

Jesus, Deliverer and Friend

No prejudice

Mary Magdalene is a remarkable figure within the Gospel story. She plays a humble part, isn't centre stage; that place is reserved for the disciples, particularly Peter, John, James and the tragic Judas Iscariot. You might say that she would have won best supporting actor for her role. Despite her role being off-centre, it is crucial and sadly too overlooked.

Mary Magdalen provides a foil to the band of 12 disciples. When they get it wrong, she gets it right. When they flee Jesus, she remains. When they've given up, she waits at the tomb, albeit with the grief of loss. As Ian mentioned last week, 'grief is the price of love', and Mary Magdalen truly loved Jesus.

Let's look at the facts.

She was delivered from 7 demons, the 18/19th century Methodist scholar Adam Clark suggests, *'The number seven may here express the superlative degree.'* The Bible sometimes uses the number 7 symbolically to mean complete. Of Mary Magdalen, meaning that her suffering was complete, the worst that it could be.

After her deliverance she ministered to Jesus alongside other women. The Greek word used in Luke 8:3 is diakoneo which is the verb to serve, the noun being diakonos where we get the name Deacon, you might say she was deacon-ing to Jesus. She stuck by Jesus side during his passion, she was the truest and most faithful of friends to Jesus. The Gospel records,

Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph,^[a] and Salome. (Mark 15:40)
Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. (John 19:25)

She was at the tomb when Jesus was buried, led the company that returned to the tomb after the sabbath to complete the embalming of Jesus' body. She met the angels at the empty tomb. She was the first to meet the risen Jesus and his first words were her name. In a way, she was the first evangelist in the church. John records.

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' (John 20:18)

It's not surprising that in the earlier days of the church all kinds of groups wanted Mary Magdalene on their side. If you search, you'll find extra unbiblical stories about Mary Magdalene, some she might be willing to own, others that neither do her or the church any favours.

The Friendship

As said, we don't have much detail about the friendship between Jesus and Mary Magdalen. It's important to stress that though she is not named within the 12 she was a disciple, being with Jesus was to be a disciple.

Her full background story is unknown apart from what the scripture tells us. But that is what God intended us to know, it is sufficient.

Also, most scholars ask that we don't superimpose Mary Magdalene over other unnamed women within the Gospels. Let Mary Magdalen be what she is, where we encounter her in the gospel story and leave the others to be themselves.

Jesus delivered Mary Magdalen of seven demons, her life must have been awful, tortured by the demonic inside and shunned by her community outside, miserable. We don't know why she was in this way but as she was, her life would have been lonely and loveless. She would have been left to the demon's ruler over her life.

Jesus delivered her from the demons and healed her. In other stories of deliverance, the healed are returned to their communities as a witness to Jesus' healing power. Not so with Mary, she either, wouldn't or couldn't return, so she stayed with Jesus and became part of his new community. Whilst among her own people of Magdala on the Midwest coast of Galilee, she was rejected and would have experienced life halting prejudice. With Jesus she is accepted without prejudice, he frees her from what had bound her, and he freed her to find her place in his story. Her story becomes part of his, as she accepts Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

As a faithful friend she stays with Jesus in his darkest hour. The 12 disciples failed to wait with Jesus when he was in need. Matthew records Jesus **'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'** (Matthew 26:38) Where she could, at the cross and at the tomb she was there, watching, waiting longing for her friend.

To note the friendship was not romantic, Jesus would never have entered a romantic relationship with another human being. He was uniquely the Son of God, and therefore could never be equally yoked to another human. He was the master and those that followed were disciples. He maintained a morally equal relationship to all and never abused his authority. If he had done, even once, he could no longer have been the spotless 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'

The Example

So, what can we take away from the story of Mary Magdalen and Jesus?

She was saved from a hellish life and then she completely devoted herself to Jesus. We see in Mary Magdalen two doctrines of the Christian faith at work.

- Justification, she was delivered and set free from her oppression by the love and compassion of Jesus.
- Sanctification, having been freed she found in Jesus a man utterly worthy of her love and dedication, she loved and followed Jesus because he was a worthy recipient of her love.

We might love a lot of things in life, but are they worthy of our love. Could we ever find something or someone more worthy to love than Jesus.

Jesus needs nothing from us and comes only to love us into 'life in all its fullness', our new life in him cost him his human life and that is worthy of deep reflection. Following Jesus' death as Jesus is laid in the tomb Matthew records **Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.** (Matthew 27:61)

Let's take time like Mary Magdalene to be with Jesus, to revel in his salvation and allow his transforming love to work within our lives.

Questions for Connect groups.

- What strikes you most about Mary Magdalene's love for Jesus?
- How might we emulate that love for Jesus?
- Mary Magdalene was utterly loyal to Jesus, what does loyalty to Jesus look like in our lives?
- Choose one characteristic of Mary Magdalene's life as a disciple, tell the others and put it into practice this week.
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Characteristics of Mary Magdalens discipleship

1. She chose to be near Jesus, even as he suffered (John 19:25)
2. She waited patiently, hopefully for Jesus (Matthew 27:61)
3. She was willing to serve (Luke 8:3)
4. She boldly shared the Gospel (John 20:18)