

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Role Players in the Spotlight**

#### **Broken and Made Whole (Mary Magdalene)**

Study #1

##### **Introduction:** Role players...

It may be that the best illustration of the concept of the “role player” in the world of sports comes from the Cleveland Cavaliers in the days before LeBron James’ “Decision” to leave Ohio for the warmth of Miami in 2010.

Over the years that he played for Cleveland, the Cavs threw a number of other players together to join LeBron on the court. But the show was always about King James.

The rest were role players.

Last Sunday evening millions of Americans watched the Academy Awards show to find out who received the Best Actor and Best Actress and Best Movie awards.

Also receiving awards on that evening, of course, were directors and musicians and supporting actors and actresses and make-up artists and choreographers and lighting technicians. These men and women play important parts (crucial, actually!). But they are role players. The evening was all about Jennifer Lawrence and Daniel-Day Lewis and Argo.

And so this morning we begin our march toward an observance of Good Friday and the celebration of Easter. And there is no question as to who is the star of this show. It’s all about Jesus!

However, there are quite a few role players who show up in the Easter story. These are supporting cast members who enter the main story. And this Easter season we are going to focus on a few of these role players.

We’ll look at Joseph of Arimathea at our annual sunrise service in our Chapel in the Woods on Easter Sunday morning.

We’ll focus on another very special role player on Good Friday evening. (And if you have never attended one of our Good Friday services, I hope you will join us this year. It gives us a wonderful chance to see the power of the cross of Christ.)

And on the Sunday mornings between now and Easter Sunday we will take an in-depth look at three of Jesus’ apostles (Simon Peter, Judas Iscariot, and Matthew/Levi).

Today we are going to grow in our understanding of a figure who is often quite misunderstood: Mary. I believe that the life of Mary will have something to say to each of us this morning.

And, by understanding a bit of her story, I believe that Jesus, the Star of the show, will become a bit more precious to each one of us, too.

Now, by telling you that her name is “Mary” I haven’t helped you very much. That’s because there are several (actually seven) women named “Mary” in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Many “Marys” of the New Testament**

##### **Other Mary’s**

*Mary, the mother of Jesus*

Of course, the most famous of the Marys is the mother of Jesus. She was chosen by God to conceive in her womb - without a human father - and give birth to Jesus. Jesus grew up in the home of this Mary and her husband, Joseph.

*Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha*

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<sup>1</sup> “Mary” - the Aramaic form of the Hebrew “Miriam.”

And then there was Mary, the sister of Lazarus (whom Jesus raised from the dead) and Martha.

We know her as a contemplative sort who loved to sit at Jesus' feet and to learn from Him. She and her siblings showed Jesus hospitality when His travels took Him to the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany.

*Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12)*

Another prominent Mary was the mother of John Mark. She shines in the book of Acts by hosting a prayer meeting which had been called when Simon Peter was thrown in jail for preaching Jesus. (Acts 12)

About the other Marys we know almost nothing.

*Minor Marys*

There was Mary, the wife of Clopas (John 19:25). That's all we know of her. One Mary is simply known as the mother of James and Joseph (Matthew 27:56). And then there is a woman who is, sadly, simply referred to as "***the other Mary.***" (Matthew 28:1)

Then we have Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is in the spotlight this morning.

### **Mary Magdalene ("the Magdalene")**

"Magdalene" refers to the town in which she lived. Magdala (the name means "tower/fortress" in Hebrew) was located on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee, near the royal city of Tiberias. It was a significant town, with a wall around it for protection and a synagogue for Jewish worship.

In the days of Jesus, Magdala was known for its dye works and fine woolen products.<sup>2</sup> As well, shipbuilding, the fishing industry, and agriculture brought great wealth to the city

Located near Capernaum and Nazareth as it was, Magdala was close to the hub of Jesus' ministry activity - and that is probably how she makes her way into the story.

It is not often that popular opinion about a biblical figure is as wrong as the general thinking about Mary Magdalene is wrong. But wrong it is.

