

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Encountering the Life-Changing Jesus**

#### **Jesus, for the Broken**

(the story of Mary Magdalene)

Study #1

#### **Introduction:** Calendar high points...

I was curious, so this past week I googled “holidays” and discovered that there are hundreds of days on the American calendar dedicated to this or that.

Not counting personal days like birthdays and anniversaries, there are state holidays (Texas Independence, San Jacinto, LBJ) and national holidays (Veterans, Labor, 4<sup>th</sup> of July) and others - Groundhog, Wear Red, Explosive Ordinance Disposal - and many, many more.

Did you know that if you added up all the days that some Americans consider a holiday, you would find many more holidays than there are days in the year? It’s true.

So, has this holiday explosion created a holiday inflation? Has the multiplication of special days diluted the specialness of any day?<sup>1</sup>

It might seem so. But, on reflection, some days really are more special than others.

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<sup>1</sup> That’s what inflation is all about. Print more money and each dollar is worth less. Add more water to a soup and it’s less tasty.

Case in point? Two spring days that we observe every year. These two days are vitally important.

They are so important to people like us who are interested in Jesus, that, beginning today, we’re going to take a full month to prepare for them. These two days highlight the historical heart of our faith: Good Friday (the day of the death of Jesus) and Easter Sunday (the day of His glorious resurrection).

The Star of these stories is, of course, Jesus. And we’ll see Him throughout.

But there are several “role players” mentioned in the Gospels who figure prominently into the narratives about Jesus’ death and resurrection. These role players were all marked in unique ways by their encounters with the life-changing Jesus.

They are supporting cast members who enter the main story. Throughout this Easter season we are going to focus on a few of these role players.<sup>2</sup>

Today we are focusing on a character who is often misunderstood. Her name is Mary, but saying her name doesn’t help all that much, because there are at least seven women named “Mary” in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

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

##### **Other Marys**

*Mary, the mother of Jesus*

Of course, the most famous of the Marys is Jesus’ mother. She was chosen by God to conceive in her womb and give birth to Jesus. Jesus grew up in the home of this Mary and her husband, Joseph.

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<sup>2</sup> At our worship service on Good Friday, our Easter sunrise service, and on the four Sundays preceding Easter, Jeff and I will highlight one role player per service.

<sup>3</sup> “Mary” - the Aramaic form of the Hebrew “Miriam.”

### *Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha*

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

This second Mary was a contemplative. She loved to sit at Jesus' feet and to listen to Him and 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 shows up in the book of Acts when she hosted a prayer meeting in her home, convened to pray for Simon Peter's release from jail. (Acts 12)

About the other Marys, we know almost nothing.

### *Minor Marys*

One was the wife of a man named Clopas<sup>4</sup> (John 19:25); one was the mother of James and Joseph (Matthew 27:56); one is, sadly, simply referred to as "***the other Mary.***" (Matthew 28:1)

But there is another Mary. Mary Magdalene. Today, we want to get to know the story of Mary Magdalene.

## **Mary Magdalene**

"Magdalene" refers to the town in which she lived. She was Mary of Magdala. Magdala<sup>5</sup> was an important town in ancient Israel, large enough to merit a wall for protection and a synagogue for worship.

The town was known for the wealth that industry and commerce brought.

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<sup>4</sup> We don't know anything about Clopas, either, unless he is the man who was on the road to Emmaus when the resurrected Jesus appeared to him and his unnamed friend. There, the spelling is "Cleopas (Luke 24), so it might be a different man.

<sup>5</sup> The name means "tower/fortress" in Hebrew.

Magdala was located near Capernaum, which was the hub of Jesus' ministry activity. That is probably how Mary 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)*

Many people have mistakenly identified Mary Magdalene as the sinful woman who anointed Jesus with costly perfume. (Luke 7)<sup>6</sup>

There is no reason to make this identification. The Bible never even hints that Mary Magdalene was a notorious sinner.<sup>7</sup>

Evidently, belief that Mary Magdalene was that woman is the result of a confusion dating all the way back to AD 591 when Pope Gregory the Great first made the connection in a sermon.<sup>8</sup> From that time forward most of the Western church has assumed that Mary was a reformed prostitute.<sup>9</sup>

This faulty interpretation was corrected by Pope John Paul I in 1969. But the thought still lingers in both Catholic and Protestant minds, and to this day, she is often depicted as a repentant prostitute in Christian art.

But, again, there is no reason to say that Mary Magdalene was the unnamed, sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume.

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<sup>6</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>7</sup> Magdala was notorious for its moral corruption, perhaps explaining Mary's completely undeserved reputation.

<sup>8</sup> I know how Gregory feels; I've made my share of pulpit blunders.

<sup>9</sup> It is because of this misinterpretation that houses dedicated to rescuing women from lives of prostitution are, even today, sometimes called "Magdalene houses."

Nor was Mary Magdalene Jesus' love interest or wife.

