

Looking for Mary Magdalene

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Part One

I believe the Bible is a confusing amalgamation of history, mythology, and poetry, and that it is probably not possible to say where the one ends and another begins. Moreover, I am not entirely sure it is necessary; because I believe the Bible is a living document we have to struggle with in a search for Truth, with a capital *T* not a small *t*. Data teaches truth with a small *t*; mythology and poetry teach Truth with a large *T*. The creeds, laws, poetry, and stories given to us by our Jewish and Christian forbearers present a complex and profound cannon we can engage with to better understand our spiritual relations with ourselves, our fellow human beings, and the divine.

I cannot tell you much about Mary Magdalene that I know to be true with a small *t*, although I can tell you what I know is very *unlikely* to be true about her. I can suggest to you some Truths with a large *T* that I am beginning to glimpse for myself as I search for the meaning of this Biblical figure. That kind of Truth, large *T* truth, is personal and cannot be accurately translated. I extend this service to you as a way of inviting you to think about Magdalene in a new way, and look for large *T* Truths of your own.

This sermon is titled “Looking for Mary Magdalene, not “Finding Mary Magdalene”. Yet, when I titled the sermon, I had no idea how difficult this quest was going to be, nor that when I stood before you this morning, I still would not be able to say I had found her. She is a bit like a shadowy figure in a mystery, and I’ve been the detective trying to piece together a picture from the sketchy material in the Bible and

some additional, underground sources. So, since I am investigating a mystery, let me start by interviewing you. What have you heard about Mary Magdalene?

[Pause for responses]

Well, let me share with you the sum total of the evidence presented in the Christian Testament. In only one of the four canonical gospels is there any reference to Mary Magdalene prior to the crucifixion. In this passage, from Luke, Jesus travels through the countryside preaching. He is accompanied by his twelve disciples and women whom he has healed of infirmities and evil spirits. Among these is Mary Magdalene, “out of whom went seven devils.” She and the others “minister to him of their substance.” She does not appear again in Luke, nor in any other gospel, until the crucifixion. Mary Magdalene and the other women are witnesses to the crucifixion. Either with them, or alone, Mary is the first witness to the resurrection, and it is she who first proclaims his resurrection to the other disciples, thus earning the title Apostle to the Apostles.

This is all that is written anywhere in the canonical gospels about Mary Magdalene. It is not Mary Magdalene who anoints Jesus with oil, nor does she wash his feet, nor is she the sister of Lazarus and Martha. And there is not a shred of evidence anywhere that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, although she has been depicted as a prostitute in popular culture from the days of the early Church to *The Last Temptation of Jesus*.

Mary Magdalene was made over as a whore by the early Christian church. Her character was confused, sometimes deliberately, with that of other women in the Christian Testament, until in the sixth century Pope Gregory declared that Mary

Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and a sinner who was possibly a prostitute were all the same person: Mary Magdalene, a repentant prostitute. This deliberate misinterpretation of the Christian Testament has offered us throughout most of the history of Christianity one of only two models of women: the whore and the mother.

As radical Christianity solidified into orthodoxy, Mary Magdalene was prostituted to stand for Woman, who was by nature sexual and therefore corrupt. Only by repudiating her sexuality and remaining a virgin, or by repenting it, as Mary Magdalene is supposed to have done, could a woman be redeemed, and even so she remains inferior to man. Woman. Eve's progeny. The recipient and bearer of evil. In essence, **the Mary Magdalene of the Roman and medieval eras repents being a woman.**

This distortion of Mary Magdalene is tragic. It is tragic for the model it has given us and it is tragic for the model it has denied us. Who *was* Mary Magdalene, and what was her role in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

The Christian Testament tells says very little, but it does say this much: she was among those who were healed by Jesus, she -- along with other women -- provided him with the material means to carry out his ministry, and she was the witness, in some versions the only witness, the resurrection.

Mary traveled with Jesus, and in fact though not one of the famous twelve males, she was a disciple. She *received* from Jesus, but what is particularly important to me is that she *gave* to Jesus. For Jesus, the Bible says, was supported by women who traveled with him and ministered to him. Biblical scholars explain that this ministry consisted of providing financial and other forms of material support, but I like to think this ministry

may have included emotional and spiritual support as well. Be that as it may, Mary and other women ministered to him.

