

Mary Magdalene: A Faithful Disciple

Bible Background • Mark 15:40; 16:1-9; Luke 8:1-3; John 20:10-18

Printed Text • Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40; John 20:10-18 | Devotional Reading • Romans 4:13-25

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will DISCERN Mary Magdalene’s motivations for committing her life to Jesus, APPRECIATE the sacrifices Mary Magdalene made in order to follow Jesus, and EMBRACE a lifestyle of wholehearted discipleship.

In Focus

It was a wearying plane ride from San Diego to the military hospital overseas, but Jackie got no rest; she was too anxious. This was not the reunion she wanted for her and her husband Bruce, a lifelong Army officer whose career had taken him to deployments across the United States and around the world.

Every time Bruce was reassigned, they dutifully made the moves, understanding that they were together in marriage no matter where it took them. They packed everything they had and she took on the challenges of settling into new housing, making new friends, and supporting him, even as their family grew from two to three, then four. But the family wasn’t allowed to follow when Bruce was stationed at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, which meant Jackie leaned harder on her faith that her husband would be safe. Before Bruce left, he gave her a bracelet engraved with the Mizpah: “The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.” For months, that carried her through. Then came word that Bruce was injured in a vehicle crash. Now Jackie stood in a hospital corridor being told Bruce had been moved just before her arrival, but it wasn’t clear where. As an Army chaplain and an administrator tried to sort out the confusion, a kind charge nurse saw Jackie’s distress. “Don’t let worry overtake you now,” she said with a smile. “Believe me, with a loving partner like you in his corner, he’ll be fine.”

Can we trust God to care for those we love, wherever they are?

Keep in Mind

“He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.” (from Luke 8:1–2, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Sepulchre (John 20:11) mnemion (Gk.) — A tomb; a place of remembrance for a deceased person

B. Steward (Luke 8:3) epitrophos (Gk.) — An overseer or regent; person placed in charge of household affairs

Say It Correctly

Magdala. MAG-dah-lah.

Salome. SAH-low-may.

Chuza. KOO-zah.

KJV

Luke 8:1 And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with him,

2 And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils,

3 And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.

Mark 15:40 There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; John 20:10 Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.

11 But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre,

12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

13 And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him.

14 And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

16 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.

17 Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the LORD, and that he had spoken these things unto her.

NLT

Luke 8:1 Soon afterward Jesus began a tour of the nearby towns and villages, preaching and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him,

2 along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons;

3 Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's business manager; Susanna; and many others who were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples.

Mark 15:40 Some women were there, watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of James the younger and of Joseph), and Salome. John 20:10 Then they went home.

11 Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in.

12 She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying.

13 "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her. "Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him."

14 She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him.

15 "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

16 "Mary!" Jesus said. She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher").

17 "Don't cling to me," Jesus said, "for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" Then she gave them his message.

The People, Places, and Times

Demonic Possession. Demons are evil spiritual beings (Matthew 8:16; 12:43-45) who are enemies of God and have certain power over people (James 2:19; Revelation 16:14). They belong to the number of fallen angels that “kept not their first estate” (Jude 6). Demonic possession is mentioned quite often in the New Testament, with a variety of effects such as muteness (Luke 11:14) and epilepsy (Mark 9:17f). The child’s posture in Mark 9 is evidence of the physical exhaustion caused by the intense nervous strain of demonic possession. The Gospel records clearly show that Christ distinguished between ordinary sickness and demon possession. Jesus generally healed sick people by the laying on of hands or anointing. The demon-possessed were delivered when the spirits were commanded to depart (for example, see Matthew 10:8; Mark 6:13; Acts 8:7). Sometimes multiple spirits possess a single person, such as the legion of demons who possessed the man in Gennesaret or Mary of Magdala.

