

## Stories of the Master

Web – [www.StoriesoftheMaster.com](http://www.StoriesoftheMaster.com) email – info@WGSministries.org

### The Mystery of Mary Magdalene Part 1

Mystery and intrigue have surrounded the maiden from Magdala. Many have believed her to be . . .

Jesus's wife . . . and . . . or . . .

The chief of the apostles . . . and . . . or . . .

An unfortunate victim of a male power play in early Church politics . . . and . . .or

A converted prostitute.

Take your pick. Mix and match. The probability is that you, like most, will fail to decipher the mystery if you rely upon sensational articles that have grabbed headlines and sold millions of books in our lifetime. Yet, since the Gospels were written, never have so many believed so much about one person with so little evidence!

This may surprise you – so little evidence? Yes, surprisingly, she is barely mentioned in the Gospel narrative during the life and death of Jesus, but then she appears in one of the resurrection encounters with Jesus with dramatic force.

In this special edition of Stories of the Master, we will explore what we know from the biblical record, I will share a story about Mary from John 20 when she encountered the resurrected Lord, and we will investigate why so many believe so many different things about her. What are these beliefs based upon, and are they as credible like the original biblical stories? We begin by investigating the biblical record.

Her name was Mary, in the first century – Miriam – a common Hebrew name, and she came from the village of Magdala. Mary was a common name and many “Mary’s” show up in the New Testament.

1. Mary, the mother of Jesus –
2. Mary of Bethany –
3. Mary, the mother of two men named James and Joseph –
4. Mary, the wife of Clopas –
5. Mary, the mother of John Mark –
6. Mary of Rome –
7. Mary Magdalene

Because Mary was a common name, the writers had to devise ways to keep the readers straight on who they were talking about. Thus, they used a descriptive for most of them. In the first century patriarchal world, the Gospel writers would often identify women with a significant male. Thus, we hear of Mary *the mother of John Mark*, Mary *the wife of Clopas*, and Mary *the mother of James and Joseph*. The virgin Mary, of course, is known for being *the mother of Jesus*. If there was no

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significant male, a writer could identify a woman by her home town. Thus, Mary, who was from Magdala,<sup>1</sup> became known as Mary *Magdalene* in Scripture and throughout history.

What else do we know about Mary Magdalene from the Bible? The Gospel writers mention her only one time during the preaching and teaching ministry of Jesus. They mention her presence at his crucifixion<sup>2</sup> and in a notable resurrection appearance<sup>3</sup>.

Let's begin by focusing on the one ministry passage in Luke 8:1-3. These are the words of Luke, the physician, researcher, and writer.

Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.

The first point we note from this passage is that Mary Magdalene was one of many women who traveled with Jesus and his apostles. Jesus and the apostles would naturally provide a safe and scandal free place for them to sleep, but they were pushing the boundaries of custom for that time and place. Only something of great urgency would necessitate this; the urgency was that the kingdom of God was coming to Israel through his ministry. Mary and the other women were part of his mission to bring this message to the people.

Second, while Mary was part of a team of women, Luke lists her first. Sometimes, the order of names was important in the Gospel records. In the lists of the twelve apostles, Peter, the most prominent of the apostles was always first. Could this be the same for Mary Magdalene? Possibly. It could indicate that she had a leadership role among the women, but it could just as easily indicate that she was greatly gifted or was the chief benefactor of these wealthy women.

Another possibility as to why she was mentioned first is that the miracle Jesus performed for her was the most amazing! Luke tells us that the women who accompanied him had been healed of sicknesses and released from evil spirits. All of them had some difficulty from which he freed them. Luke makes special mention that Jesus had cast out – not one – but seven demons from Mary Magdalene! Perhaps listing her first meant that her need was greatest and the display of Jesus' kingdom power most evident in her life. She is listed first in two other short lists of women at the crucifixion in Matthew and Mark, but John lists her third. Although prominent, it would be a mistake to read too much into the order of names, and we must be content knowing that Mary

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009, the village of Magdala was discovered on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Many have hailed this as the greatest archaeological find of the past 50 years. Only 10% of the village has been recovered to date, but already the first century synagogue has been uncovered! Magdala was a commercial, fish trading village. Its name may come from the Hebrew word for tower, *Migdal*, because fish were preserved by salting and stacking them in towers. You can learn more about the exciting discoveries in Magdala at [www.Magdala.org](http://www.Magdala.org).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:4–41; John 19:25

<sup>3</sup> John 20:1-18

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was well enough known for the Gospel writers to mention her in several places, but they mention nothing more about her than her home village and how Jesus rescued her. This tells us something crucial – the focus is on Jesus and his mission, not Mary!

Third, Mary may have been a wealthy woman. Luke notes that she along with Joanna and Susanna contributed to his mission out of their private means. Wealth in the ancient world was mostly in the hands of men. Scholars estimate that 90% of all patrons were male. But that did leave 10% in the hands of women. These three whom Luke mentions by name along with other unnamed women helped with the costs of Jesus' mission to Israel.

