



CLOUD OF WITNESSES

MARY MAGDALENE

Apostle to the Apostles

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group, provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of Mary Magdalene explores her role as the first to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus and is one of several volumes dedicated to **Cloud of Witnesses**. The pages of our Bibles are filled with the stories of women and men who have played a unique role in salvation history. By entering into a few key biblical passages written by or describing these people, we begin to see how our own story continues God's great work of salvation in the world. Their witness, handed on to us from centuries ago, continues to speak to us and challenge us to stand as faithful witnesses in today's world.

Prologue

Mary Magdalene is named more than a dozen times in the four gospels—more than any other woman and more than most men, even most of the Twelve Apostles! And, as Peter’s name heads the lists of male followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene’s name almost invariably heads lists of women followers. It seems reasonable to conclude that she was well known and well respected in the early church.

The gospels place Mary Magdalene among the disciples involved in Jesus’ public ministry and also tell us of her presence at the cross and at the empty tomb. She was probably one of the group of women gathered together with Jesus’ male disciples on Pentecost, as described in Acts, although the only woman actually named in that passage is Mary of Nazareth (Acts 1:14). Her part in Jesus’ story spans the public ministry to Pentecost (and no doubt beyond).

Most of what we know about Mary Magdalene comes from the passion and resurrection narratives. Surely, her great Easter morning proclamation—“I have seen the Lord!”—is the reason her name has been remembered throughout Christian history. With these words, Mary Magdalene became the first of Jesus’ followers to proclaim the good news of the

resurrection to other followers. It is this role as messenger of the good news on Easter Sunday that earned her the ancient title “*apostolorum apostola*”—“the apostle to the apostles.”

But Mary was part of the story of Jesus well before the resurrection. We know that she was present during his public ministry, and she was present at his crucifixion. This abiding presence is an important aspect of discipleship. Luke 8 tells us that Mary Magdalene and a number of other women were followers—disciples—of Jesus during his public ministry. And it is these same women who stayed with him during the crucifixion and who were witnesses to the empty tomb.

As we get to know Mary Magdalene (or Mary of Magdala, as she is sometimes called), we will explore the journey of discipleship that brought her to—and from—the empty tomb and that led to her being honored with the title of apostle. We will look at discipleship and apostleship, and at how these terms apply to Mary and to other women of the early church. And we will see, I hope, that these words can be applied to us as well! We, too, are called into a life-changing relationship with the Lord. We, too, are called to be disciples . . . and even apostles!

Called into Discipleship



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Luke 8:1-8 to be introduced to Mary Magdalene's involvement in Jesus' public ministry.

Luke 8:1-8

¹Afterward [Jesus] journeyed from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Accompanying him were the Twelve ²and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

⁴When a large crowd gathered, with people from one town after another journeying to him, he spoke in a parable. ⁵“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. ⁶Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. ⁷Some seed fell among thorns,

and the thorns grew with it and choked it. ⁸And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.” After saying this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.”

After a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the following background information provided in “Setting the Scene.”

Setting the Scene

The gospels give us several stories of the call of particular disciples, of their first encounter with Jesus, but there are many more disciples about whom we are told little or nothing. Jesus seems to have specifically called some people to follow him. There were others, apparently, who chose for themselves to follow this compassionate and charismatic man. Their call came through seeing the things Jesus did and hearing his words; his very presence called out to them. It was through their connection with him, their growing relationship with him and with his followers, that they “heard the call.” This number included both men and women.

We know little about Mary Magdalene and the other women who followed Jesus, and even less about what their “following” entailed. But it seems that they were, indeed, disciples: following after him physically and also following his teaching and his example. They were learning from their Master—and that is what a disciple does.

Who was Mary Magdalene?

Who was Mary Magdalene? As is the case with many of the people we read about in the Bible, little of her story is given. Much is left to our imaginations! Often, in my imagination, I have pictured her as a middle-aged woman, a childless widow, a woman of some means, who, when Jesus

healed her, responded with heartfelt thanks. Out of gratitude and generosity, she desired to learn from and to follow Jesus, and to support his ministry. And in so doing, she found a place of belonging, a family. She became one of those “who hear the word of God and act on it” (Luke 8:21)—which is how Jesus defines his family later in this chapter. Her new life was one of gratitude and hope. She was growing in love of the Father through Jesus and coming to know herself as part of God’s family. Using your imagination to read and pray with Scripture is a practice much encouraged by St. Ignatius, among others. The picture I have given here of Mary Magdalene is simply my picture, my imagination. Others have other ideas. (Perhaps my picture of Mary Magdalene is influenced by my own circumstances: if I had written this when I was in my twenties, my image might have been very different!)