Background

Although some traditions have historically advanced the idea that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, more recent Biblical scholars have debunked that claim because Scripture does not support it. Possibly the link began with scholars assuming Mary Magdalene (who is first named in Luke 8:2) is the same “sinful woman” who anointed Jesus in Simon’s house (Luke 7). In Luke 8:2, what we really learn about Mary Magdalene is that she was a woman from whom seven demons had gone out and she was a close follower and friend of Jesus. In Mark 15:40, we learn that when Jesus was crucified, Mary was among the group of women who looked on from a distance. When the Sabbath was over, she was also one of the three women who brought spices to anoint Jesus’ body. Mary’s consistent presence with Jesus and His appearance to her after His Resurrection points to the value Jesus placed on the contributions of women to the spread of the Gospel.

What transforming life experiences have shaped your relationship with Jesus?

At-A-Glance

1. The Twelve and Some Women (Luke 8:1-3)
2. Refusing to Leave the Scene (Mark 15:40)
3. Looking for Signs of Resurrection (John 20:10-18)

In Depth

1. The Twelve and Some Women (Luke 8:1-3) Jesus’ earthly ministry would not have been possible without the support of disciples and friends who traveled with Him as He proclaimed the Gospel. As seen in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ ministry takes Him all over Galilee. He traveled with twelve disciples to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. However, Jesus did not travel with only His disciples. A group of women also accompanied Jesus. Each of the women who traveled with Jesus had been cured of evil spirits or diseases. Mary was called Magdalene because she was from the town of Magdala on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Joanna also traveled with them. She was the wife of Herod’s steward, Chuza. Her faithfulness to Jesus possibly indicates her opposition to Herod’s rule. Luke also records Joanna as being one of the women (along with Mary Magdalene) who first discovered Jesus’ tomb was empty (Luke 24:10). Another woman named Susanna also traveled with them. The women who traveled with Jesus and the disciples provided resources such as food and other support for the group.

What unique resources do you provide to contribute to ongoing Christian ministry?

2. Refusing to Leave the Scene (Mark 15:40) The women who traveled with Jesus supported Him in life and death. Each of the Gospels presents slightly different details of Jesus' death and resurrection, but the account is briefest in the Gospel of Mark which was the earliest of the four Gospels written. Mark does not indicate that the disciples remained at the foot of Jesus' Cross, but he does note that there were women who looked on from a distance (Mark 15:40). These women included Mary Magdalene. Crucifixion was meant to be a humiliating and shameful execution. People would not normally associate themselves with such a person. Crucifixion also demonstrated the total power of the Roman Empire. People who were crucified served as an example to Roman citizens of what happens when one crosses Rome. These women associated themselves with someone who was a threat to the Empire—Jesus. Though they are not right at the feet of the Cross (where John records himself and Jesus' mother), they do not fully desert their master as the other disciples did. These three women stay with their Master through His death and are the first to come planning to anoint His body on the morning of His resurrection.

When was the last time you supported someone or something until the end even knowing that you would not receive the result for which you had hoped and prayed?

3. Looking for Signs of Resurrection (John 20:10-18) Mary is the first to find the empty tomb. She then alerts the Apostles (John 20:1–2). When Peter and John went to Jesus' empty tomb, they thought that someone had taken His body. The two returned home. Like Peter and John, Mary feared that someone had taken the body also, but she was unwilling to leave the tomb without trying to determine where the thieves placed Him. Mary remained at the tomb only because of her devotion to Jesus. Mary's grief prevented her from immediately recognizing Jesus when He appeared to her in His resurrected body. When Mary finally recognized Him, she knew Jesus because of the distinct way He spoke to her. The miraculous had happened and Mary was the first of Jesus' friends to bear witness to the fact that Jesus had risen with all power in His hands. Mary could not wait to share the Good News!

When you receive unexpectedly good news, whom do you tell first?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why did Jesus travel with such a large group of followers? Why did those followers include women? (Luke 8:1-3)
2. Why did Mary Magdalene and others go to the tomb after Jesus' death? (Mark 6:1-2; Luke 23:56; John 20:3-9)

Discuss the Meaning

1. What might these women, especially Mary Magdalene, reveal about what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ?
2. What risks did Mary take to support Jesus' ministry?