The idea that Jesus received as well as gave ministry had never occurred to me. I certainly never heard that in Sunday school. I grew up believing that Jesus was ministered to only by God and God's angels, who somehow, supernaturally provided for his every need. The gospels actually tell that he was provided for by his fellow human beings. Even Jesus Christ could not do it alone!

The relationship between Jesus and Mary represents for me a circle of love at the heart of my personal theology. I believe that the divine is manifest in the love that flows between human beings. Like electricity, love can only flow as a current: you must receive it and you must give it or the circuit is broken and the love of God will not flow. Throughout the Christian Testament we see Jesus give and give and give. Only in these sparse accounts of his female disciples is there any hint that Jesus received.

But he had to receive. And so do we. This is one of the two truths that I have been able to coax from Mary Magdalene so far: **Giving and receiving are both blessed, and if we are to enjoy the blessings of giving, we cannot deny ourselves the blessing of receiving.**

I believe that living a religious life requires us to act not for ourselves alone, but for others. What I admire most in Jesus's teachings is his constant reminder to us to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the imprisoned.

Social action and education have been among the most spiritually satisfying activities I have ever been involved in. But I could not have managed without my Mary

Magdalenes: people who are part of a personal and reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving.

All of my Mary Magdalenes give me a place to go to be emptied and to be filled. To rest. To listen. To feel encouraged. Challenged. Awakened. Foremost among my Mary Magdalenes is my husband, who has been a constant and steady support and catalyst for me. I have other Mary Magdalene's as well. My mother is a significant Mary Magdalene, so are my friends. My covenant group has been a Mary Magdalene to me. None of my Magdalenes are perfect, nor am I. Our relationships are replete with petty annoyances, misunderstandings, disappointments. And yet it is through these contacts, so very human, that I receive grace and receive it again and again and again.

Part Two

This is the one big T truth that I began to glean early in the process of trying to understand Mary Magdalene. But I knew there was something else in the story, something I did not want to have to grapple with. That is the story of Christ's resurrection. I am a Unitarian Universalist. And if there is anything that approaches orthodoxy in Unitarian Universalism, it is the belief that our concern is with this life. If there is a life after death, that is beyond our concern.

Yet I have thought for a long time that there are many layers to the resurrection story beyond both the literalism of conventional interpretations AND the platitudes of liberal interpretations. I have known there are some big *T* truths in the resurrection story, some VERY BIG *T* truths, yet I have been reluctant to go that way. I tried to understand Mary Magdalene without thinking about the resurrection, but my search for Mary Magdalene led me out of the Christian Testamentⁱ altogether, into a strange, mystical

cannon that ultimately brought me back to the Christian Testament and forced me into the garden with Mary.

In my readings, I discovered that although she is a minor character in the gospels collected in the Christian Testament, Mary Magdalen is a major player in the Gnostic Gospels. These texts, discovered fifty years ago in the sands of Egypt, are the written documents of a branch of Christianity that was both literally and figuratively buried shortly after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Gnosticism was a philosophical and theological orientation that was not limited to Christianity alone, but there were many Gnostics among the early Christians, so many in fact that Gnostic Christianity seriously rivaled what would become Orthodox Christianity.

From the evidence we have of Gnosticism in the newly discovered texts, from some fragments discovered in the 19th century, and from references to Gnosticism in Christian writings throughout the common era, this appears to be a very mystical esoteric group, who scorned the world and ways of the flesh, revered virginity, and sought to detach their spirits from the corruption of their bodies. The influences on this group were many: Platonism, mystical Judaism, and almost certainly Buddhism and other religious sources that we tend to categorize as eastern. I have learned since undertaking my research for this service that the designations of Eastern and Western Religion are artificial constructs. The Roman Empire was indeed a multicultural society, and the influences on religious thinking were many.