Very little is actually known about Mary Magdalene. Was she a repentant sinner? A reformed

prostitute? These images of Mary have stirred hearts and minds for centuries. They are, however, much more gossip than gospel! They are not part of the biblical story of Mary Magdalene. They are part of the confusion and misinformation that have swirled around her over the centuries, clouding her reputation. It owes something to overactive (perhaps we could say artistic or romantic) imaginations and something to a lamentable blending and mixing of her story with those of other women in the gospels. This misunderstanding can be traced back to commentaries from the fourth and fifth centuries. The gospels never portray Mary Magdalene as a prostitute or a sinner.

Instead, the gospels present Mary, quite simply, as a disciple. Luke tells us that she is a woman who has been healed by Jesus and who now follows him and looks after his needs. That's the picture we get from the passage in Luke 8, quoted above. This presentation of Mary Magdalene as a disciple can also be found in the longer ending of Mark's gospel (16:9-20). Both Matthew and Mark, in their passion narratives, also tell us of Mary Magdalene and the other women who followed Jesus and provided for, or ministered to, him (Mark 15; Matt 27). It's a bare-boned description, but it is pretty clearly a description of discipleship.

The passage in Luke 8, introducing Mary and the other women disciples, is followed by the Parable of the Sower, an important teaching on discipleship. Through this parable, Jesus illustrates what it means to say yes to the call to

discipleship and to become “fertile ground” for God’s word. The meaning of discipleship will be explored more fully as we go along.

The entire passage will be considered a few verses at a time. The questions in the margins are for group discussion or for personal reflection or journaling.

Understanding the Scene Itself

¹Afterward he journeyed from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Accompanying him were the Twelve ²and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out.

The previous chapter of Luke is filled with encounters between Jesus and various groups of people in the region. At the beginning of Luke 8, we find Jesus on the move. This was his common practice: he was an itinerant preacher. He traveled throughout Galilee, “preaching and proclaiming the good news.” He was a man with a purpose, a mission: doing the will of the Father. He was proclaiming the message God had given him to proclaim. We are familiar with



much of his preaching and teaching: the beatitudes, the parables, the discourses. He attracted eager crowds, and he taught them that God's mercy and forgiveness were freely available to them. He showed that God was reaching out to them in compassionate love. Jesus taught them that God was calling them into relationship, calling them to live in justice and righteousness. His message of compassion, inclusion, healing, and peace spoke to many. And his words were backed up by his deeds: healings and other miracles, reaching out to and welcoming the poor, the outcast, the marginalized. Many of his listeners—including many women—responded very positively. Many of them accompanied him on his travels and became disciples.

As already noted, we have accounts of apostles like Peter and Andrew, James and John, being called by Jesus and leaving everything to follow him. But for several of the apostles, we have no story of how they came to be followers of Jesus. And we know that, beyond the group of twelve apostles, there was a much larger group of followers—disciples. We don't know if they were called by Jesus or simply chose on their own to follow him. In the passage we are focusing on, from Luke 8, we are told that Jesus, in this particular journey, was accompanied by “the Twelve and some women.” Besides Mary, two other women—Joanna and Susanna—are mentioned. We are given very little information about them though, only that they had been cured by Jesus and responded by becoming disciples.

What attracted you to Jesus? How would you sum up his message?



Cured of what? We aren't sure. Of the women in general, Luke says that they "had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities." Speaking of Mary Magdalene, he says that "seven demons" had been driven out of her. From a modern perspective, biblical references to demon possession might be taken

to mean any number of illnesses or conditions: epilepsy or seizures, mental or emotional illness, perhaps grief, depression, or what we would now call posttraumatic stress; there are varying explanations. A sinful past might or might not be part of this story of suffering. We have no way of knowing the particulars.

Certainly, in biblical times, illness and suffering were often considered to be the result of sin. And illness carried a stigma that left the sufferer feeling isolated and ashamed. Mary Magdalene would have experienced that. Although we do not know the details of her situation, what we can say with certainty is that she had been suffering greatly and had been healed by Jesus. Her response was one of gratitude and generosity. And this is true of the other women as well.

³Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

The final thing Luke tells us in this paragraph about Mary and the other women who followed Jesus and the Twelve is that they “provided for them out of their resources.” It seems likely that they were women of some means (we are told that Joanna was “the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza,” which indicates a position of some status and wealth). We can assume that they provided financial assistance to the apostles and maybe also looked after them in other ways—preparing meals, perhaps. We might wonder if they also reached out to other women who came to hear Jesus, perhaps making them feel welcome, perhaps sharing some of Jesus’ teachings with them.

This is not to imply that Jesus had wealthy women as patrons who saw to his every need! That does not fit the image of the Son of Man who had “nowhere to rest his head” (Matt 8:20). Nor does it fit the image of the poor man from Nazareth who identified with and befriended the poor and who spoke strong warnings to those who relied on their riches. But there were people, men and women, who were willing and able to use their material possessions to help Jesus and his mission. And Jesus would benefit from physical nourishment and nurturing on his journey, just as he benefited from the spiritual nourishment that came when he went aside by himself to pray. Those who responded positively to his message wished to support his mission in various ways. Some welcomed him into their homes; some left everything to follow him. Some, it seems, supported him financially.

What women have brought you to Jesus or shared Jesus’ teachings with you?

What gifts do you have that are being used to spread God's love in the world?

Luke's mention of "the resources" of the women might lead us to focus rather narrowly on financial resources. Current Catholic teaching on stewardship can help to expand our understanding. The term "stewardship" has come to encompass the resources of "time, talent, and treasure." Surely, this wider understanding applies well to Mary and her companions (and it fits with Matthew and Mark's description of the women as "ministering to" Jesus—see Matt 27, treated in the next chapter, or Mark 15:40-41). Mary Magdalene and the other women gave Jesus their time, their talent, and their treasure. Perhaps the talents they were able to offer included traditional domestic talents, like providing meals and accommodations. They also spent time with him, learning from him and serving him. They offered their talents of hospitality and caring, their gifts of compassion and presence.

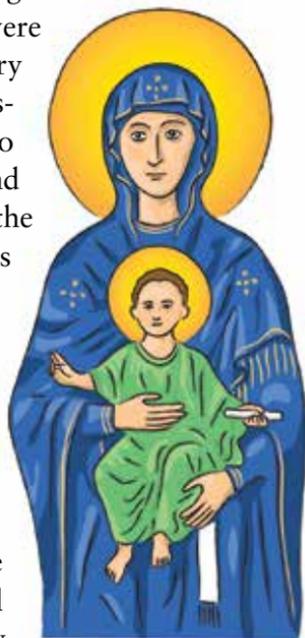
Let's take a deeper look now at Mary Magdalene as a disciple. We can define a disciple as one who follows and, more specifically, as one who learns from a Master. Jesus' disciples followed him literally and figuratively: they traveled with him; they learned from him and modeled their lives on his. They followed his teaching and they followed his example. Meeting Jesus changed their lives. This is true of the Twelve, but it is also true of a much wider group, including the women mentioned in Luke 8.

To our frustration, we are told little about them. Were these women well known in the early church? Did the original gospel audiences

already know their stories . . . did they even, perhaps, know some of these women? We wish we knew!

The gospels give us various examples of women who were disciples: not necessarily following Jesus on his journeys, but following his teachings, following his examples, learning from their Master, and living out what they were learning. We can certainly speak of Mary of Nazareth as the first and foremost disciple, who said “yes” to bearing Jesus to the world. And we are told of Martha and Mary, and of the Samaritan woman at the well. It may be that the mother of James and John—the wife of Zebedee—was one of the women who accompanied Jesus on his travels. We know of at least one occasion when she was journeying with him (Matt 20:20), and she was with him at the cross (Matt 27). The number of women disciples may have been relatively small (compared to the number of men), but in such a patriarchal culture, it is surely remarkable that they existed at all!

While it is true that little is said in the gospels about the women followers of Jesus, it is not surprising that his ministry attracted many women. His ministry had great appeal to the marginalized. We know that Jesus had a special connection to the outsider, the poor and lowly. This included “tax collectors and sinners” (see, for example, Mark 2:15); it included foreigners and non-Jews (Matt 8:5ff). It also included



How does Jesus' reaching out to women show that he reaches out to the marginalized? Have you thought much about the role of women in the early church? What does it mean to you that Jesus welcomed women into discipleship?