### **Getting to Know Mary Magdalene**

#### **Mistaken Identity**

*NOT the immoral woman who anointed Jesus (Luke 7)*

Mary Magdalene has long been identified by many people as the sinful woman who anointed Jesus with costly perfume. (Luke 7)<sup>3</sup>

But there is no reason to make this identification! The Bible never says or even hints that Mary Magdalene was a notorious sinner, a prostitute, or immoral in any way.<sup>4</sup>

Belief that Mary Magdalene was the Luke 7 woman is the result of a confusion of texts dating all the way back to AD 591 when Pope Gregory the Great first made the inaccurate connection in a sermon. (I know how Gregory feels; I've made my share of pulpit blunders.)

From that time forward most of the Western church assumed that Mary was a rescued woman of the streets.<sup>5</sup>

This incorrect interpretation was rejected and corrected by Pope John Paul I in 1969, but the thought still lingers in both Catholic and protestant minds. She is to this day often depicted as the repentant prostitute in Christian art and literature.

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<sup>3</sup> This text does not explicitly say that this woman was a prostitute, but the assumption is that she was guilty of sexual sin.

<sup>4</sup> Magdala was notorious for its moral corruption, and that may help explain Mary's completely undeserved reputation.

<sup>5</sup> It is because of this misinterpretation that houses set apart to rescue women from lives of prostitution are, to this day, sometimes called "Magdalene houses."

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<sup>2</sup> So Edersheim in The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah.

So, Mary Magdalene was not the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.

And Mary Magdalene was also not Jesus' wife.

*NOT Jesus' wife (sorry Dan Brown)*

In 2003 Dan Brown came out with his fantastic (by that I mean to say, "fantasy") book, The da Vinci Code. In it, he puts forward the idea that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married, had children, and moved from Palestine to France.<sup>6</sup>

But to argue that she was the wife of Jesus is an argument from complete silence.

Not only does the Bible NOT mention a marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene - or anybody else, for that matter - she is nearly unique among the Marys of the Bible in that her identity is not tied to a man at all.<sup>7</sup>

There would have been plenty of opportunity for Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John to have spoken of a close or married relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene - but they don't.

The only place Mary and Jesus are found alone together is outside of Joseph's tomb at the resurrection - and as we will see this morning, there is nothing there to suggest that they were married.

So, if she was not Jesus' wife and was also not an immoral woman, what can we say about this woman who was such a very important role player in Jesus' story?

Well, the Bible tells us that she was a very troubled woman who was tormented by demons.

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<sup>6</sup> Brown claims that Mary is in da Vinci's painting, The Last Supper. She is not. In the 1960's Mary was often a key figure in musicals about Jesus. (Jesus Christ, Superstar; Godspell, etc...) And she is shown as a source of sexual temptation for Jesus in the movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ."

<sup>7</sup> Some of the other Marys were tied to Jesus, Lazarus, Clopas, John Mark, and James and Joseph.

## Mary Magdalene's Story

*[Luke 8:2b]...Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; [Mark 16:9]...He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons.<sup>8</sup>*

*The effects of demons*

Scattered throughout the Gospels are heartbreaking stories of people who suffered by being possessed by unclean spirits.

Some of them were deaf or dumb. Some acted compulsively. Some acted irrationally. All were tormented.

Demon possession is a real thing. It is not the invention of Hollywood. And when it occurs, it is a devastating experience, robbing the person of either physical health or emotional health or mental health - or all three!

*The effects of the demons on Mary Magdalene*

There is no hint in the Bible that Mary was responsible for being demon-possessed and we don't have a clue as to what the effect of these demons were on her.

We need not jump to any conclusion that she was insane, immoral, or diabolical. All we can be assured of is that her condition was desperate. We just don't know in what way it was desperate.

*Mary Magdalene set free!*

Clearly it was a terrible thing to be possessed by demons. Mary was possessed by demons. And Mary was freed from these seven demons by Jesus.

He made her whole. We don't know the details of her story, so the telling will have to wait until heaven. But whatever suffering she experienced from these spirits was removed the day Jesus cast them out!

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<sup>8</sup> Neither Matthew nor John make any comment about Mary being possessed.

Her life was radically changed and she experienced freedom.

Many of us here today can testify to the freedom Jesus has brought to us. Freedom from addictions. Freedom from fears. Freedom to love and to serve.