Liberating Lesson

Crises of conscience plague contemporary society. Mary Magdalene's example to us as individuals is two-fold. First, she reminds us to allow God to transform our lives. Second, she shows us what it means to be a faithful follower and friend. In a world where so much seems temporary and fleeting, Mary teaches the contemporary reader to stay plugged into our relationship with Jesus. Mary's example to our churches is not to be hasty and walk away from the empty tomb. Today's churches often find that they are bombarded with statistics of how people in younger generations are less likely to attend church. These statistics sometimes lead us to change or dilute our message to suit changing times. Mary reminds the church to remain steadfast. There is yet hope.

Application for Activation

Think of someone you know who has experienced a liberating transformation because of Jesus. (Maybe you have yourself.) Ask the person to share their testimony with you. Consider asking the person if you may record their story to share with others in your small group.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40; John 20:10-18 Luke 8:1 And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with him,

With the word “afterward,” Luke begins this part of his account by connecting it to what came before. A review of the previous verses (Luke 7:36-50) reveals that Jesus accepted an invitation to have dinner at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. It was there Jesus taught a great lesson about forgiveness and demonstrated his power to forgive sins. The parallels of this account are found in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; and John 12:1-8. Jesus blessed an unnamed sinful woman who sought His forgiveness. He also admonished Simon to have a heart of love, worship, giving, and humble submission, which were traits He saw in the woman needing forgiveness. In essence, Jesus was engaged in His Father’s business of ministry to all people by proclaiming the Gospel. Chapter 8 continues to shed light on the dynamic ministry of Jesus and those who traveled with Him.

Verse 1 is clear about Jesus’ mission on earth: to travel extensively, preaching and showing Himself as our Redeemer, Savior, and expected Messiah. In Greek, the phrase “shewing the glad tidings” is a single word, euaggelo (ew-ang-GHEL-lo), from which we get the English word evangelize, and is the verb form of the word usually translated “Gospel.” The glad tidings were that He had come and anyone who believed in Him would receive eternal life as a child of God (John 3:16). Jesus had many disciples (Luke 6:13), but this passage tells us that His twelve, inner circle men traveled with Him. Luke elsewhere lists these as “Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James, and Judas Iscariot, which also was the traitor” (Luke 6:14-16).

2 And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, 3 And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.

These verses make it clear that men were not the only disciples. Women were disciples and devoted followers of Christ as well (Matthew 27:55). Verses 2 and 3 name specific women who are worthy of inclusion in this Scripture: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. All three women were delivered from demons and illnesses by Jesus and became devoted disciples of Christ. They demonstrated their love and devotion by supporting Jesus’ ministry with their personal resources. It is the epitome of humility and love that our Lord, who owns everything (including all riches), allowed His followers to contribute to His sustenance and ministry.

Verse 3 is the first reference to Joanna. We can see she worked with Susanna and Mary Magdalene to support Jesus’ ministry. She was very likely present when Jesus was taken from the Cross and buried. She is named as

one of the women at the tomb on the morning of the Resurrection (Luke 23:55; 24:10). The name Joanna is a Greek form of a Hebrew name meaning “God is gracious.” Joanna’s discipleship was unusual because she was the wife of Chuza, Herod’s “steward” (Gk. epitrophos, eh-PEE-trow-foce). This steward would be in charge of household affairs, as an overseer or regent. Joanna was a woman who had resources because of her husband’s position and is comparable to someone today whose spouse has a high-ranking job in government, such as a secretary for a governor or district judge. Can you imagine Herod’s reaction if he knew his employee’s wife was a disciple of Jesus? This Herod is not Herod the Great who tried to kill Jesus as a small child (Matthew 2), but that Herod’s son, Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist executed (Luke 3:19-20). Joanna’s contact with Jesus led to her deliverance and salvation. She was grateful and showed her love and devotion by supporting Jesus’ ministry, despite Herod’s actions against the ministry of the Gospel and the risks involved in her support.