Finally, we must note that in this passage nothing is said about any immorality in Mary Magdalene's life. Often, in sermons or biblical movies, Mary is associated with the sinful woman in Luke 7:37-50 or the adulterous woman in John 8. But this is a mistake, and the first to make it was Pope Gregory the Great whose sermon in AD 591 was not so great! He mistakenly associated Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman in Luke 7. From that point, Western Christianity has tended to portray her as a prostitute although Eastern Orthodox Christianity never accepted this portrayal.

There was, however, something wrong with Mary – at some point in her life she opened the door to the world of evil spirits and seven of them entered her causing suffering in some form. What did she do to open this door? No one knows. All that we know is that Jesus freed her from this affliction, and she was a new woman. Once again, this reminds us of something crucial – the focus is on Jesus and his kingdom power, not Mary Magdalene.

Yes, Mary Magdalene was a changed woman. she – along with many other women who had also been healed or freed from evil spirits – accompanied him in his journeys throughout Galilee. They also accompanied him to Jerusalem and observed the horror of his crucifixion. One can imagine the heartbreak that she and the others experienced. She was at the cross. She saw the nails in his hands and feet. She heard his words. She saw the mockery and ridicule. She saw the men take down his battered body from the Roman cross and hurriedly wrap it in a shroud as the sun was setting and the Sabbath about to begin. She saw the burial, and she knew that she must visit the tomb to give a proper burial with more spices than could be arranged in the final moments before the sun set on that fateful Friday afternoon.

And then it happened. Early on Sunday, after resting on the Sabbath day, she and a group of women went to the tomb to add spices to Jesus' dead body. There they heard and saw something that changed them and the world forever. The following story is from the program "Early One Morning," presented in *Stories of the Master* and based upon the biblical accounts of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This story can be heard at <http://wgsministries.org/stories-2/holyweek/>. Scroll down and when you come to "Early One Morning - HW012," hit the play button to listen.

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In a home in Jerusalem, a small band of men and women were gathering. They came in ones and twos and they came as secretly as possible. Fear was in their eyes. Anguish and despair was on the faces of all. The followers of Jesus were gathering together.

The men hung their heads in despair. Some of the women were weeping. John, the youngest of Jesus' disciples was sitting next to Jesus' mother and speaking gently to her, reassuring her that he would watch over her and care for her as Jesus requested. Then a knock came on the door and Andrew motioned for all to be quiet and still. They feared that the authorities might come for them and they had to use extreme caution.

"Yes, who is it?" Andrew asked. "It's your brother, Simon Peter. Please let me in." Andrew quickly unbolted the door and Peter entered the room. Everyone stared and Peter looked upon them all and said, "I know. I have let you down. I have failed you all. I failed him. I am so sorry." Peter lowered his eyes in shame wondering if he would be received or rejected.

But one of the disciples approached Peter and said, "Brother, we all failed him. We all fled from him that night. In his moment of greatest need, we did not stand with him. All these years we argued about who was the greatest. We all proclaimed our loyalty. We all said we would stand with him, but none of us did." Then, with a slight smile he said, "At least you had the courage to use the sword, Peter! I thought you were going to chop that guy's head off in the garden when they came to arrest Jesus!"

"I never was good with a sword," Peter said, "but it was foolish. What was I thinking? What were a couple of swords against that band that came against us. Besides, did you see what Jesus did? He healed the man that I hurt. Jesus healed the one who came against him and told me to throw away the sword. Then he gave himself up as if he wanted to go with them. I still don't understand."

One by one the disciples came to Peter and embraced him. They comforted him and then they all wept over their failure and over the death of their master.

Late on the Sabbath the women went to their own quarters to rest. When the Sabbath ended, some of them began to gather spices. Mary Magdalene said, "We saw where Jesus was buried. Joseph of Arimathea laid our master's body in his tomb and he placed many spices in the folds of Jesus' burial cloth, but the Sabbath was approaching and he could not finish the job. We must go to the tomb early in the morning and complete the proper burial procedures. Who will go with me?" Joanna, the wife of the steward of Herod before whom Jesus stood trial and Mary the mother of one of Jesus' disciples and several other women agreed to go with her early the next morning.

They prepared their spices and went to bed, trying to sleep, but finding it difficult to rest because of the grief in their heart. All night, deep rumblings could be felt from the depths of the earth. The ground would shake for a moment and then be still, as if the earth were trying to say something to them all. And then they slept.

It seemed like they had just shut their eyes for a moment when Mary Magdalene woke with a start and said, "What time is it?" And another said, "I heard voices outside. I believe it is the fourth watch. The sun will be rising soon. Let's go to the tomb," and the women gathered their spices and went to the tomb to care for the body of Jesus."