The Christian Gnostic texts concern themselves with many of the same characters as the canonical gospels, and some were penned within the same time frame. In many of these gospels, Mary Magdalene figures very prominently, and her relationship with Jesus

and the disciples is deeper than in the Christian Testament. Indeed, Mary Magdalene is Jesus' favorite disciple. One of his most constant companions, she receives and understands his teachings more than any of his other disciples. Her relationship with Jesus is Platonic in the sense that she is his spiritual and intellectual companion. But in at least one text, their relationship is NOT Platonic in the conventional sense. In the Gospel of Phillip, Jesus is reported to kiss her often on the mouth. Given the Gnostics' obsession with virginity and contempt for the flesh, suggestions of an erotic relationship are confusing but it is widely believed that the Gnostic Mary Magdalene is Jesus' female counterpart, an earthly embodiment of wisdom just as he is an earthly embodiment of spirit. She stands for the female as he stands for the male, and whatever else their relationship may mean, it does symbolize a Platonic reunion of the male and female elements.

I tell you this to give you a broader picture of Mary Magdalene as she was understood by some Christians in the early Christian Era, and to introduce you to the Gnostics, whose understanding of the resurrection is unique and inspiring. There is an entire sermon in the relationship of Mary Magdalene and Jesus, and while I do not wish to ignore it, to explore it further now would derail this sermon, which is primarily intended to examine the figure of Mary Magdalene as she is presented in the Christian Testament.

We have seen Mary Magdalene in relationship to the mortal Christ. I cannot do justice to this character without also looking into her relationship with the resurrected Christ. This is the territory I have tried so hard to avoid, because no explanation of the resurrection I have heard sits well with me. I do not believe in the bodily resurrection of

Jesus. I don't think many Unitarian Universalists do, and I know mainstream Christians who also do not take the bodily resurrection literally. Yet I am unsatisfied by explanations that describe the resurrection as the influences and teachings that survive Jesus's death. These explanations miss the mystery, wonder, and awe of myth.

The Gnostics, however, offer another explanation of the resurrection. In the early decades of the Christian Church, there wasn't agreement on what the resurrection meant, and remnants of this disagreement remain in the Christian Testament, even within the same Gospels. Thus Jesus in one passage clearly walks in his former corporal body, a tangible body that looks and acts just exactly as one would expect a body to behave. In another, he appears to Mary and the disciples as a stranger, and it is only after engaging with him that the Christ is revealed. Elsewhere, the risen Christ is ethereal, appearing and disappearing behind closed doors.

Some early Christians accepted resurrection stories that clearly depicted encounters with the very same physical body that had died three days earlier. This version has dominated our culture until recently. But many of the Gnostics thought their more orthodox brothers and sisters were entirely too literal. They did believe in the very real resurrection of Jesus, but it was a resurrection of the spirit, not of the body. The Gnostics believed the human spirit was immortal and separate from the body. The spirit did not have a physical form, but it could take on a physical appearance. The Jesus Mary Magdalene saw was an apparition, a vision, and as Jesus tells her, a vision occurs in the mind. This is *not* to say that Mary imagined Jesus, but that the actual conscious spirit of Jesus arose within her, not outside her.

The Gnostics believed that resurrection was neither a past nor a future event, but a present event. Jesus was not resurrected only for the forty days that preceded Pentecost. He always was, and always will be resurrected. He was resurrected before he ever died.

Now much of the Gnostic understanding of resurrection is no more comprehensible to me than conventional interpretations. And like many other Christians (but not our Universalist ancestors) they believed only those who followed Christ were granted life eternal. My reading of the **canonical** gospels involves much sifting, interpretation, and selection. My reading of the Gnostic Gospels is requiring even more.

But this jewel of Gnostic theology shines for me: Our resurrection is a present event. To the Gnostics, every soul is unique and individual, a separate self, yet every soul can know the All. The human's goal is to experience his or her immortal soul. Because our spirit is eternal, it is not changed by death. It is eternally present; only the body changes. When we know this, separating ourselves from our physical being to comprehend fully our spiritual being, then we are resurrected. *We do not need to die to experience eternal life because it is ours already!*

This is one of those universal big *T* truths that is not the property of one religion only. Resurrection is enlightenment, altered consciousness, and in Christian terms, revelation. I understand it best as William James explains it in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In recognizing our worst self, we become conscious of our highest self and by knowing our best self “we become conscious that [our] higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of [us]”ⁱⁱ

Whatever else Mary Magdalene may mean to different groups, she is significant in all incarnations of Christianity as witness to the Resurrection, and it was for this that she earned the epithet “Apostle to the Apostles”. For many, she testifies to the literal resurrection of Christ’s body; to me, and to many of the Gnostics, Mary experienced and heralded the internal and ever present resurrection of the immortal spirit.

