

**St Mary Magdalene**  
**Companion on the Way**  
**23 July 2017**  
**The Revd Jenny Wilkens**  
*Song of Songs 3:1-4*  
*2 Corinthians 5:14-17*  
*John 20:1-2, 11-18*



[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

I will never forget as our minibus was idling along the coastline of the sea of Galilee and I was dozing off in the muggy heat, when I suddenly sat up with a start! There was the green road sign Migdal, and even a shopping mall with Magdalene painted on the roof. I was sorry we couldn't stop at Magdala, the place from where Mary Magdalene came, in her time a prosperous town based on the fishing industry. Yet as so often is the case in the Scriptures, there could be a symbolic meaning to Mary Magdalene's name. The word Migdal means a tower, and so this could mean that Mary was like a tower, just as Peter was a rock. It could mean that Mary was a towering figure among the disciples, or even a descriptor that she is Mary the Great to distinguish her from the many other Mary's, just as we have James the Great and James the less among the disciples.<sup>1</sup>

Today as we celebrate the feast day of Mary Magdalene – I wonder what picture of her comes into your head as you think of her?

The beautiful and seductive woman with long flowing red hair and red dress of so many medieval paintings? The original scarlet woman? The fallen woman, now the great penitent, the healed sinner?

Perhaps the hypnotic soothing therapist of Jesus Christ Superstar – 'everything's all right, yes, everything's all right', to the desperate wannabe girlfriend of 'I don't know how to love him, what to do, how to move him' which I can well remember singing soulfully with 700 other girls at assembly at high school!

And then what about the Mary Magdalene of so many recent novels<sup>2</sup>, including Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code: Mary Magdalene the lover of Jesus and mother of his daughter Sarah*; *Mary Magdalene and Jesus sitting up in bed discussing theology!*

We have to work quite hard to get back beyond the layers and layers of church tradition, and current romanticizing and fantasizing to see what exactly is there about Mary Magdalene in the New Testament record...

<sup>1</sup> Fisher, Judi and Janet Wood, eds. *A place at the table: women at the last supper*. JBCE: Melbourne, 1993, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Also Marianne Fredriksson, *According to Mary- the life of Mary Magdalene, a novel*. Orion, 1999.

It's unusual that Mary Magdalene is not described, as most other Biblical women are, in relation to a husband or son, but in relation to a place: Magdala on the Sea of Galilee, a commercial and trading centre. Because Mary Magdalene is never linked up with a male, it's often been thought that she may have been a businesswoman of sufficiently independent means, to *choose* to be part of Jesus' group of followers, and one of those women whom Luke (8:3) says provided for Jesus out of their own resources. Perhaps an older single woman or a widow.

Luke in introducing Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna as Jesus' disciples, says they have all been set free from evil spirits and infirmities by Jesus, and this has been the catalyst for them to follow him. It's interesting that a few chapters earlier when Luke portrays the call of the male disciples, he doesn't refer to any of them needing healing, though he does have Peter saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man'. (Lk 5:8). It's funny that we don't wonder what Peter's sinfulness was about or link this with his sexual history, and yet the church has been very quick to cast all sorts of aspersions about what Mary Magdalene's 7 evil spirits were, to link them with the 7 deadly sins and particularly lust!

Be that as it may, both men and women become disciples of Jesus, and Luke comments that the women followed Jesus and provided for him out of their own resources. The word for this in the Greek is *διηκονουν* *diēkonoun*, from which we get our word 'deacon' – the women *served* him, *ministered* to him from their own resources. This is the same word Jesus uses at the Last Supper to invite the disciples to *serve as he has served*. We tend to think of 'provided for' in terms only of material resources, but actually in Luke *diēkenoun* has a stronger sense, it is a discipleship word, disciples who serve, used of both men and women disciples.

We know these women disciples were there at the cross of Jesus (Lk 23:49; Jn 19:25) and then they see where Joseph of Arimathea lays Jesus' body in the tomb (Lk 23:55). They go home and prepare spices to anoint Jesus' body and come back with them early on Sunday morning, to carry out burial rites for the body of the one they loved (Lk 23:56, 24:1), the last work of women for their beloved dead.

John, as so often in his Gospel, focuses on the experience of one individual as he tells the resurrection story. So first of all Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb while it is still dark (John 20:1) – a telling image for John who loves to play with images of dark and light. And then the shock begins...first the stone has been rolled back from the tomb, and so Mary Magdalene rushes off to tell the other disciples. She returns with Peter and probably John, and then at length has her own encounter with the risen Jesus, the one she evocatively mistakes for the gardener, but then recognises when he calls her by name. She is then challenged not to hold onto the Jesus she has known as her Rabbi, but to go and proclaim him now as the risen Lord.

John's gospel has some lovely imagery to share with us here contrasting death and birth. Mary Magdalene has come to anoint Christ's dead body at the tomb and yet arriving at the tomb, she finds the stone rolled back, a word that was also used of the motion of giving birth. Just as labour pains precede birth, so the pain of the crucifixion preceded the resurrection. Here the tomb is symbolic of the womb promising rebirth, Christ's resurrection as the first of the new creation.

Scholars<sup>3</sup> have also noted the similarities in John's gospel account between Christ's tomb and the Holiest of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem – the chamber at the heart of the Temple where God was said to be manifest on earth. In Jewish tradition, the Holiest of Holies is guarded by two angels, and it has paintings of the Garden of Eden on its walls. Only the high priest is allowed to enter, and only on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement. This was the nearest a human being, and of course then a man, could ever get to God. Women were kept at a considerable distance beyond the court of the Gentiles, in the Court of the Women. In John's gospel, the empty tomb is situated in a garden (John 19:41) and Mary sees two angels within the tomb. Here in this holiest of moments, God's great truth is made manifest, that God's life and love is stronger than death itself. And the person who comes first to witness this great revelation of God's power over death is Mary Magdalene herself, not a high priest, not a priest, a lay woman entrusted with being sent to share the news of the resurrection with the other disciples, the apostle to the apostles.

So regardless of later attempts to discredit Mary Magdalene, she is there in the New Testament as a faithful follower of Jesus to the cross, she is there first of all at the empty tomb, and she is the first to witness to the resurrected Jesus to the rest of the disciples.

I hope today we can celebrate Mary Magdalene as a leader among the disciples, the faithful follower of Jesus, and witness to the resurrection, the one the risen Jesus called by name and then sent to be the apostle to the apostles.

Mary Magdalene was one who carried the hope of the resurrection back to her community. I want to conclude with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:  
*Christian community is not an ideal we have to realise but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognise that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.*

May we too be those who hear the risen Christ call us by name, and may we bring the hope of resurrection and the possibility of new life to our rebuilding community and to our so needy world. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Revd Dr Giles Fraser 'Why Mary Magdalene is a true apostle', Church Times, London, 4 August 2010.  
Archbishop Rowan Williams, "Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne".