

THE FOLLOWING IS THE SCRIPT THAT PASTOR TASHA USED TO PREACH FROM. IT IS NOT WRITTEN FOR PUBLICATION, AND MAY CONTAIN TYPOS AND/OR GRAMMATICAL ERRORS. IT MAY ALSO DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM THE RECORDED SERMON.

When I was growing up—really for a long time as I grew up—I remember that whenever I heard about Mary in the Bible—at Easter when the women go to the tomb especially—I always thought, and sometimes I’d ask—now which Mary is she? Because I knew that there was Jesus’ mother, she was Mary, and then there was Martha’s sister, Mary, who was Lazarus’ sister, too, and then there was Mary Magdalene, and then there’s Mary the mother of James who goes to Jesus tomb, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph who watches the crucifixion. I could never keep all those Marys straight—because it’s confusing! Well, it turns out that I’m not the only one who’s had trouble with all those Marys—most people find them a little perplexing—and in fact, Christian tradition throughout history has found it difficult to paint a clear picture of who’s who.

But today I hope we can provide a little clarity, especially about Mary Magdalene.

Now the first thing that most people think of when they think of Mary Magdalene is they think—yes, she was a prostitute who became a follower of Jesus. And if they’ve read the DaVinci Code—that book by Dan Brown, or if they saw the movie, they might even think she was Jesus’ wife.

In many ways over the years, Mary Magdalene has developed an unfounded and perhaps undeserved reputation. Let’s look at a few reasons why that might have happened.

She is mentioned by name 12 times in the canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – she’s called Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdalene, Mary who was called Magdalene, Mariam.

Some scholars think that Magdala is the town Mary came from, but because the word “Magdala” means “tower” or “fortress,” other scholars think it was was a nickname that Jesus gave her because she was tall or strong—in the same way that he called Peter “the Rock,” and John and James “the sons of Thunder.”

She is not married, nor is she a widow. We can come to this conclusion because a married woman would have carried her husband’s name. And it would be fair to assume that, because she was free to follow Jesus, she had no home obligations.

Mary Magdalene was probably not a prostitute. The idea of Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner became the generally accepted view in Western Christianity as a result of a series of easter sermons delivered by Pope Gregory I in 591. He spoke highly of her devotion and love of Jesus, but also referred to her as the anonymous sinner with perfume in Luke's Gospel (7:36-50) and as Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. The pope also cited the Gospels of Luke (8:1-3) and Mark (16:9) which make a brief reference to Christ ridding Mary of "seven demons." Pope Gregory deduced the seven demons as the seven deadly sins, making Mary not only guilty of lust, but pride and greed—and the other four-- as well.

What I find interesting is that the writer of the Gospel of Luke calls Mary Magdeline by name in the next chapter – Chapter 8, vs 2. Now, knowing what we know about the writer of Luke, who is diligent about details—he tells Theophilus in chapter 1 that he sets out to write an orderly account having investigated everything carefully--it would seem that if this sinful woman WAS Mary Mag, he would have introduced her here—but he doesn't.

But Mary's reputation as a repentant prostitute made a really good story, a powerful tale of grace, and so this view of Mary was further solidified in Western medieval theology, with its emphasis on penitence, and flourished in Europe over the next fourteen hundred years. Western medieval and Renaissance Christian art usually depicted Mary dressed extravagantly, even suggestively. In some paintings, she is naked (most notably by the artist Titian (Tishan) in the 1500's), her body wrapped in long blond wavy hair.

That reputation was further strengthened in the 1300's when the Roman Catholic Church established its first "Magdalen House" for the rescue and maintenance of fallen women. Magdalene asylums or Magdalene laundries –operated from the 18th to the late 20th centuries to house "fallen women" – women who worked in prostitution, young women who became pregnant outside of marriage or young girls without family support. But were essentially commercial workshops, laundries and factories with regimes more severe than those found in prisons.

Although the Western church, since the late 20th century, has attempted to undo the unfounded representations of Mary in the past, these misconceptions, this unfounded reputation still lingers, especially in popular culture.

But it's understandable why this would happen – As the story of Jesus was told again and again in those first decades, over years and years when people weren't literate, and even when they were but they couldn't read

the bible because they didn't have access to it - for 100's of years, stories are told and shared – and we like to simplify things – and it's a good story--this terribly fallen woman who is transformed.