He enters our lives to change us and transform us. And so our hearts are full of gratitude to Him for what He has and is doing for us.

We can only imagine the gratitude Mary Magdalene would have felt toward Jesus.

Not surprisingly, given the wonderful deliverance she had experienced by Jesus' power, Mary Magdalene became a devoted disciple. And her commitment to Him is measured in two ways.

First, along with some other women, she traveled with Him.

## **Mary Magdalene and the Ministry of Jesus**

### *Her travel with Jesus*

***[Luke 8:1] Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another... [2] and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene...***

From somewhere around the mid-point of His three year ministry, Jesus' traveling band would often include the Twelve PLUS a few women, one of whom was the former demonized Mary of Magdala.

I hadn't thought about that much until this week and have found it a very refreshing and joyous idea that the group that traveled with Jesus included women as well as men.

The second way we know of her devotion and serious commitment is that she gave of her own wealth to support Jesus, the Twelve, and Jesus' mission.

### *Her support of Jesus*

***[Luke 8:2]...Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, [3] 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.***

Despite having been possessed by evil spirits, Mary had been able to accumulate enough money to be helpful to Jesus and she used that material resource to further His work.

Clearly, Mary Magdalene was quite a woman. There is no reason for us to doubt that she was a godly woman and a leading figure in the early group of disciples. And that is the Bible's and history's "take" on Mary Magdalene, too.

### *History's "take" on Mary Magdalene*

Reading through the Gospels we get the idea that Mary Magdalene was a leader, as virtually every text in which she appears she is listed first.<sup>9</sup>

The Roman Catholic church thinks the world of her and calls her a saint, giving her a holy day of her own. (July 22) And early church fathers (like Hyppolytus, 3<sup>rd</sup> century) note Mary's privilege of being the first to see Jesus in His resurrection as indicating that she was highly esteemed by the Lord.

Small wonder then, that when the story of Jesus' earthly life reaches its end and its main purpose, Mary is there.

## **Mary Magdalene and Easter**

### **Mary Magdalene at the Crucifixion**

At the cross of Jesus, as Jesus was dying, there were some notable absences.

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<sup>9</sup> The exception is John 19, which lists Jesus' mother, Mary, first, for obvious reasons - since He speaks to and about her care from the cross to John. Mary Magdalene then goes on to play an extremely prominent role in the resurrection scene at the tomb in John 20.

Simon Peter was not there, having just denied knowing Him three times. Matthew was not there, nor was Thomas or James or Andrew or Bartholomew. Others were not there.

But Mary Magdalene was there. All four Gospels tell us that she was there.<sup>10</sup>

She was there with other women who, perhaps like her, had been broken and made whole by Jesus.

Her salvation prompted her to be loyal when some were not.

At one point she watched the proceedings from a distance. (Mark 15:40). The longer He remained on the cross the closer she came, at the end standing right by the cross. (John 19:25)

As much as anyone on that Passover Friday, Mary Magdalene had seen her dreams crash and burn, her hopes go up in smoke as she watched Jesus die.

Unlike the disciples, who were hoping for a political coup, or a military triumph over Rome, or a return of Israel to its glory days with King Jesus on the throne, Mary had just wanted to be with Jesus.

He had given her life back. So it's not hard to imagine Mary's emotional state. "Sad" would be accurate, but it doesn't seem to quite capture what it would be like to see the Man who freed you from demonic oppression being put to death.

Late in the day, after Jesus died, she wouldn't leave what remained of Him. She followed those who carried His body after He was taken off the cross to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

## Mary Magdalene at the Tomb

*[Matthew 27:61] And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave.<sup>11</sup>*

So, watching where His body was laid, Mary Magdalene knew precisely the location of the tomb. And that information would be critical for what was to follow a couple of days later.

So, we know Mary Magdalene's loyalty for her presence at the cross and afterward. But her most significant role in the story of Jesus comes on the first day of the week when she went back to the tomb.<sup>12</sup>

Mary Magdalene is the first person who comes into view on that Sunday morning. She arrived early.