This is the only Scripture that references Susanna by name, but certainly, she was present in other experiences that involved Jesus. He delivered her from evil spirits and sickness. She became one of His disciples and traveled with Him. She too, worked with women such as Joanna and Mary Magdalene to support the ministry of Jesus. Susanna’s name is the Greek form of a Hebrew name meaning lily, rose, or flower. It can be assumed that she was a woman of means, perhaps wealthy in her own right, because her husband is not mentioned, yet she supported Jesus’ ministry. She holds a significant place in Scripture because of her dedication to Jesus.

However, of the three women named, it is Mary Magdalene who is referred to the most in Scripture. She is portrayed as an exceptional, faithful disciple—present at the Cross, the burial, and the Resurrection as all four Gospels record (Matthew 27:56-61; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1-19; Luke 24:10; John 19:25, 20:1). Mary was and continues to be a very common name even today. During biblical times, Mary was so common that people used other descriptors for those named Mary, such as whom they were related to or where they lived. Mary was probably called “Magdalene” because she was from Magdala, a city in Galilee, located in the northernmost region of ancient Palestine, which is now a part of northern Israel. Magdala was a coastal area where Jesus traveled by boat, after His miracle of feeding 4,000 people (Matthew 15:39).

Of the women in Luke 8:1-3, Mary Magdalene is identified first. The fact that her name is given and that she is first on the list of women, says she is special. The life of Mary Magdalene was greatly impacted by Jesus. He healed these three women from evil spirits and diseases. But for Mary Magdalene, He had to cast out seven demons (Mark 16:9). We know from the account of Jesus’ encounter with the demoniac of the Gadarenes that many demons can possess a person at one time (Luke 8:30). Even though seven was thought to be a spiritually powerful number, Jesus’ authority over all creation—even demons—is more powerful. Such deliverance at Jesus’ hand helps us understand why Mary’s transformation led to faith, love, and devotion to Christ.

Traditionally, Mary Magdalene has been conflated with the sinful woman Jesus met in Simon’s house (Luke 7). It has also traditionally been assumed that the sinful woman was a prostitute. This is why Mary Magdalene has historically been portrayed as a repentant prostitute. A close reading of the texts, however, shows that this is not necessarily the case. The Gospels do not indicate as to Mary Magdalene’s profession or family history. Like Susanna, she simply is likely a wealthy woman with no husband, whose life was so changed by Jesus that she felt compelled to support His ministry in any way she could.

Mark 15:40 There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome;

Mark identifies the women who witnessed Jesus’ execution on the Cross. Mary Magdalene is mentioned again, along with Salome (John 19:25), and another Mary who was the mother of James “the less” and Joses. He was called “James the less” to distinguish him since James was such a common name. James the Less was younger or shorter than another James, perhaps another James in the family or among the disciples. Joses is a Greek spelling of Joseph, a common Hebrew name.

Luke and Mark show us the prominent and significant roles women played in the life of Jesus and the support of His ministry. In African American churches and across the overall population, women are crucially active and

comprise the majority of protestant congregations. Certainly, it is very encouraging for all to read these verses and see the value Jesus had for women.

John 20:10 Then the disciples went away again unto their own home. 11 But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, 12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. 13 And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him.

After seeing the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene ran back to tell the disciples. Peter and John ran back with Mary to see for themselves, but soon “went away again” to their homes, perhaps to ponder all they had experienced and to think about what might happen next. Mary Magdalene, however, stayed at the gravesite, overwhelmed and distressed because she thought someone had stolen Jesus’ body from the tomb. She didn’t recognize the two angels as messengers from God, and she responded to them as she would respond to human beings, perhaps because she was in a state of shock and sobbing. She let it be known that in her mind, Jesus’ body should have still been there.

14 And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

Mary Magdalene was so distraught, she did not recognize Jesus and thought He was a man that cared for the grounds. Even when Jesus questioned her, she tearfully spoke out of her grief and despair, not knowing where to find Jesus’ body. We do not know why she did not immediately recognize Jesus. Perhaps it was a dark early morning, coupled with tear-filled eyes, and compounded grief. The fact remains that she simply did not recognize Jesus. Often in a state of deep despair, a mourner will fixate on one thing, and not be shaken even by good news. Mary Magdalene seems to have been fixated on finding Jesus’ body.