But like a lot of urban legends – often they're just really good stories, fabrications. For example, let's take a look at George Washington – he's surrounded by myths – he had wooden teeth, he was so strong he could throw a silver dollar across the Potomac or, probably the most famous one - that when he was six years old, he chopped down a cherry tree (then told his dad the truth about it) "I cannot tell a lie" And rather than punishing young George, his dad said that George's honesty was worth more than a thousand trees. Now that may or may not have happened, but like Mary Magdalene's past as a prostitute, there's no evidence that it did happen--but an urban legend, a made up story, can teach a lesson in integrity.

Mary's reputation may have been tarnished by these things, but here's the truth - her voice and identity still come through when you read between the lines, particularly when the reader is led by the same Holy Spirit that influenced the writer. So, let's see what the gospels have to say about Mary.

The gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene was set free. Luke 8 begins: "Soon afterwards he (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. "

Jesus freed Mary Magdalene from seven demons. It's tempting to speculate what those demons were – the Bible doesn't specifically say, but something worth noting is that in scripture, the number 7 often symbolises completion or perfection. And although we don't know what bondage those seven demons had her in or how they had entered her life, we can safely declare that Christ freed her from them and from their control on her life. From that moment on she became a devoted follower of Jesus. And not only did she, from then on, give of her time, serving and traveling with Jesus to proclaim the Gospel, she, along with these other women provided financially for Jesus and the disciples out of their own resources.

When we look at the Greek used here we see that these women, were ministering to, providing for Jesus and the disciples using their own possessions – their own money. – the verb used for provided is (dee-ak-on-eh'-o) (from [1223](#) /*diá*, "thoroughly" and *konis*, "dust") – and (dee-ak-on-eh'-o) literally means to "thoroughly raise up dust by moving in a hurry, and so to *minister*" So Mary wasn't just hanging around Jesus,

she was actively serving and ministering in very practical ways. It's the same word used in Matthew 20:28 – where Jesus says “the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve.” So she's living the way Jesus said he was called to – she's following in Jesus' footsteps.

The gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene stayed with Jesus. And even in the darkest of times—even at the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene stayed near him – Unlike those who scattered and ran, those who lost faith, those who betrayed Jesus, Mary Magdalene stayed. She stayed nearby as her saviour, stripped of his clothing, whipped and beaten hung on that cross. She was there when he drew his last breath and announced to the world, “It is finished” Mary witnessed the very real death of Jesus. She was with him, providing for and serving Jesus through his ministry and now, with him in his death.

As we look at our scripture in the Gospel of John, chapter 20, we can see that it's the third day after the crucifixion. Mary had probably been involved in the anointing of His body for burial in the tomb. And now, she's gone early in the morning of the first day of the week to anoint His body again, which was Jewish custom – to anoint the body until the third day when it was believed that the soul departed the body. In the quiet, early morning hours, Mary has walked to the place of His burial to do this last act of devotion and discipleship for her Lord.

So Mary Magdalene had witnessed Jesus' very real death on the cross, had anointed his body and now, John's Gospel tells us that she gets to the tomb and the stone is rolled away – and Jesus isn't there. She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved and tells them that they've taken Jesus and she doesn't know where they've laid him.

Peter and the others rush to the tomb to see for themselves, then return to their homes. Maybe they thought, “What else can we do?”

But Mary stays. - John tells us in verse 11 that she remains at the tomb weeping. She doesn't put on a false face. She doesn't say “oh, it will all work out for good. It's not as bad as it seems” She weeps and utters the truest words “we don't know where they have taken him.” Her grief and pain at the loss of her Lord is worsened now by the loss of His body. This was the last place she had seen His broken, dead body and she isn't going anywhere. Even her grief has been violated—she's lost Jesus TWICE now—first to death and now to something or someone else that has taken him-- and she weeps. Can you imagine the emotional turmoil of the last days that overwhelms her and she just breaks down and weeps at the sight of the empty tomb?