## Mary Magdalene at the EMPTY Tomb (John 20:1-18)

*Mary reports something unusual at the tomb (vv. 1-10)*

*[1] Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene<sup>13</sup> came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.*

And for what purpose had she gone to the tomb? It was to finish preparing the body of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

Expecting that the soldiers who were guarding the tomb would help her roll away the stone when she arrived, she was shocked to find NO soldiers and the stone already rolled away from the entrance.<sup>15</sup>

She immediately jumped to a conclusion (and not to the conclusion you might think!) - *"Someone has robbed the grave!"*

<sup>11</sup> See also Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55

<sup>12</sup> See Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-8, as well as John 20.

<sup>13</sup> The other gospels mention several women coming to the tomb, but John's account doesn't negate that. He just emphasizes the presence of Mary Magdalene. I assume that she arrived at the tomb first.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 16:1 and John 20:1 tell us that she came with spices.

<sup>15</sup> Literally, it was "lifted up" (Greek - *αιρω*) out of its tracks.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew (27:55-56) and Mark (15:40) say that she, with others, was looking on from a distance; Luke doesn't name her, but says that the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee were there, which would have included Mary Magdalene (23:49); John tells us that Mary Magdalene was there with Jesus' mother, Mary. (19:25)

So Mary ran from the tomb straight to where she knew she would find Simon Peter and John, the two leading disciples.

Peter and John listened to her report and ran to the tomb to see for themselves. When they entered the tomb what they saw convinced them of the resurrection. They believed on the basis of what they did NOT see, and then, without a word to Mary, left to go back to the house where they had been staying.

While there is much to learn from watching Peter and John on that Easter morning we're not going to follow them now. That's because today we're keying in on Mary Magdalene.

She had run to get the guys. When they ran to the tomb, she followed them back to the tomb. But then they left, leaving her all alone at the empty tomb of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene has yet to be convinced of the miracle of resurrection. She is alone in a cemetery, all alone with her grief over Jesus' death and the additional sadness of His missing body.

Listen to John's description of Mary.

*Mary talks with angels! (vv. 11-13)*

***[11a] But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping***

It is not unusual to see people weeping in cemeteries. And the Greek word used to describe Mary's weeping is the word for loud wailing. She was beside herself with grief.

And who wouldn't be? Could you imagine yourself in her shoes?

Think about her life before she met Jesus. She was possessed by seven demons!

Now, think about the life she had come to know after having met and been set free by Jesus. Free. Chains broken. Whole.

What thoughts would have been sweeping over her? How much she would miss being with Jesus? Fear that the demons would come back?

How would you react if you heard a definitive news report tomorrow on the news that the body of Jesus has been positively identified? He didn't rise. Christianity is a joke. What would it do to you?

Well, whatever you imagine that news would do to you, THAT's what Mary Magdalene is experiencing as we watch her weep beside Joseph's empty tomb.

Well, after a while, Mary can't stand not knowing what the conditions were inside the tomb anymore.

She had seen Peter and John go inside the tomb. She wanted to see, too, so she poked her head inside. What she saw was certainly not what she was expecting.

***[11b]...and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; [12] and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.***

The angels were the first to break the awkward silence. And what do we expect them to say? Right! "*Fear Not!*"

In the Bible, most every time an angel appears to a human their first words are, "*Don't be afraid!*" Not here.

Evidently Mary wasn't afraid. Too overwhelmed with grief to fear. So the angels ask Mary one question.<sup>16</sup>

***[13a] And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"***

Knowing all that they knew, these angels simply couldn't understand her sorrow.

They understood that this was the most inappropriate moment in all of human history for weeping! The angels know that all is finally well with the universe. Jesus is alive. Sin has been conquered. The way of salvation is now open to all.

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<sup>16</sup> This is one of the only places in Scripture where the first words of an angel to a human are not, "*Fear not!*" Mary was evidently so overwhelmed with grief that she was not afraid.

But Mary doesn't know that yet.

Mary thought that she had good reason to weep. So she explained to the angels (did she even recognize them as angels?) why she was so upset.

***[13b]...She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."***

Clearly, Mary wasn't expecting a resurrection? If she had heard Jesus talking about rising from the dead, she either hadn't understood at the time what He was talking about or was, by now, too blinded by grief to take hold of courage to hope.

Then, just As she said this, something happened outside the tomb to get her attention and Mary turned around. When she turned she saw Someone.