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The Roman soldiers were vigilant in carrying out their task. They wanted to please their centurion. They had risen in the ranks of the soldiers by their courage and discipline and did not want to disappoint. One by one they would take turns standing beside the disc shaped stone that covered the entrance to the tomb. They would check the Roman seal to make sure it was intact although this was unnecessary for they would see anyone approaching the tomb before anyone could do anything to the seal or the stone or the body in the tomb.

Inside the tomb, the dead body of Jesus lay. Since Friday when Joseph placed him in his family tomb, his body had rested, lifeless, bloodless, and without breath. All throughout the Sabbath day, the second day, the body continued to lay in absolute silence and stillness. Darkness wrapped itself around him and held him tightly, as if it were trying to prevent something or someone from reaching out to him. And then on the third day, it happened. The darkness in the tomb screamed as a piercing light shined throughout the burial chambers, and the darkness fled for the darkness always flees from the light.

The light was coming from the body of Jesus. It was a beautiful light, a light such as no one on earth had ever seen and the body that had lain lifeless and motionless began to breathe. The chest moved up and down as Jesus took in the sweet air of God's new creation, and then he stood up! The burial cloths and the headpiece slowly dropped to the slab of stone, showing where they had encased a dead body, but now that body was standing – Jesus was alive!

The scars on his head where they placed the crown of thorns began to fade, but not completely. He looked at the hole in his side where the soldier pierced him. He looked at the scars in his hands and feet where the soldiers had driven their spikes. Although marks remained, the wounds were healed! Beautiful, holy light emanated from the body of Jesus as immortality spread to every cell. He looked up to his Father in heaven and said, "I thank you Father, that you always hear my prayer." And then he smiled and said, "It is beginning! Your new creation has come into the world!" And he walked through the walls of the burial chambers as the sun was rising on the first day of the week and the third day since he had been crucified.

The Roman soldiers had heard the screams of darkness from inside the tomb. It was a scream like they had never heard before, like something from another world, like something of a power that was beyond the power of Rome, yet, like something that was defeated by an even greater power. The four strong, disciplined Roman soldiers came to the entrance. They looked at each other with concern and then the earth shook mightily and one of them said, "Look" and they all turned around and two men were standing before them. They seemed to be filled with light. Their appearance was like the flash of lightning, and the soldiers could barely look at them for their brightness.

The men were smiling and staring into the faces of the Roman soldiers. They held no weapons but their appearance was so majestic and fearful that the soldiers could not hold their swords or spears or shields, their arms seemed to have no strength, their hip joints went slack, their knees began knocking, and puddles of water formed at their feet. The Roman soldiers looked down in shame and embarrassment but there was nothing they could do as they seemed to turn into stone.

Then, one of the shining ones walked to the stone. He reached out to the cord and seal that represented the might of Roman authority and he broke it and casually tossed it aside. Then

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he looked at the soldiers and smiled again at them as he reached out his right hand, grabbed the stone, lifted it out of its groove before the tomb entrance as if it were no heavier than a feather, and rolled it away from the tomb. He let it fall to the ground with a loud thud and then he sat on it and continued smiling at the Roman soldiers.

The Roman soldiers did not know what to do and then the other shining one walked to them and said, “If I were you, I would run. Run!” And the four, strong, disciplined Roman soldiers ran for their lives back to the city.

When the women arose and gathered their spices, they walked quickly to the tomb. It was very early on the first day of the week. The sun had just risen with enough light so they could make their way through the lingering darkness that seemed to fade with each step they took.

One of them said, “How will we roll away the stone? Even though there are several of us I don’t know if we have enough strength to move it from the entrance of the tomb. Who can we get to help us?” And then they felt the earth move. The women looked at each other with fear. “What is happening, Lord? God of our fathers what is happening?” They continued to walk towards the tomb and one of them said, “Look, Roman soldiers!” And they saw four soldiers with fear in the faces running towards the city. “I have never seen anything like that in my days!” one of the women said. Then, they rounded the hillside and came to the burial site and what they saw astonished them – the stone was rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. It was several feet from the tomb and lying flat on the ground, as if someone were saying it was never to be used again to seal a man in death.

“What has happened here?” Mary Magdalene cried out. “What is going on? Has someone tampered with the tomb. Oh God, no!” And she and the other women walked to the entrance of the burial site but instead of darkness the tomb was filled with light. They trembled with fear and then two men stood before them. The light was coming from them and the women fell to their faces with fear.

“Do not be afraid. I know that you have come looking for Jesus who was crucified. Why are you seeking the living one among the dead? He isn’t here. He is risen, just as said. Look, here is the place where they laid his body.” And the angels led the women to the slab of stone where Jesus’ body had laid since Friday night and the angel said again, “Don’t you remember what he said to you in Galilee? He said he would come to Jerusalem, be handed over to evil men who would crucify him and then on the third day he would rise. It is the third day! He has risen! Go now and tell his disciples. Tell them that he will go before you into Galilee.” And the shining ones disappeared.