Yet in spite of her grief, in verse 12 we read that she gathers the courage to look into the tomb for herself and what a sight she is met with. He had died between two thieves but now two angels appear and between them are the empty grave clothes declaring His resurrection. In verse 13 we read that they ask her a simple question: “Woman, why are you crying?” From the perspective of heaven tears at the empty tomb of Christ would make no sense at all. From the angels’ perspective tears of grief are totally inappropriate but for Mary they are the only way to express her heart’s pain. Then we read her reply. Through tear stained cheeks and tear strained voice she utters her grief. “They have taken my Lord. I don’t know where to find Him.”

Mary Magdalene immediately becomes aware of another presence behind her and turning round assumes it’s the gardener. How ironic, the first Adam in Genesis 2:15 was to be a gardener and now the ‘second Adam’ is mistaken for a gardener. Jesus now asks her the same question as the angels “Why are you crying?” and adds a second question “Who are you looking for?”

Even in the midst of her grief, Mary is courteous to Him, and asks “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” So what does this tell us about her personality? She’s not timid or squeamish, but she’s ready to take Jesus’ body herself and remember that coming into contact with a dead body would have carried with it the threat of uncleanness. Think about this – this is a task that would make many of us uncomfortable but Mary doesn’t hesitate.

Then Jesus utters just one word ‘Mary’ and her eyes are opened to who it is that stands before her. ‘The good Shepherd calls His sheep by name, they know His voice and heed His call’ He simply calls her by name ‘Mary’ and her exhausted soul, her broken heart are transformed. Mary Magdalene stayed with Jesus, through his ministry, through his death and now she’s with him in his resurrection.

And the third thing I want to mention about Mary Magdalene – she’s commissioned. In verse 17, Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” And what did she do? Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

I love being a pastor in the church of the Nazarene. As many of you know, both Pastor Steve and I grew up in Nazarene homes with deep Nazarene roots. For as far back as I can remember, I’ve had the honour of

knowing incredible, Godly women like Dr. Nina Gunter. Nina was called to preach at 12 years old and answered that call to ministry at the age of 14. She was ordained in 1960 and went on to co-pastor churches with her husband Moody in Tennessee, Missouri and South Carolina and became General Superintendent for the Church of the Nazarene in 2005. I have vivid memories as a teenager, of listening to Nina preach, standing at the pulpit in the open air tabernacle during many sticky hot summers of Batesburg, South Carolina family camp meeting, and the way Nina would unapologetically proclaim the gospel of Jesus – I still love listening to her preach. I love her passion. And I love being part of a church that ordains women and has from day one.

Even today I'm blessed to be supported and surrounded by women pastors on our district – Women who are called, who serve. Women who love Jesus, love people and preach the gospel.

So what can we learn from Mary Magdalene?

Well, for one, like Mary, we all have a past – and it might possibly one that's not based on truth or one that's not deserved. Or maybe it is deserved. Whatever the case, whatever demons possess us, whatever burdens we carry, whatever we have been, whatever we have done, we can be saved by the powerful love of Jesus. We can be saved, made complete and we can also (dee-ak-on-eh'-o) - serve and minister in practical ways. And follow in Jesus by living the way he said HE was called to.

Secondly, when we think of Mary Magdalene at Jesus crucifixion and at the empty tomb, she inspires us to look bravely at reality, even when things seem hopeless – she doesn't gloss over anything. She's not afraid to grieve, to weep, to be broken hearted. She does not fall back into denial, not does she try to sugar-coat things—she weeps, and she investigates, and she is willing to pick up Jesus' corpse when she finds it. But as we've seen, time and time again, particularly in the last few weeks as we've studied the Psalms, even in times of utter desperation and darkness, God transforms hopeless situations into a new creation, and gives us good news, a new song, to share with others.

And this is the third thing we can learn from Mary Magdalene--she embraces the commission to go and tell others about Jesus. And we should too. We are called to share the good news of the gospel. I think as a church there is the lesson we need to see here. We say we have met with the risen Christ. We say He has freed us from sin and death – well who have we told today? Is it not about time we told those we love—again and again? Is it not about time we actually told people this wonderful news—every single day, and every single person we meet? Not only through our words, but through our actions and attitudes, we can proclaim

the good news of God's saving grace and the power of the resurrection, and I know that we will continue to do so as the Spirit leads us.

We welcome you all back tonight at 6:00 for the Zoom Bible Study portion of our Big Faith Sunday. May God richly bless you. We'll see you tonight!