

Mary Magdalene



Written by
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Mary Magdalene

Chapter One

Jesus went through every town and village preaching and telling the people the good news of the Kingdom of God. He was accompanied by twelve disciples and a group of women who had been cured of evil Spirits and illnesses. There was Mary known as the woman of Magdala who had been possessed by seven evil spirits; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's agent; Susanna and many others. These women looked after his comforts from their own resources.

Jesus had a special affection for Mary as he had for the disciple he loved. He knew the silent love of her healing. He was to her every man she'd never known. Over the years that affection had deepened between them. Yet in his vulnerability as a man he was not afraid. For he knew she would never abuse it in him nor he in her. Her support in his ministry was very real and important to him.

In her childhood, Mary was the victim of sexual abuse by a father and two uncles. They all saw her as a possession like the goods and chattels they owned, to be used and abused. By the time she was twelve years old she hated all men with a hatred so deep it consumed all her thoughts towards them. None of the other women could understand her for they did not know her secrets. Anyway why would they believe her? Sometimes she felt so fragile she would

dissolve into tears at the least criticism. Other times Mary was so wild she wouldn't obey anyone and often slept in the fields near her home and foraged for food in people's rubbish heaps. During these times her hair was unkempt and a tangled mess and she never washed herself or her clothes. Those who saw her said her eyes were crazed and she frothed at the mouth. Tales of this kind abounded even from seeing her slight shadow slipping between the rubbish heaps.

When she was home with her family Mary used few words and her eyes could not hold the gaze of even the women. She always did her work well but never joined the children in play. Sometimes they would call her but she never answered them and would turn away. When she was this fragile the walk to the well was torturous for her because she had to bear the taunts of the young boys and the odd girl who would spit at her and call her names which they made sure no adults overheard.

When Mary turned 16 years old her parents wondered about marriage for her. But who would want a woman who was so strange and unpredictable; sometimes so childlike and sometimes like a wild animal. As the years went by she began to be treated more like a servant than a daughter.

Chapter Two

It was a cool early winter's day. The birds rose up from the lake as a small crowd gathered quietly near an upturned boat on the shore where Jesus sat. Mary had walked a long way from her town of Magdala to come and hear Jesus talk and cure people. Why had she come to hear this man when she couldn't trust any man? She made sure she stood well back in the crowd where her slight figure could blend in with a group of older women huddled together for warmth.

Jesus began to speak. His soft and gentle voice penetrated deep into the crowd. He talked about many things which Mary hardly understood. But something was happening to her. Inside she felt a peace spreading through her whole being and she became aware this same peace was in the man Jesus. Somehow she had to move closer. Edging her way through the crowd was difficult. She eventually found a small space to the side which was close to where Jesus sat but not close enough to be noticed. Sitting down on the ground Mary drew her garments round her and half covered her face. She could watch him now. She knew men well. The answer to what was happening in her must be in him. The peacefulness never left her and nor did it leave him. Yet there were no answers in his words. Puzzled, Mary eventually began looking more intently at him.

Suddenly he turned and looked her way. His eyes held pools of a deep loving she'd never known before. This wasn't the love of the men she knew. His gaze transfixed her for a few brief seconds. Quickly she lowered her eyes.

Tears started to well up inside her so she got up and moved through the crowd towards a road leading into the hills. As time went by the tears in her eyes made her stumble on the rough surface and hurt her toes. She drew to the side into a small grove of bare fig trees. Here she dropped onto the ground of dead leaves and sobbed as she'd never sobbed before. Her tears came from so deep inside her she couldn't find the source. It was late evening when at last she became aware of stars twinkling above her and the darkness of tree shadows blowing in the wind. Fields were home to Mary so she curled up and slept.

With the morning chill wakening her hungry and thirsty, Mary had made up her mind to search for this man Jesus no matter how many days it took her to find him. Foraging for food kept her alive and water from the wells she passed. Mary asked whoever she could as to where the man Jesus lived but he didn't seem to live anywhere. Then when she'd almost given up hope a young woman with a baby in her arms directed her to a small house near the side of the village where she said Jesus was staying with friends. Mary hadn't the courage to knock at the door. But she had learnt a patience to wait. So she sat down under a tree from where she had a good view of the doorway.

Eventually two people came out and her heart leapt within her. Neither of them were Jesus. Then about an hour later a man stooped in the doorway to come out and stood up in the sunlight. Mary recognised him at once and so she moved towards him feeling afraid. How could she do this? Before she had time to answer herself he saw her and said,

“I know you” “Yes”, she said. “I’m Mary” “Come and eat with us Mary”, Jesus said. “The women will give you clean clothes and water to wash with. You’ve come a long way”.

Over the months she stayed with the women who knew Jesus and cared for him. Whenever Mary could she listened to Jesus speaking. Gradually she began to understand more of what he was saying. She began to learn about a God whom Jesus called father. But this father was not like her father whom she hated with all the hate she knew how! Jesus never approached Mary directly. He always made sure there were other women with her. He seemed to know how fragile she was. Eventually after many months she summoned up the courage to go outside and sit with him and his disciples in the evening while he talked and they asked him questions.