*Mary talks Jesus! (vv. 14-16)*

***[14] When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.***<sup>17</sup>

The as-yet-unrecognized Jesus asked Mary the same question the angels had asked, plus one more.

***[15] Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"***<sup>18</sup>

Now any cemetery gardener would have been used to seeing women weeping. And a kind gardener might have asked, "What are you looking for?" But this Man asked, "**WHOM** are you seeking?" - and people don't generally go to cemeteries looking for someone.

Mary answers and her answer makes it clear that nothing is clear to her.

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 24, and the discussion along the Emmaus Road show others who knew Jesus well, but didn't recognize Him in His resurrection body.

<sup>18</sup> "WHAT are you seeking?" might have been what she expected. But, Jesus asked, "**WHOM**.....?"

***[15b]...Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away."***

Jesus knew that Mary had come to the tomb out of devotion to Him. He also knew that she was near the end of her emotional rope. So, He did the one thing that would let her know that all was well. He spoke her name.

***[16a] Jesus said to her, "Mary!"***

First, it was, "**Woman, why are you weeping?**" Words any stranger could have uttered. But not this. "**Mary!**" was personal.<sup>19</sup>

And she recognized the voice as the voice of the Friend who had set her free. This is the voice of the Shepherd who calls His own sheep by name!

***[16b]...She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher).***<sup>20</sup>

Reading this, we get the impression that as soon as she knew it was Jesus, Mary Magdalene dropped to the ground to cling to Jesus' feet in desperation.

Jesus told her to stop. Why would Jesus tell Mary to not cling to Him?<sup>21</sup>

*Mary, commissioned! (vv. 17-18)*

***[17] Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me,<sup>22</sup> for I have not yet ascended to the Father"***

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<sup>19</sup> From Bishop C. F. D. Moule.

<sup>20</sup> Here is the truth of John, chapter 10, demonstrated in living color. There, Jesus had said, "**The sheep here the shepherd's voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.**" (v. 3) And again, "**My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.**" (v. 27). Mary Magdalene was a true sheep of the Good Shepherd. When He called her name, she knew Him! She replied in Aramaic, the language most familiar to her, "**My Teacher!**"

<sup>21</sup> At Matthew 28:9 Jesus did not stop the women who clutched at His feet in worship. Something else seems to be motivating Mary to cling to Jesus.

I think that Jesus was telling Mary that the old face-to-face relationship they had known was fading.

Yes, He will always be Mary Magdalene's greatest treasure. But Jesus now belongs to Heaven. Jesus' exaltation is in process. The Holy Spirit will soon be the realized presence of God in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

So now is not the time to cling to His physical form. But if Mary can't do that, there is something she can do. And we listen as Jesus gives Mary Magdalene her own great commission.

***[17] Jesus said to her, "...but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'"***

Grieving, hopeless Mary has become a messenger. Jesus has sent her on a mission. She is now, even if not in the technical sense, an apostle. Mary Magdalene, the former demoniac is SENT by Jesus.

And, just like that, energized by the truth that Jesus was alive and captured by the thought that she could be useful to a risen Lord, Mary left the garden to carry the news to the Twelve.

***[18] Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her.***

### **Conclusion:**

This morning, you are Mary Magdalene. You have been rescued from evil and have been made new. What was true for Mary is true for you. God has turned your destiny 180 degrees. You are heaven bound. You are born again. You are a new creation in Christ! He is making beautiful things out of your mess.

And Mary Magdalene's story is also your story in that you are grateful beyond words to Jesus for what He has done for you. The day will

come, after this life is over, when you will cling to Him as Mary Magdalene began to cling to Him by the tomb. Right now, you do not see Him - but one day you will. And on that day you'll worship Him to His face.

And you - redeemed and grateful - can hear Jesus say to you what He said to Mary Magdalene: *"Go! You are a sent person. Do My bidding. I commission you for service for My Kingdom."*

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<sup>22</sup> From E. F. Harrison: Not all interpreters believe that Mary actually touched Jesus. Their contention is that she started to do so but was checked by [His] prohibition. However, according to the usage of the tenses, μή μου απτού should mean "stop touching me, stop clinging to me."