Mary was healed and responded in gratitude. What has led you to expressions of gratitude?

women, who, in a patriarchal society, were often marginalized. He called the humble, the neglected, the outcast into community, identity, and belonging.

Reading the passage from Luke 8 about Mary Magdalene and the other women who followed Jesus reminded me of a passage from Mark's gospel, the passage where Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. This is the second miracle recorded in Mark's gospel, still in chapter 1. Following is a quotation from the passage, using the New Revised Standard Version translation: "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them" (Mark 1:31). Jesus lifts people up, gives them new life, by raising them to a new understanding of who they are, a new awareness of their value and dignity as children of God. And they respond in gratitude and self-giving. They want to serve him. That's what we see with Simon Peter's mother-in-law. And that's what we see with Mary Magdalene. Jesus brought Mary healing, wholeness, restoration—new life. She responded with generosity and love. As with Simon Peter's mother-in-law, when Mary experienced healing, it led to a desire to serve. She and the other women named in Luke 8, who had also experienced healing, traveled with Jesus and his friends, and "provided for them." The self-giving love of Jesus called forth self-giving love from them.

⁴When a large crowd gathered, with people from one town after another journeying to him, he

spoke in a parable. ⁵“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. ⁶Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. ⁷Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. ⁸And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.” After saying this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.”

Mary and her companions responded to Jesus’ outreach to them by becoming disciples. It was his healing and compassionate presence that “called” them to discipleship. In chapter 8, immediately after he tells us of the women who followed Jesus, Luke places the parable of the Sower and the Seed. We can see in these women seed that “fell on good soil, . . . and produced fruit a hundredfold.”

“Good soil” is prepared and receptive. It welcomes life and allows life to flourish. Jesus uses this image to describe those who are open to hear and to follow him. The call to be “good soil” is a call into intimacy and community, a shared life: shared with Jesus and with all his brothers and sisters. The journey of discipleship is a shared journey. We learn from and support one another. And always we journey



A disciple
is one who
follows, and
learns from,
a teacher.

with—and toward!—Jesus, our teacher, our support, and our guide. Mary and the other women who became disciples followed Jesus with open, grateful hearts and minds eager to learn. They grew and matured together. God’s word, deeply rooted in them, would help them to withstand trials and challenges—rocky ground and thorns—as they matured in their commitment and developed hope and courage.

Jesus, in his words and his actions, taught many to see themselves as fertile soil where the seed of God’s word will flourish. He taught them that they were known, loved, and valued by God. That is the basis and core of discipleship; everything flows from that. Then Jesus taught his disciples to respond to that love: to respond to the call to lives of service to others, lives of compassion and generosity. This we see in Mary Magdalene. This is a lived discipleship: a responding to the message and the life of Jesus, a modeling of that message and that life. It is learning to abide in God’s love. It is a following of Jesus’ new commandment: “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Mary and her companions were learning to do what Jesus did, and that’s what all disciples are called to do.

Mary Magdalene is an example for us of someone whose life was changed by the Lord

Do you think of yourself as a disciple? What does being a disciple mean to you?

Jesus. Her discipleship “produced fruit a hundredfold.” She came to see herself as loved and valued by God. She came to see that she had gifts that could be used in service to God and God’s people. She grew in faith and trust because she experienced healing and acceptance from Jesus. She learned from him and modeled her life on his. She was a woman of gratitude and of generosity. She is a wonderful example of what it means to be a Christian disciple, someone we can admire and emulate.

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Return to the passage in Luke 8:1-8, reading it carefully and prayerfully. What words or phrases speak to you? Let yourself linger with these words or phrases so that God may speak to you. Try to memorize those particular words or phrases:

- *Write them down.*
- *Use them in your prayer this week.*
- *Let them speak to you about what it means to be a disciple.*
- *Hear in them your call to follow Jesus.*

Spend time praying about your discipleship. Your prayer may include gratitude, repentance, hope, resolve, confusion, questioning. . . . Bring it to the Lord: have a conversation with Jesus about being his disciple.

Living the Word

As you go about your week, be mindful of the women around you. What examples are there in your life of women disciples? What women do you know who are producing “fruit a hundredfold”?

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for these women, and keep them in your prayer.

Find a way to thank or encourage at least one of the “Mary Magdalenes” in your life.