

## Mary Magdalene: A Case of Mistaken Identity

As a Catholic, I grew up surrounded by saints, holy people who went before us, whose lives on earth served as role models, and who lived in heaven ready to help us in our struggles here on earth.

As a Catholic *woman*, the saint held up for me to emulate especially was Mary, the mother of Jesus—pure, obedient, a handmaiden of the Lord. While I loved the Virgin Mary, the saint I secretly wanted to be like was the other Mary, Mary of Magdala. She drew me in a way the Virgin Mary could not. For starters she seemed more real, a flesh-and-blood woman who struggled and was saved.

Scriptural references to Mary Magdalene are not plentiful—even though she is mentioned more times than any other woman in the New Testament except the Virgin Mary. What we know of Magdalene from Scripture is this:

- She was a woman of independent means, who probably came from the shipping town of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee.
- She was healed of seven demons by Jesus and chose to follow him after that, supporting him out of her own resources.
- She stood with Jesus at the foot of the cross when the other disciples had fled.
- On Easter morning, Magdalene went to the tomb to claim Jesus' body. It was to her that Jesus first appeared as the resurrected Christ. It was to her that he gave the momentous commission to go and tell the disciples he had risen as he said.

From John's Gospel account it is clear that there was a strong and tender bond between Magdalene and Jesus. In one of the most intimate exchanges in all of the Scriptures (John 20:11-18), John tells how Mary goes to the tomb before dawn and, finding it empty, begins to weep. She begs the gardener to tell her where they have laid her Lord. The gardener calls her by name—"Mary"—and in that instant she knows it is he. She responds—"Rabboni"—and apparently reaches out for him, for he cautions her not to hold onto him. He cannot stay. He asks her to go and tell the others.

This is the extent of what we know of Magdalene from the Scriptures. Looking back over the references we notice a curious omission: there is no mention of Magdalene as a prostitute. And yet that is how she has come down to us, as a fallen woman whose sexual promiscuity cost her her dignity and her reputation, who came before Jesus in a shameful state and was healed and forgiven.

So where did it come from, this idea that Mary Magdalene—a brave, independent woman, a woman Jesus trusted and loved—got labeled a repentant prostitute? Scholars suggest several possibilities:

- The “seven demons” of which Magdalene was healed were mistakenly assumed to be sexual sins when in fact they were more likely mental or emotional afflictions—anxiety, depression, and so on—or a physical infirmity such as epilepsy.
- Magdalene, who first appears in chapter 8 of Luke, has been confused with other unnamed women in the Gospels: for instance, the “sinner” in chapter 7 of Luke, who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and the woman with the alabaster jar in chapter 14 of Mark.
- In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great gave a series of homilies in which he named Magdalene as the repentant prostitute. His motive in this manipulation was not to discredit Magdalene but to use her to draw sinners back to the church. Nevertheless, this served as an official sanction and cemented Magdalene’s image as a “fallen woman” for centuries to come. (The church did issue a retraction in 1969, but by then Magdalene’s image as a prostitute was so deeply engrained in the popular imagination that it had no real impact.)
- Some scholars suggest that Magdalene was “downgraded” because she posed a threat to the established order. Women in first-century Palestine were seen as inferior and subordinate. A woman who modeled autonomy and personal power would challenge this order, especially if she wore the special blessing of Christ. Turning her into a prostitute would diminish her influence as a role model for other women.

Whatever the motive, however it happened, to name Magdalene a prostitute robs her of her good name and robs us of a strong female role model, at a time when women and girls are in special need of scriptural role models. Celebrating Mary Magdalene’s feast day on 22 July is one way to dispel the case of mistaken identity and to begin to uncover the truth about who she really was. Hundreds of gatherings of women around the country are doing just that—in homes, parishes, schools, and other settings.

I have a feeling Mary Magdalene, who lives with us and walks with us still, is not surprised. I sit with her in prayer, and she tells me not to worry but to work and pray and keep the faith, for Christ will always find a way. In my meditation, I see Mary, the mother of Jesus, standing by her side.

By Lalor Cadley Ferrari  
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## **Celebrating Mary Magdalene: Picturing Her True Self**

In a scene in the Walt Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel swims past a painting of Mary Magdalene. Coincidental, but Ariel and Mary Magdalene do have something in common. Both are silenced, dismissed by others, and changed from their true self. Mary Magdalene's story is in all four Gospel accounts of the Resurrection. John's account (20:1-18) is the most poignant, as Jesus calls Mary Magdalene by name and she recognizes him. On her feast day, 22 July, at Easter, or any other time, celebrate Mary Magdalene's status as the first witness to the Resurrection and the first evangelist to spread the Good News of the Resurrection.

Gather a group of girls and women for a party in Mary Magdalene's honor. Begin by asking the group what they know about her. Provide print copies of some of the artwork from the Web site [www.magdalone.org](http://www.magdalone.org). Ask the group to compare the artwork to the Gospel stories about Mary Magdalene. What do they like or dislike about each image? Use the information on the Web site to dispel notions about her status as a prostitute.

"Mary of Magdala: A Case of Mistaken Identity" is an easy-to-read article about how this mistaken identity evolved. Make a copy of the article for each group member. After learning more about Mary of Magdala, ask each person in the group to draw her own image of Mary Magdalene that emphasizes her true role in the Gospel.

Many women's groups now celebrate Mary Magdalene's feast day on 22 July. Contact [cschenk@sistersofstjoseph.com](mailto:cschenk@sistersofstjoseph.com) for more information about ways to plan an event that promotes Mary Magdalene as an apostle to the Apostles instead of as the mistaken identity of prostitute.

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