

# The Apostles and Early Followers of Jesus

As he walked through Judea teaching, healing, and telling stories, Jesus gathered about him many who were drawn to his words and actions. Among his first followers were the Twelve who became most closely associated with him. Other Gospels present different lists, but the oldest Gospel, that of Mark, lists the Twelve as Simon, later called Peter; Andrew; James and John, the sons of Zebedee; Philip; Thomas; Matthew; James, son of Alphaeus; Thaddeus; Simon the Cananean; Bartholomew; and Judas Iscariot.

When we think of their importance in the history of the Church, it is amazing that these men, Jesus' first disciples (meaning "followers"), were not wealthy or powerful. The disciple John was a member of the priestly class, but most of the Twelve were members of the working class and not leaders. Peter, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee were fishermen, an honest middle-class occupation. Matthew was a despised tax collector working for the Roman government. Some of these men may have had some education; others were probably illiterate. None of them would have foreseen their historical impact as the first people to proclaim the Christian message.

One of the most important people in getting the fledgling Christian community going was the Apostle who came to be known as Peter. The Gospels show Peter to be a complex person—committed, loyal, hotheaded, dense, and scared. The respect he gained in the early Christian community, and which modern Christians still extend to him, did not come about because he was perfect or because he always understood what was going on but because he stayed with it and kept trying.

The most frequently mentioned disciple in the Gospels, Peter was the first one called, a leader of the other disciples and a special friend of Jesus. He came from the town of Bethsaida in the Galilee, an area with many non-Jewish inhabitants and strongly influenced by Greek culture. Many around Peter spoke Greek rather than the Aramaic common in Judea, and as a prosperous fisherman, he probably knew at least enough Greek to conduct business.

Catholics see Peter as the first Pope in a succession that continues to the present day, but he did not come by that title immediately. Once the hierarchy of the Church began to emerge, people looked to the line of the bishops of Rome to see how the teachings had been passed down. The earliest lists record Linus as the first bishop of Rome and thus the first Pope; Peter was not given that title until the late second or early third century. Nevertheless there is no doubt that he was honored in a particular way even in the earliest Christian circles.

Later in his life, Peter traveled extensively, telling people the Good News about Jesus. Eventually he traveled to Rome, which became the last of Peter's journeys as he was killed during Nero's persecution of Christians in about AD 65. The executions took place in an area called the Vatican Gardens, and a tradition from the early Church tells us that Peter was buried in a cemetery close by. The Emperor Constantine certainly knew this tradition: in 315 he began building what would eventually become Saint Peter's Basilica on that site. If you go to Saint Peter's today, you can walk below the basilica floor and see what is thought to be the tomb of this faithful follower of Jesus.

Long before that, though, Peter was simply a tradesman who worked hard to take care of his family, including his wife. Although we know little about Peter's wife—even her name is never given in the Gospel accounts—it is clear that she too was among the early followers of Jesus. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 9:5 that she went with Peter on mission trips after the Resurrection. Her faith would not have come about just by listening to her husband either, since Jesus stayed in her house many times; it seems to have been his base of operations during his ministry. According to the Gospel writers, she also saw Jesus heal her mother of a fever and, later that same day, heal a host of people who showed up at her home.

Peter's wife is one of the many faith-filled but usually unnamed women who formed part of the community around Jesus during his life and spread the Christian message to others after his Death. The Twelve may all have been men, but women also formed part of the inner core of the group that gathered around Jesus. The Gospel of Luke, for instance, presents Jesus staying at the home of a woman named



Mary and her sister Martha when he traveled to Bethany (see 10:38). We also hear in Luke about Joanna and Susanna, who traveled with Jesus and the Twelve and helped financially support Jesus' ministry (see 8:1–3). We read about many other unnamed female followers of Jesus, such as the woman who washed his feet with her hair and tears and the women who walked with Jesus on the road to his Crucifixion. And no follower of Jesus, male or female, has been more honored among Catholics than Jesus' mother, Mary. Although they are not as often discussed, women were every bit as important in Jesus' life and ministry as were the men who heeded his call.

The best known of Jesus' female followers is Mary Magdalene, a disciple of Jesus and, according to all four canonical Gospels, the first witness to the Resurrection. The Gospels differ on exactly who first saw Jesus after he was resurrected, but all of them list Mary. This led a second-century Christian writer named Hippolytus to proclaim her the "apostle to the Apostles" (a title the Church continues to use today), as she was the first one to see and also the first one to tell, which makes her the first spreader of the Good News, the first apostle. Mary followed Jesus in his travels and supported his ministry financially. When most of the disciples fled in fear, Mary remained with Jesus until his Death. Her role as the first one to hear about the Resurrection did not create her status as a disciple; it came about because of it.

During Jesus' lifetime those who gathered around him were known simply as his followers. A little later they came to be known as followers of the Way. By about AD 45, Jesus' followers in Antioch had come to be called Christians (see Acts 11:26), which comes from *Christ*, a Greek word meaning "anointed one"; in Hebrew, *Messiah*.

The followers of Jesus did not become known by his name but rather by the title they believed was his, that of the Anointed One whom the Jews had long awaited. With this name they proclaimed their belief that Jesus played a special role in history and claimed the Jewish heritage as the background of their faith. The term *Christian* was soon proclaimed by the followers of the man from Nazareth, and it is the name by which they came to be known as they traveled outside of Judea to spread their beliefs to others.

(This article is adapted from the article titled "It's Good to Have Friends: The First Followers," in *The Catholic Church: A Brief Popular History*, by Cynthia Stewart, PhD (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2008), pages 26–31.)

