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**Summer Preaching Series:**  
*Characters of the Bible*  
**Mary of Magdala**

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

July 29, 2018  
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

# Summer Preaching Series

## *Characters of the Bible: Sarah & Hagar*

The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 2, 2018

Judith 9:1, 11-14  
Psalm 42:1-7

2 Corinthians 5:14-18  
John 20:11-18

Good morning! I want to try something with you this morning. It involves some interaction on your part. I'm gonna ask you a couple questions and I want you to shout out your answer. Okay? Okay. Question number 1: Who is Jesus' mother? (MARY) Great! Question number 2: Which of the twelve disciples betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver? (JUDAS) Excellent! And our final question, question number 3: Who was the first witness to Jesus' resurrection? (MARY MAGDALENE) Wonderful! That last question is sometimes a bit more challenging for folks to answer than the first two. Though the Resurrection is the pinnacle of Christ's earthly life and a core tenant of our faith, the first person to which this momentous miracle was revealed is a figure who is often misunderstood in our collective consciousness.

Though Mary Magdalene should be remembered as the faithful first bearer of the Good News, her name and reputation have become so misconstrued over the centuries that she is more commonly, though erroneously, remembered as a repentant prostitute. Today, as our summer sermon series, Characters of the Bible, continues, we will look at that misnomer, explore who Mary Magdalene was and wasn't, and consider how her story may inform our faith journeys.

Unlike other women in the Bible, Mary Magdalene is not identified in relation to another person; she is not associated as anyone's mother, wife, or sister. Rather, she is identified simply as Mary Magdalene. Mary's second name, Magdalene, is generally understood to derive from her town of origin Magdala. The town, whose name means, "tower of fish," was located on Sea of Galilee and was engaged in the salting, preserving, and export of fish.<sup>1</sup> Magdala was located between Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, and Capernaum, the home base of the Jesus' movement. So Mary's geographic origin was right in the thick of it all between Jesus' home and the place where his ministry began.

The Gospels of Mark (Mk 16:9) and Luke (Lk 8:2) describe Mary of Magdala as someone who Jesus had healed. Both accounts state that Jesus cured her of seven demons. In antiquity, what many people thought of as demons we would consider sickness today. Seven is a number of significance in scripture. It is often associated with fullness or completeness. That Mary was healed of seven demons may imply that she was cured completely of a significant suffering. Whatever she was healed of, it is clear that because he cured her, Mary faithfully followed Jesus and supported his ministry. Luke's Gospel tells us Jesus went throughout towns and villages proclaiming the Good News and that the twelve accompanied him, as did Mary Magdalene and other women (Lk. 8:1-2). Luke also tells us that in addition to following Jesus and the twelve, Mary and her female companions provided for them out of their resources.

These female followers of Jesus, disciples in their own right, supported Jesus and the twelve during Jesus' ministry and they stayed faithful even when things started to fall apart. When Jesus was sentenced to death and others fled, the women remained. Foremost among them was Mary Magdalene. The details of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection in the four gospel accounts differ. But on this all four gospels agree: Mary Magdalene was true until the end. She was present at Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection. She is the only woman consistently mentioned at both events by each of the four gospel writers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Women & Christian Origins*, Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, editors, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 122

If Mary of Magdala is consistently portrayed as a crucial player in what is arguably the most important event of Christianity, why is it that she is not primarily remembered for this role? The problem lies in the alternate image of Mary that is ingrained in the imaginations of centuries of Western Christians. This image is of Mary as a fallen and redeemed woman, a prostitute, the epitome of sensuality and spirituality. This image is fostered through western depictions of art, literature, and movies. Examples include the painting “Penitent Magdalene” by Caravaggio, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, etc. But there is no biblical evidence to back these depictions. There is no evidence at all that Mary was a prostitute or a public sinner. This popular image of Mary Magdalene just isn’t scripturally accurate. Scripture describes Mary as I have described her to you. So how did popular understanding stray so far from scripture?

Enter 16th century pope, Gregory the Great. In a homily delivered in Rome in 1591, Pope Gregory combined the narratives of three separate women from the gospels, claiming that the three women were actually one woman – Mary Magdalene. The three women he combined were Mary of Bethany, a sinful woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair and Mary Magdalene. Scholars have different theories of why Pope Gregory might have done this. Whatever his reasoning, Gregory’s choice to merge these women’s stories made a lasting impact on the collective western Christian understanding of Mary Magdalene that ended up marring the depth and breadth of three separate women’s stories. Mary Magdalene herself was cast as a repentant prostitute who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair and who was cured of seven demons, often associated with the seven deadly sins. This is who she remains to many to this day. While that is a powerful story, it is not Mary’s story as scripture conveys it.

No, scripture conveys Mary’s story as one of sickness and healing, of thankful and faithful service to her Lord, of discipleship and of witness. She was a witness to Jesus’ ministry, a witness to his death and a witness to and of his resurrection. “Mary is the first Easter witness in both senses of the word ‘witness.’ She is the *first to see* the risen Jesus, and she is the *first to tell* others what she has seen.”<sup>2</sup>

In the early church, Mary was known as the “apostle to the apostles.”<sup>3</sup> The word apostle means, one who was sent. In our gospel story today, Mary is sent by Jesus to tell the other disciples the Good News of the resurrection. Which she does. “I have seen the Lord,” she tells them. Mary shares her experience of the Risen Christ. In Eastern Christianity, tradition holds that Mary shared the good news beyond just the inner circle of Jesus’ followers. In fact, a legend in Eastern tradition places Mary of Magdala in Rome convincing Emperor Tiberius of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Eastern Church held to the scriptural depiction of Mary as a bearer of the Good News and as one who followed Jesus sharing in the most epic moments of his life and ministry.

It would seem to me that our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Church land closer to the mark than we in the Western Church. But whether in the East or the West, Mary of Magdala is a figure that captures the imagination. A faithful follower of Jesus, who stayed true to her Lord. She was a woman sent into a man’s world to proclaim the Risen Christ. And that is no small feat.

For me, Mary’s leadership and discipleship are inspiring, as is her relationship with Jesus which John captures so beautifully in his resurrection narrative. In John’s depiction, Mary is at the tomb and encounters Jesus but she doesn’t know it is him. Jesus repeats the angels’ question, asking Mary why she is weeping, and then he asks her an additional question, “Whom are you looking for?” These questions are the first words spoken by the risen Christ. His question whom are you looking for, mirrors the first words he spoke in his ministry. When the followers of John the Baptist approached Jesus he asked them, “What are you looking for?” (1:38). This question is an invitation that introduces one of the marks of discipleship in John: to look for Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> *Women & Christian Origins*, Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo, editors, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 108

Mary of Magdala is scripturally portrayed as someone who looks for Christ and when she finds him, she shares her experience with others. This is what we are all called to do as disciples and followers of Jesus. Whether women or men, like Mary, we are called to look for Jesus and to share our experiences of him with others. I have seen the Lord, she proclaims. Mary is one who sees. She is one who shares. Despite what tradition has made her over the years, her true character is one of discipleship. She is an example for us of what a faithful disciple looks like and acts like. Her story has provoked the imagination of millions. What does her story provoke for you?