Southern France, Dan Brown's Da Vinci code; a Harvard professor based on a tiny fragment of 6<sup>th</sup> century Coptic papyrus. Preparing for this talk I've read a fascinating book "The Quest for Mary Magdalene, History and Legend" and been introduced to the incomplete Gnostic "Gospel of Mary" which is very ancient. Then, as now, Mary was a common name and one problem for us is that different Marys have been confused and conflated to produce a composite figure.

In the 4 canonical gospels, Mary Magdalen appears as one of the group of women who travelled round Galilee with the disciples and Jesus and who literally looked after them "of their substance" (Luke 8). First century Palestine was one of the most male-dominated and conservative societies in the ancient world - so the situation of these women must have been very different. They must have had very considerable means, education and freedom. This is confirmed by at least one other woman in the group. Joanna was the wife of Chuza, who was steward and minister of Herod Antipas in his very hellenized court at Tiberias on the north shores of Galilee. Significant parts of Jewish society were hellenized, especially the Sadducees who controlled the temple. Josephus tells us that that Herod was popular among the Jews (much more so than Pilate) and was very interested to learn more about John the Baptist and Jesus and his miracles; he also made allies among the Pharisees in order to limit the power of the Sadducees. Perhaps Mary had a similar background.

Perhaps the thing most of us remember about Mary is the tradition in John that she was the sister of Martha and Lazarus in Bethany who just wanted to listen to Jesus' teaching despite Martha's request for help in the kitchen, and who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and lovingly anointed them with precious oil. We learn two things here - first that Mary was a woman of considerable wealth (the 'precious oil' would have cost a year's wages for a common labourer) and secondly that she was deeply involved with and committed to Jesus and his ministry - a serious devotee of his teaching. Why else would she have risked standing by the cross, and risked going to the tomb where guards had been posted.

Is this the same 'woman of the city who was a sinner' who, in Luke 7, while Jesus was eating in a Pharisee's house did the same with her 'alabaster box of ointment' and to whom Jesus said "Your sins are forgiven"; or the one from whom Jesus cast out "seven evil spirits". It

is important to note here that the 'sins' and 'evil spirits' are nowhere specified and at the time is far more likely to refer to some form of illness. Be that as it may, the very male dominated early church took the sins to be sexual and this led Pope Gregory in 591 to declare Mary was a sexually promiscuous woman or prostitute, perhaps echoing the sacred prostitutes of ancient pagan temples. The misconception stuck - 'Magdalene' became a word to describe an adulterous woman; street girls in the London of 1850 were called 'Madelines' and there were the infamous Magdalene laundries for 'fallen women' in Ireland. Some good has nevertheless come from this error (which Pope Paul VI corrected in 1969) because many Christians have been inspired to care for those trapped in prostitution.

We commonly think of Mary Magdalene as Mary of Magdala - a town later destroyed by the Romans during the Jewish revolt and not mentioned in early church writings, but which modern excavations show was a sophisticated Hellenistic city with a synagogue. Alternatively, in the original Greek of the gospels, she is Mary *the* Magdalene - a title derived from Migdal - a tower. What is uncontroversial is that Mary Magdalene was Jesus companion throughout his ministry in Galilee and helped organise and finance his mission of healing and salvation to the sick and the poor, and followed him to Jerusalem for his passion, death and resurrection. Jesus certainly had a very inclusive attitude to women, unlike much of the culture of the time.

So, why does Mary Magdalene appear nowhere in Acts or in Paul's letters - has she been deliberately written out? Paul makes very little reference to the life of Jesus or his teaching and is interested primarily in his own insights; he also has a reputation for misogyny, writing "it is shameful for women to speak in church". But why nothing in Acts? Acts does mention 'the women and Mary the mother of Jesus' in the upper room at Pentecost, but concentrates almost entirely on Peter and the other male disciples. During the last century various incomplete papyrus Gnostic texts were discovered in Egypt including a Gospel of Mary alongside that of Thomas and Philip. These actually predate the gospels of Luke and John and the writing of Acts. They are very different from the canonical gospels, being either discourses or sets of sayings, but in them Mary Magdalene is clearly one of the disciples. She knows scripture and discusses its meaning with Jesus, including the nature and purpose of discipleship. In the gnostic gospel of Philip she is said to be the 'constant companion of the Lord'. These writings also contain clear indications of male hostility. Mary is attacked by Peter who says "Lord we cannot tolerate this woman anymore; she speaks all the time". Perhaps this is why we hear nothing about Mary Magdalene in Acts. The gnostic sect, Mary, and women as apostles were actively suppressed by the early male church.

Much later tradition has it that Mary and Lazarus travelled to France to proclaim the gospel. If you go to France on holiday you may have noticed that Mary is very prominent in the Abbey at Vezelay; and the cave of Mary Magdalen at Sainte Baume where she is said to have lived as a hermit is one of the oldest Christian shrines in the world.

So much speculation and uncertainty. What can we learn? What is clear is that, in his ministry, Jesus group of followers included both women and men and that Mary Magdalene in particular was especially close to Jesus. We should, therefore, think of Mary Magdalene as a follower of Jesus with great virtues which we should emulate - total support for the ministry or our Lord with all the means at her disposal; constant love for our Lord; compassion with the tortured; solidarity with the dying; and loyalty that extended beyond death. Mary Magdalene is, indeed, a role model for us all.