Conclusion

In the Christian Testament, Mary Magdalene has a relationship with the mortal Jesus and with the resurrected Jesus. These relations represent for me the two central strands of all religion: Communion and Revelation. Communion is represented in the reciprocity of her relationship to Jesus. He served her and she served him. Communion has two aspects to it-- giving and receiving.

Revelation is represented by Mary’s encounter with immortality. Revelation also has phases of giving and receiving-- transcendence and translation. Transcendence occurs in single instances of illumination. Translation is the process whereby we give witness to our experiences, inviting others to their own unique encounters with the eternal.

When I first discovered this interpretation of the resurrection, I was both delighted and dismayed. Delighted because this offered me the promise of experiencing resurrection in a way I can understand. I felt a longing to know better my deepest and most ineffable self and was persuaded that there was a level of religious experience that I have not adequately supported through my spiritual practices. I have focused mostly on the divine as experienced through interpersonal encounter, minimizing the importance of encountering my own naked spirit.

Then I inwardly groaned thinking, “If I want to experience this I have to go and sit perfectly still for twenty minutes at a time, and I CAN’T STAND doing that.”

Various forms of emptying meditation have been shared with me over the years by translators bearing witness to their experience of transcendence. I respect and deeply honor their experience. I believe I understand what it means to them. It does not mean the same to me. I have tried again and again, and I have come to believe that that pathway to illumination is not suited to my nature. I must find other ways.

And I know that I already have had these encounters. I have not nurtured and cherished them to the extent that I need to, but they are always there, as the resurrection is ever present. I encounter the eternal when I lose consciousness of my outer self and sink into a wordless relationship with an inner being that is felt, not heard.

Let me give you two examples. I become conscious of the deepest truest part of myself, and something beyond myself to which I belong when I listen to certain music, such as Schubert’s *Ninth Symphony* and Barber’s *Adagio*. And I experience this when I am alone in the countryside on horseback. In both of those situations I am distracted from consciousness of myself and opened to encounters with that More of the Same.

My search for Mary Magdalene has not only caused me to commit to a deeper, reciprocal communion with my fellow human beings, as I expected it to do. It has also taught me to cultivate the solitary encounters of my soul with the eternal. Ultimately, I find translation serves me more than anyone else as it causes me to interpret and integrate my experiences. My struggle to give my experiences meaning, so that I can communicate them with someone else, causes me to pause over moments that I would otherwise pass by. Much of what I experience is lost in translation, but the translation

slows me down and causes me to re-experience, failing perhaps to recreate the experience for you, but owning it for myself. I believe the moments of transcendence are private and spontaneous, but the process of translation helps us integrated them into our own lives and builds on the corporate spiritual life of society.

So, let me try, one more time, however ineffectively, to translate to you my encounter with Mary Magdalene. As I said, I had believed Jesus' message of compassion was the central tenet of Christianity. But that is not all that is contained in his teachings. If you look you will see the presence of a mystery, the hints at the ineffable, the hope of revelation.

Compassion and mysticism, communion and revelation, whatever you want to call them, these are paired elements of religious life. I have known many people to embrace the one and ignore the other. The Gnostics repudiated their humanity; humanitarians often repudiate mysticism. I believe a full religious life intertwines mystery and humanity.

I invite you to think for a moment about the steeple on our church. It is made up of interwoven strands which spiral towards the sky, becoming closer together as the spiral narrows until they are as one. Though I know it is not precisely what the architect meant, I am coming to think of the steeple as standing for religious experience. The strands are human spirits, disparate, yet moving toward union. The circular motion is provided by the communion I described, the giving and the taking of love. The upward motion is revelation. Without the circle the separate strands would never come together. But the circles would go nowhere without the transcendent, the moments of illumination that lift us up. We require both. SO BE IT.

ⁱ I use the phrases Hebrew Testament and Christian Testament rather than Old and Christian Testament, as I feel it places the two collections on even footing.

ⁱⁱ James, William. (1936) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Modern Library. 498-499.

Sources include: Barnstone, Willis, ed. 1984. *The OTHER Bible*. Pagels, Elaine. 1989. *The Gnostic Gospels*. Robinson, James, ed. 1990. *The Nag Hammadi Library*.