Often she was the only woman with the group but these men were like Jesus. She felt safe with them. As Mary sat quietly listening to him talking she learnt many things about Jesus of which he never spoke. There was a humility in him towards everyone which she was sure was the source of his real power and love for the people. It wasn't about weakness. Mary also sensed the suffering in him which wasn't from any illness. He talked about the Kingdom of God and himself as the way, the truth and the life. It wasn't an arrogance but an authority for she knew the difference in men. Yet he never claimed equality with his father. He said he was here to serve him.

One day he began to talk about his death at the hands of men as though it was ordained to be. At these times the disciples chided him and seemed puzzled by such talk. But Mary knew that he believed too deeply in his ending for her to disbelieve it. Sometimes his Mother was present when he talked like this. Mary Magdalene watched her face and saw the pain in her eyes and her hand go to clutch her stomach under her outer garments. Mary knew why she did this, for the same pain went through her also. Such was the love of both these women for Jesus.

Mary Magdalene grew stronger and more sure of herself. She laughed a lot more and sang while she worked. She often went up to Jesus and asked him questions which grew out of the talks he gave. They would sit down together and discuss at length many things. There was a quiet enjoyment in each other's company at these times. Her childhood and the town of Magdala seemed so distant and shadowy now in the sunlight of life with Jesus and his disciples and the women. The only fears she had now were when he talked of his eventual death even though the talk of the resurrection gave her some hope that there was more to his death than an ending.

His entry into Jerusalem was triumphant and the crowd loved the man on the donkey. By now so many had been healed by him and knew him well. And many others hoped he could overthrow the Roman power which kept them prisoners in their own land. Mary felt caught up in the excitement of it all as she watched with a group of women.

One day when Jesus sat at Simon's table to eat a love so great overwhelmed Mary. She took the precious alabaster flask of oil she'd brought and went up to the table and quietly broke the neck of the flask and poured it onto his hair. The other men at the table grumbled about the waste of a costly ointment. Some looked at her so queerly that she felt ashamed by their thoughts and withdrew into the shadows where she could hide. But not before she heard Jesus say, "She has done a beautiful thing. The poor you will have with you always but you will not always have me. She has poured oil on my body in preparation for my burial". The words both frightened and warmed her. He'd understood the love, but instinctively she knew in that moment his death was not far away and a sharp pain pierced her heart.

How Mary longed to be at the supper Jesus had asked the women to prepare for his disciples in that upper room. She'd even felt some anger. Where had that come from? How dare she think she was equal to being one of them for she wasn't a man. Fearful of her thoughts she kept quiet even with the women she trusted as they would not understand.

Chapter Three

Mary lay on her bed and tried to recount the events of the last few days. She'd been there with his mother when they crucified him outside the city wall beside two thieves. Her pain at the time was beyond all pain! There were no words to describe pain like that inside her. They'd been so cruel. She couldn't watch the nails being hammered in again and again but she heard the agony in his cry. How could he say, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do". She saw them pierce his side with a sword, and she heard them laugh and say, "You saved others, why can't you save yourself?". She couldn't bear to think what those soldiers did to him, when Pilate let them take him away. For she knew men who were cruel and needed to be powerful in the wrong kind of ways. Did he know the abuse she'd suffered when they'd stripped him and had time on their hands to play.....did he know?

Mary watched the soldiers take his shirt; the shirt woven in one piece by his mother. She knew that shirt so well for she'd washed it many a time and sat by it as it dried on the sun-baked rocks. How dare they caste lots for it! It was hers to take away! She longed to reach out and touch it one more time but how could she. Both the men and the women would wonder. What was her love for this man Jesus?

Jesus suddenly looked towards his mother. The pain in his eyes matched the pain in Mary's heart. He saw the disciple he so loved and then said these words to his mother, "Look

there is your son”, and then to him, “There is your mother”. Mary Magdalene was hushed inside herself for a moment by such loving. Where did it come from? But she felt left out. A little while later Jesus cried, “I am thirsty”. Those rough soldiers soaked a sponge in wine and put it on a spear and pushed it towards his mouth. When Jesus had taken it he cried, “It is finished!!”. His head fell forward and he died.

The end had come unexpectedly for Mary. An emptiness filled her. Her beloved Jesus was dead. In the darkness of her small room Mary sobbed until she could cry no more. Her tears drenched her pillow where she lay totally bereft and abandoned. It was early morning. She hadn't slept but the cool dawn light was showing streaks through the window. Something inside her urged her tired and exhausted body to get up and out of bed and to dress. What was she doing? All she knew was that she was going to Jesus tomb. But at this hour! She must be mad! Maybe she was going crazy like she used to be. By now she was very frightened by what she was doing and yet she was driven by a longing so deep inside her which she could not resist.

