

“Mary Magdalene: A Weed By Any Other Name”

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Soon afterwards [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

[Luke 8:1-3]

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

[John 20:1-2]

As Spring began and being a less than attentive gardener, I look over my yard to assess the ravages of my Winter of discontent and neglect. Sadly some years ago, a drought and Winter freeze had killed several bushes in the garden. Both the yard and the garden were loaded with weeds: Henbit, Chickweed, Crabgrass, Russian Thistle ~ all the scourge of farmers and gardeners alike.

Then suddenly I surprise myself. I remember how it is that I can identify all these weeds ~ because of one of the most enjoyable courses in college: Local Flora. Harriet Barkley was one of the best professors I have ever had. Her course had come highly recommended even for non-majors. In that wonderful course, I had a good excuse for spending months roaming Eastern Oklahoma with my honey searching for illusive wildflowers.

Then it struck me ~ I could identify the weeds in my garden, because in a different context, they were wildflowers!

Shakespeare's thought on a rose: "A rose by any other name wouldst smell as sweet" is not quite accurate for our purposes here. "A weed by any other name wouldst smell as sour" is not right. Rather: **"A weed by any other name is a wildflower!!"**

That is especially true of the disciple we study today: Mary of Magdala.

Mary of Magdala is one of the foremost of all the disciples, but church tradition has not been kind to Mary. Church tradition has repressed her being among the Disciples, emphasizing much more the weediness of Mary rather than her flower-like character. [How many even think of her as a Disciple?] On the other hand, in the canonical Biblical traditions themselves, Jesus early on identified the "floweriness" of Mary of Magdala, Jesus emphasized it, cultivated it, magnified it.

From silent movies through musicals down to Dan Brown's book and movie *The Da Vinci Code*, artists, writers and directors have depicted Mary of Magdala in the most imaginative, surprising and provocative terms, but [and here is a big "spoiler warning"!!] not necessarily have they shown her accurately according to the Bible.

Modern depictions often follow church tradition rather than the Bible, but usually with a dramatic flourish.

- ❖ In *King of Kings* (1927), Mary is not a lowly backstreet prostitute, but a high class hooker. Not true either way.
- ❖ In the rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), Mary is portrayed as Jesus' special friend (though not a wife nor lover in this version), but nevertheless as a scarlet woman, the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears of which we read today. But this common association between these two women is also not accurate to the Bible as we shall see.
- ❖ In the controversial book and movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Mary is portrayed as a prostitute and Jesus' former lover who gets angry when he will no longer be visiting her since God called him. Again, see the pattern of inaccuracy.
- ❖ And in the most flamboyant assertion yet, Mary is depicted as Jesus' wife in *The Da Vinci Code*, that they had a child together and that she and the child escaped to France to found the first line of Frankish kings. But this is as preposterous and as much of a politically expedient story as the equally unbiblical legend of Simon Peter traveling to Rome, founding the First Church of Rome and the papacy.

Will the real Mary Magdalene please stand up? *Newsweek* some years ago searched for the "real Mary Magdalene" under the title, "*An Inconvenient Woman.*" Who is she really? And why is she so "inconvenient?"

The Bible actually does not say much about Mary, but nevertheless what it does say puts her in a central role. The Bible does say "*Mary Magdalene, from whom [Jesus] had cast out seven demons.*" [Mark 16:9] And Church tradition dating from Pope Gregory the Great in 591 has presumed these seven demons included licentiousness and unchastity. But this is pure speculation, and says more about the Church Fathers' views on women than about Mary herself.

According to the Bible, Jesus did cast seven demons from Mary Magdalene, but do not let us read our own cultural biases into it. In the language of the day, 'demons' were overwhelming associated with physical and mental illness rather than with moral or spiritual defect. The 'seven demons' in reality denote a serious or recurrent physical malady.

The *Interpreter's Dictionary* summarizes Mary's life this way: "one of the most prominent of the Galilean women who followed Jesus."

Mary's bad reputation among later church leaders may be a case of mistaken identity, being associated in error with other women in the Gospels.

Her bad reputation among later church leaders may well have stemmed from mistaken guilt by association. Her city Magdala was a gentile city, prosperous with a reputation for licentiousness. But just because her city was like that does not make her like that. Mary of Magdala is in the Bible identified with the industry of the city, dyed cloth, rather than its party character.

Her bad reputation among later church leaders may have stemmed from envy. For she was a strong, devoted and exceptionally favored disciple. And most to be envied, she was the one, the only one to be blessed with seeing first the resurrected Jesus.

We do know that, far from being a scarlet woman, she was instead a woman of means. How do we know? Because at several points she is recorded to have funded Jesus' and the disciples' ministries. It would have been morally reprehensible, indeed impossible for Jesus to accept the profits from prostitution to support his ministry.

We do know that Mary is not the unidentified "woman *of the city*," the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears in Luke 7:36-50 as she is so often falsely identified in tradition and in art. Luke is at great pains to show this is indeed a different woman. Immediately following that reference in Luke to a woman of the *city of Nain*, Mary *of the city of Magdala* is introduced as a different person, as she was accompanying Jesus on that preaching tour. Mary could not possibly be the "woman of that city" of Nain.

John's Gospel says the woman who anointed Jesus was Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Matthew and Mark simply say that she was a woman from Bethany. We also do know that Mary is not the woman taken in adultery in John 8 for equally compelling textual evidence.

What we do know from the Bible is that Mary was a woman of some means who served Jesus with devotion. She funded Jesus' and the other disciples' preaching missions. She had a serious illness which Jesus healed. She put the money in the purse from which Judas embezzled.

Mary was a prominent, if not the most prominent disciple and apostle. She accompanied Jesus on at least some of his preaching missions. She went with Jesus and the other disciples on his final journey to Jerusalem. She most undoubtedly was in the upper room participating in the Passover Seder as women and children always were.

She was present at the crucifixion when all the male disciples had fled, and she had the inestimable privilege to be chosen to be the first to see the empty tomb and the first to meet Jesus resurrected. This is one of the cardinal proofs that Jesus indeed rose from the dead. No one would make up such an outrageous story. Women as the witnesses?! ~ It would have been far too easy for the cultures of the day to deny it on that basis. Mary makes the witness credible.

Then Mary mysteriously disappears from the narrative never to be seen or heard from again in the Acts of the Apostles or the balance of the New Testament ~ leaving fertile ground for popes and authors and believers to fill in the blanks with their own, often mistaken biases, preposterous imaginings and fanciful dreams. Why? The simplest explanation is that the New Testament was written mostly by men. Nevertheless, in the NT, fully 40% of the church leaders named are women showing dramatically that the church ran counter to all the cultures of the day.

Mary's inclusion in the Bible's narrative gives us strong evidence that Jesus calls both men and women, both poor and rich, people of all nations to be Followers of the Way. That means there is hope for us too.

At the ROMEO's luncheon at a previous church one week, we got on the subject of weeds and one of the gentlemen observed how it is that weeds can grow just about anywhere, but those high-bred flowers cannot.

The observation holds for wildflowers as well.

The observation holds for Mary Magdalene as well.

Mary was a weed in the eyes of the church ~ unwanted, inconvenient and needing to be plucked up ~ but in Biblical reality she was a flower. And not a hothouse flower, but a hardy wildflower capable of blooming in all kinds of environments ~ at preaching stations, at the base of the cross, in the upper room, at the graveyard.

The faith of such a flower. May all of us, weeds that we are, be found to be wildflowers in God's garden. May our faith bloom even in the roughest environments of life and stressful times.