*NOT Jesus' wife (sorry Dan Brown)*

Nearly two decades ago (2003), author Dan Brown came out with his fantastic (as in "fantasy") book, The da Vinci Code. In this book, he put forward the idea that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married, had children, and moved from Palestine to France.<sup>10</sup>

But to argue that she was the wife of Jesus is an argument from complete silence.<sup>11</sup> Jesus and Mary Magdalene were not 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 troubled woman who was tormented by demons.

### **Mary Magdalene's Story**

***[Luke 8:2b]...Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out<sup>12</sup>***

*Demons and their effects*

Scattered throughout the Gospels are heartbreaking stories of men, women, and children who suffered from demonic oppression.

All of them were tormented in various ways by the wicked spirits who indwelt and harassed them.

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<sup>10</sup> Brown claims that Mary is in da Vinci's painting, *The Last Supper*. She is not.

<sup>11</sup> The Bible doesn't mention a marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, or to anybody else. None of the Gospels refer to a close or married relationship between them, which to have omitted would have been very disingenuous.

<sup>12</sup> Neither Matthew nor John makes any comment about Mary being possessed. Only Luke's Gospel. (see also, though, Mark's longer ending, 16:9)

One of these was Mary Magdalene.

We don't know how she came to be indwelt by demons. There is no hint that she was in any way responsible for this suffering.

And in the absence of any comment to the contrary, it's best to see her as an innocent victim of the attacks of demonic spirits.

And, while she suffered from damage done by demons, we don't know in what way she suffered.

Some of those mentioned in the Bible who were oppressed by evil spirits had physical ailments. They were deaf or dumb or crippled. Some were mentally or emotionally disturbed. Some acted compulsively or irrationally.

It isn't obvious to me that the involvement of evil spirits with someone's suffering will always be obvious to us, nor would it have necessarily been clear to an observer in the days of Jesus.

And it also seems to me that the way a spiritual attack by demons and emotional instability and mental illness and physical ailments appear in any given person may be very intertwined.

Any of the more general sufferings can happen without demonic involvement. But when any of the more general sufferings are present, there may also be demonic involvement.<sup>13</sup>

There is a spirit world and oppression by demonic spirits is a real thing. Hollywood didn't make it up.

When it occurs, it is a devastating experience. Demons rob a person of either physical health or emotional health or mental health - or all three.

*The effects of the demons on Mary Magdalene*

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<sup>13</sup> I suppose that someone could be quite well in general terms, but still impacted by evil spirits.

Again, the Bible doesn't tell us in what way Mary Magdalene suffered. But we can assume that she was tormented in some way: physically or emotionally or mentally.

We can't jump to a conclusion that she was insane, immoral, or crippled. All we can be assured of is that her condition was desperate.

*Mary Magdalene set free!*

In some way and at some point and for some reason, Mary of Magdala, came to be on Jesus' radar. He saw her desperation. And early in His ministry, in some encounter, Jesus set her free. He cast out the demons and He made her whole.

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

As a result of Jesus' work in her life, she was radically changed and experienced radical freedom.

Jesus had a powerful effect on Mary and on countless others who were desperate. He went out of His way to make whole those who were troubled. Some were troubled by demons, some by other forces.

But in looking at the life of Mary Magdalene, we can't miss this: Jesus' heart went out to the one who had been broken by life. He was especially drawn to the broken. It was then and it is now His mission to bring wholeness.

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 done for us and is doing for us.

We can only imagine the gratitude Mary Magdalene would have felt toward Jesus. He gave her back her life.

Not surprisingly, given this wonderful deliverance, Mary Magdalene became a loyal and a devoted disciple.

Luke's gospel tells us that Mary and other women traveled with Him and the twelve.

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

I find it a very refreshing thing, a very encouraging reality, that the group that traveled with Jesus included women as well as men.

And it may very well be that, with the demons gone from her life, Mary Magdalene became one of those women who supported Jesus and His ministry from her personal means.

There is no reason for us to doubt that she was a godly woman and a leading figure in the early group of disciples.

#### *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.

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 leaders (like Hippolytus, 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 reached its end and its main purpose, Mary was there.

## **Mary Magdalene and Easter**

### **Mary Magdalene at the Crucifixion on Friday**

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

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 all four Gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene was there.<sup>14</sup>

She had been a broken woman and had been made whole by Jesus. That great deliverance created a loyal heart.

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)

Try to put yourself in Mary's shoes.

As much as anyone on that Friday, when Jesus was dying, Mary Magdalene was watching her hopes and dreams crash and burn.

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 near Him.

He had given her life back. So, it's not hard to imagine Mary's emotional state.

"Sad" doesn't quite capture what it would be like to see the Man who freed you from demonic oppression being put to death.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew (27:55-56) and Mark (15:40) tell us 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)

Late in the day, after Jesus died, she followed those who carried His body to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

### **Mary Magdalene at the Tomb on Friday (Matthew 27:61)**

***[Matthew 27:61] And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave.<sup>15</sup>***

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.