As Mary entered the tomb garden belonging to Joseph of Arimathaea. The chill of the early morning made her draw her garments more closely around her body. It was so dark she almost lost her footing on the steps. On looking up after regaining her balance what she saw frightened her more than what she was doing in coming here. There was no stone covering the entrance. With her fears overwhelming her she turned and ran to Peter's house. In

the confusion Mary hadn't even stopped to look inside the tomb but intuitively she knew Jesus was not there.

Peter and the disciple Jesus loved came quickly at her tearful insistence. What they saw shocked them for this crazed woman who had burst into their house so early in the morning was right; Jesus was gone but strangely his garments were not. They went home numbed stumbling against each other in the darkness. They had forgotten about Mary. She stood sobbing by the side of the tomb alone and totally bereft. For a moment she was that child of long ago so alone and misunderstood and with no-one, no-one.

Through her tears she peered into the intense darkness of the tomb. She had to see for herself. A brightness began to illuminate the place where Jesus had lain. Two figures merged out of the light and asked her, "Why are you crying?". In a new anger and between sobs she retorted, "Because they have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have lain him!". Mary then turned and started to run towards the garden. A man stood blocking her way. She supposed he was the gardener so she cried to him, "Oh, if you have carried him away please tell me where you have put him and I will take him away from here!". With that she turned and collapsed to her knees, sobbing again, feeling out of control in her total confusion and grief. But not caring what this man thought of her. The man who stood behind her said one word "Mary".

In that moment her heart leapt within her and she turned

towards him and stood up. Through a mist of tears she saw her beloved Jesus smiling at her. That love in his eyes for her was all she knew. Instinctively she moved to hold him. Quietly and gently and with a great tenderness he said. "No Mary, do not hold me now, I have not yet gone to my father. Go and tell the others I am going to my father and your father. To my God and your God." Maybe she could not hold him, but she was filled with his presence which flooded her whole body and being. It was so beautiful and tender and loving. It was all he was.

How could she describe such a loving presence to others. For they would not understand. She lowered her eyes to the ground in awe and humility. When she looked up Jesus was gone but not the presence within her. She felt it through her whole being. The lightness in her body and the courage that came into her heart enabled her to turn and walk out of that garden. Her Lord and her beloved Jesus was not separate from her even in death.

A great peace filled her as she walked quietly back to the house where Peter and the other disciples were. When she entered the room they turned to this woman and fell silent because what they saw was not a crazed and tearful woman but one who held a beautiful stillness within her. They waited for her to speak. After a short pause she said "I have seen the Lord". This was not a woman hallucinating or imagining for the strength in her voice and her whole being convinced them that what she said was true. For she seemed filled with a courage and a presence of a love they all knew so well.

Author's Note - 2023

I wrote my story of Mary Magdalene back in 1993. According to the Gospel writers Mary Magdalene was possessed by not two or three, but seven demons! This gave me the freedom to use a contemporary understanding of how the horrific effects of child sex abuse can destroy the self-worth and confidence of a person during their formative years, especially when God and religion is introduced into the mix.

After reading the recently published book by SCM Press: 2021: When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse, this gave me the courage to share my story of Mary Magdalene more widely. Many in the Church will find it to be an embarrassing-read because of my contemporary interpretation of her 'seven demons'. However, I suspect the torture of Jesus will be an easier conversation to have over coffee than Jesus sexual abuse.

My story focuses on how fragile Mary Magdalene became as a result of her sexual abuse and the time it took for her to heal. With the added focus on Jesus ability to understand her fragility and respond to her during this time while her gifts were slowly emerging.

Hopefully survivors of child sexual abuse will find my story of Mary Magdalene empowering, while leadership in the Church continue to learn how to respond to survivors of sexual abuse with a greater sensitivity and understanding.

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Title Page Icon

This icon was commissioned for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco to commemorate the election of Barbara Harris, the first woman bishop in the Anglican communion. As women reclaim their ancient rights in the church, Mary Magdalene challenges all Christians to re-examine their cultural prejudices about gender and leadership.

According to the ancient tradition of the East, Mary Magdalene was a wealthy woman from whom Christ expelled seven "demons". During the three years of Jesus' ministry she helped support him and his other disciples with her money. When almost everyone else fled, she stayed with him at the cross. On Easter morning she was the first to bear witness to his resurrection. She is called "Equal to the Apostles."

The Eastern tradition tells us that after the Ascension she journeyed to Rome where she was admitted to the court of Tiberias Caesar because of her high social standing. After describing how poorly Pilate had administered justice at Jesus' trial, she told Caesar that Jesus had risen from the dead. To help explain his resurrection she picked up an egg from the dinner table. Caesar responded that a human being could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand turn red. The egg turned red immediately, which is why red eggs have been exchanged at Easter for centuries in the Byzantine East.

Mary travelled the Mediterranean preaching the resurrection. Like Peter and Paul, she died a martyr and she bears witness to the important role women once held in the church.