

# Spiritual Day Hike

In Scripture and Prayer and  
The Great Cloud of Witnesses

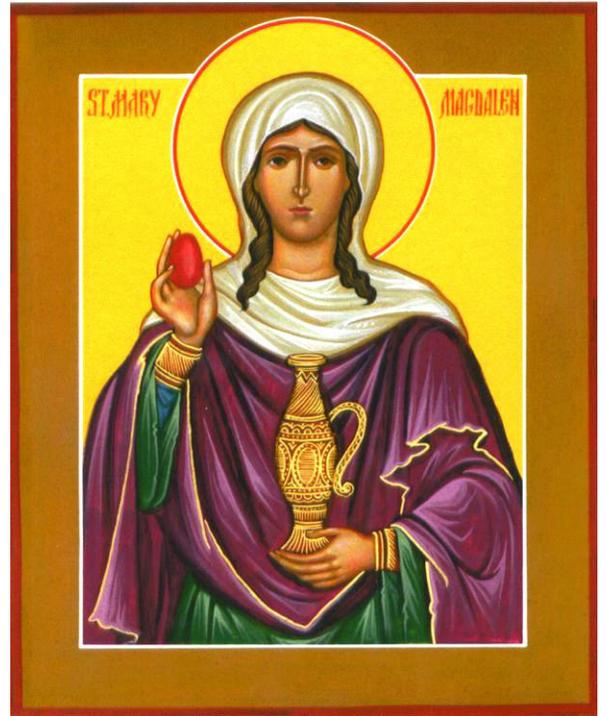
## Mary of Magdala (Mary Magdalene)

Commemoration on July 22

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### Not a Prostitute

Mary of Magdala is perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood figure in early Christianity. In Christian art and hagiography, Mary has been romanticized, allegorized, and mythologized beyond recognition. Since the fourth century, she has been portrayed as a prostitute and public sinner who, after encountering Jesus, repented and spent the rest of her life in private prayer and penitence. Paintings, some little more than pious pornography, reinforce the mistaken belief that sexuality, especially female sexuality, is shameful, sinful, and worthy of repentance. Yet the actual biblical account of Mary of Magdala paints a far different portrait than that of the bare-breasted reformed harlot of Renaissance art.



### First Witness to the Resurrection

Nowhere in scripture is Mary of Magdala identified as a public sinner or a prostitute. Instead, scripture shows her as the primary witness to the most central events of Christian faith, named in exactly the same way (Maria e Magdalena) in each of four gospels written for diverse communities throughout the Mediterranean world. It was impossible to relate the story of the Resurrection without including “Mary, the one from Magdala.”

Luke 8:1-3 tells us that Mary traveled with Jesus in the Galilean discipleship and, with Joanna and Susanna, supported his mission from her own financial resources. In the synoptic gospels, Mary leads the group of women who witness Jesus’ death, burial, the empty tomb, and His Resurrection. The synoptics contrast Jesus’ abandonment by the male disciples with the faithful strength of the women disciples who, led by Mary, accompany him to his death. John’s gospel names Mary of Magdala as the first to discover the empty tomb and shows the Risen Christ sending her to announce the Good News of

## 2

his resurrection to the other disciples. This prompted early church Fathers to name her “the Apostle to the Apostles.”

That the message of the resurrection was first entrusted to women is regarded by scripture scholars as strong proof for the historicity of the resurrection accounts. Had accounts of Jesus’ resurrection been fabricated, women would never have been chosen as witnesses, since Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women.

Early extra-canonical Christian writings show faith communities growing up around Mary’s ministry, where she is portrayed as understanding Jesus’ message better than did Peter and the male disciples. Scholars tell us that these writings are not about the historical persons Mary and Peter but instead reflect tensions over women’s roles in the early church. Prominent leaders such as Mary and Peter were evoked to justify opposing points of view. What is not disputed is the recognition of Mary of Magdala as an important woman leader in earliest Christianity.