We know Mary's loyalty for her presence at the cross and at the place where He was laid. Her most significant role in the story of Jesus, though, came on the first day of the week when she went back to the tomb.<sup>16</sup>

Mary Magdalene was the first person to the tomb on that Sunday morning. She arrived early.

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

*Mary, first to the tomb on Sunday (vv. 1-10)*

***[1] Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene<sup>17</sup> came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.***

Now, for what purpose had she gone to the tomb? Obviously, it was to finish preparing the body of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

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

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

<sup>17</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>18</sup> Mark 16:1 and John 20:1 tell us that she came with spices.

Expecting that the soldiers who were guarding the tomb would help her roll away the stone when she arrived, she was shocked to find the stone already rolled away from the entrance.<sup>19</sup>

Mary immediately jumped to a conclusion - "*Someone has robbed the grave!*" - and she ran from the tomb straight to where she knew she would find Simon Peter and John, the two leading disciples.

They 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. Then, evidently without saying a word to Mary, they left to go back to the house where they had been staying.

We could learn a lot by watching Peter and John on that Easter morning - and we will in the weeks to come - but we're not following them today. Today, we're watching Mary.

She had run to get the guys. When they ran to the tomb, she followed them back to the tomb. But then they left, she was all alone.

At this point, Mary Magdalene had 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.

*Mary and the 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 occupied her mind? How much she would miss Jesus? Fear that the demons would come back?

See, as far as Mary knew, the Jesus story was over. What a devastating thought.

I mean, what would it do to you if you were to learn that the Jesus story was over, all wrong? What if you were to discover that through DNA testing, scientists had identified the body of Jesus in Joseph's tomb? What would that do to you?

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

After a while, Mary couldn'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 silence. And what do we expect them to say? "*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. She was too overwhelmed with grief to fear. So, the angels ask Mary a question.

<sup>19</sup> Literally, it was "lifted up" (Greek - *αίρω*) out of its tracks.

**[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 human history for weeping. The angels know that all is finally well with the universe.

Jesus is alive. Death has been conquered. The Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world. Salvation is now available to all through faith in Jesus.

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.

When she had heard Jesus talking about “**rising from the dead**,” she either hadn’t understood at that time what He was talking about or was, now, too blinded by grief to have the courage to hope.

Then, just as she said this, something happened outside the tomb that got her attention and Mary turned around. When she turned, she saw Someone.

*Mary and 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>20</sup>**

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<sup>20</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.

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>21</sup>**

Mary answered and her answer made it clear that nothing is clear to her.

**[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 spoke the one word that would let her know that all was well.

**[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>22</sup>

She instantly recognized the voice of the Shepherd and Friend who had set her free.

**[16b]...She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).<sup>23</sup>**

As soon as she knew it was Jesus, Mary Magdalene dropped to the ground to cling to Jesus in desperation.

Jesus first told her to “**Stop**” and then He told her to “**Go**.”

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<sup>21</sup> “*WHAT* are you seeking?” might have been what she expected. But, Jesus asked, “*WHOM?*”

<sup>22</sup> From Bishop C. F. D. Moule.

<sup>23</sup> Here is John, chapter 10, demonstrated in living color. There, Jesus said, [3] “*The sheep here the shepherd’s voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.*”

*Mary, commissioned! (v. 17)*

***[17a] Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father***

Jesus’ earthly time was ending. The old face-to-face relationship that He and Mary and others had enjoyed was now fading.

Yes, He will always be Mary Magdalene’s greatest treasure. But Jesus is telling her that He now belongs to Heaven. Soon, the Holy Spirit will be the realized presence of God in the lives of Jesus’ disciples.

So, it was time for her to stop clinging to His physical form.

And it was time to go and do something else. Jesus gave Mary Magdalene her very own great commission.

***[17b] “but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”***

The formerly grieving, hopeless Mary has become a messenger. She is now, even if not in the technical sense, an apostle. Mary Magdalene, the former demoniac is SENT by Jesus.

*Mary, on mission! (v. 18)*

And, just like that, Mary was energized by the truth that Jesus was alive.

She was captured by the thought that she could be useful to her risen Lord. She left Him in 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:**

Today, we have seen Mary Magdalene, a woman whose eternal destiny took an about face as she was redeemed by Jesus’ power to rescue the lost.

In Mary, we see ourselves. We are each brand-new creatures, saved by the amazing grace of God poured out on us in Jesus.

Just like Mary, we worship, overwhelmed with gratitude. And, like Mary, we hear Jesus’ commission and we gladly GO!

We take next steps into obedient faith and we help others follow the same path. We grow as disciples and we make disciples.

And, in seeing Mary, we also see something precious about Jesus. We see that His heart is turned to the troubled, to the demon-oppressed, and to the desperate. He loves to make beautiful things out of messes.

He did it then with Mary and He’s doing it still. And we will give ourselves to the troubled and the oppressed if we would have hearts that beat with His great heart.