It should be noted, however, that Mary was not the only one who could not recognize the resurrected Jesus. Later, Jesus shows Himself to the disciples who do not recognize Him either (John 21:4). Jesus’ two disciples on the road to Emmaus also did not recognize Jesus, until He chose to reveal His identity (Luke 24:16, 31). Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus when He was ready for her to realize His presence.

16 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.

Finally, when Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus, she sees Him as the Risen Savior. He calls her name. God knows the name of each part of His creation (Isaiah 40:26). He knows the secret name of every follower who overcomes (Revelation 2:17). He knows Mary’s name. He sees her. And now, she can see Him. She gives a fitting answer to His call with the appropriate response, “Master” (Gk. didaskalos, dee-DASSkah-loce; teacher) The term “rabboni” is perhaps the Galilean pronunciation of “rabbi.” This is a Jewish title for respected religious leaders, coming from the Hebrew for “my great one.” She acknowledges His true identity as Lord. What a significant event for us to witness through Scripture. She goes from mourning and suffering to joy and jubilation in an instant. Surprisingly, it was not John, the beloved disciple, or one of the other men, but a female disciple in the person of Mary Magdalene who first recognized the Savior.

Jesus opens Mary Magdalene’s eyes and she believes it is Him. Praise the Lord that Jesus shows Himself to those who deeply and sincerely seek Him. He will reveal Himself in a way that often goes far beyond expectations. Mary Magdalene had a heart that honestly yearned to find Jesus and He spoke to her. She was a devoted disciple of Jesus and demonstrated faith by her belief in Him as our Resurrected Lord.

17 Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

In verse 17, the word “touch” in Greek is haptomai (HAP-toe-my) which means to attach oneself to another. Therefore, a better translation of Jesus’ words to Mary would be “don’t cling to me” (NLT), rather than “Touch me not” (KJV). We can note that Jesus instructed Thomas to touch Him multiple times before He ascended to the Father (John 20:27). He does not want Mary, however, to cling too tightly to Him because He will soon be gone. Today we know that Jesus ascended to the Father. How wonderful it is that He continually allows us to cling to and hold on to Him without limits or restrictions as we pray to and commune with our Savior.

It is a blessing and a source of hope that Jesus let us and Mary Magdalene know that His Father is also our Father, and His God is also our God. This is the essence of our salvation story, to become children of God the Father because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross for us.

18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the LORD, and that he had spoken these things unto her.

Everyone who encounters Jesus after the Resurrection is transformed by His appearance. We can see a pattern in the appearances recorded by John. Mary is overcome with grief (20:11); the disciples are filled with fear (v. 19); while Thomas doubted (v. 25, 27). Jesus appears to them right in the middle of all their feelings. He does not expect us to clean ourselves up and get everything straight before encountering Him. Regardless of our status or condition, when we see Jesus our hearts and feelings are transformed. Mary’s sorrow turns to mission; the disciples’ fear turns to joy; and Thomas’ doubt turns to faith.

What a privilege for Mary Magdalene to be the one to deliver Jesus’ message to the disciples, a message she received in person! Now that we are transformed as believers, how eager are we to deliver the Gospel message to those who need Christ? Mary Magdalene was healed by Jesus, traveled with Him in support of His ministry, witnessed His Crucifixion, and was one of the first people to witness His resurrection. The Lord gave her unique, transformative experiences and all believers should see her as a special person and a faithful disciple, indeed.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Jesus Appears to Paul
(1 Corinthians 15:1–11)

TUESDAY

Present with Jesus at the Cross
(John 19:25–30)

WEDNESDAY

Spices Prepared to Anoint Jesus' Body
(Mark 16:1–8)

THURSDAY

Mary Magdalene Finds an Empty Tomb
(John 20:1–9)

FRIDAY

Angel Confirms Jesus' Resurrection to Women
(Matthew 28:1–10)

SATURDAY

Jesus Appears, Disciples Sent into Ministry
(John 20:19–23)

SUNDAY

Mary Magdalene, Faithful Disciple
(Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40; John 20:10-18)