### **What Happened?**

Why are contemporary Christians uninformed about Mary’s faithful discipleship and prominent leadership role in the infant church? One explanation is a common misreading of Luke’s gospel which tells us that “seven demons had gone out of her.” (Luke 8:1-3) To first century ears, this meant only that Mary had been cured of serious illness, not that she was sinful. According to biblical scholars such as Sr. Mary Thompson, illness was commonly attributed to the work of evil spirits, although not necessarily associated with sinfulness. The number seven symbolized that her illness was either chronic or very severe.

### **Women Leaders Suppressed**

In 312, when Constantine made Christianity the religion of the empire, the Christian community was caught in a cultural conflict as it moved from worship in house churches where women’s leadership was accepted, to worship in public places where women’s leadership violated Roman social codes of honor and shame. In the fourth century, male church leaders at the Council of Laodicea suppressed women leaders because of the belief that women were created subordinate to men. During this same time period, we see the memory of Mary of Magdala changing from that of a strong female disciple and proclaimer of the Resurrection to a repentant prostitute and public sinner. Scholars such as Dr. Jane Schaberg believe this was done deliberately to discourage female leadership in the church.

As knowledge of Jesus’ many women disciples faded from historical memory, their stories merged and blurred. The tender anointing of Mary of Bethany prior to Jesus’ passion was linked to the woman “known to be a sinner” whose tears washed and anointed Jesus’ feet at Simon’s house. The anointing texts

combined all of these women into one generic public sinner, “Magdalen.” Misidentification of Mary as reformed public sinner achieved official standing with a powerful homily by Pope Gregory the Great (540-604).

Henceforth, Mary of Magdala became known in the west, not as the strong woman leader who accompanied Jesus through a tortuous death, first witnessed his Resurrection, and proclaimed the Risen Savior to the early church, but as a wanton woman in need of repentance and a life of hidden (and hopefully silent) penitence. Interestingly, the eastern church never identified her as a prostitute, but honored her throughout history as “the Apostle to the Apostles”.

### **Prominent Female Leader, Not Jesus’ Wife**

The 2002 publication of *The Da Vinci Code* ignited widespread controversy about the true role of Mary of Magdala. Unfortunately, Dan Brown’s book, while an engaging fictional narrative, has done a disservice to the historical Mary of Magdala and other early women church leaders. Though *The Da Vinci Code* conveys a beautiful ideal of the essential unity of male and female, it is ultimately subversive to women’s full and equal leadership in the church because it focuses on the fiction of Mary’s marital status rather than the fact of her leadership in proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection.

There is no historical or biblical data to support speculation that Mary of Magdala was married to Jesus. The contention that ancient writers didn’t mention their marriage and offspring for fear of Jewish persecution doesn’t really hold up because John’s gospel and most of the apocryphal literature were written after the fall of Jerusalem, when there would have been nothing to fear from Jewish authorities. If Mary of Magdala were Jesus’ wife and the mother of his child, it is highly unlikely that these texts would have omitted these important facts, especially since she is prominently portrayed in both as the primary witness to the resurrection and a female leader who, in many ways, understood Jesus’ mission better than did the male disciples.

If Jesus were married, it wasn’t to Mary of Magdala, because then she would have been known as “Mary the wife of Jesus,” not Mary of Magdala. Literary and social conventions in antiquity dictated that if women were mentioned (a very rare occurrence) they were nearly always named by their relationship to the patriarchal household, for example: “Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chusa” (Luke 8:1-3). Atypically, Mary of Magdala was named according to the town she was from (not by her relationship to a man). Biblical scholars believe this indicates that she was probably a wealthy independent woman not bound to the patriarchal household.



## 4

Contemporary scholarship has rightfully restored our understanding of Mary of Magdala as an important early Christian leader. Now she becomes the same inspiring role model for twenty-first century disciples that she was for first century Christians.

In 1997 FutureChurch in Cleveland began a special celebration of the July 22nd feast of Mary of Magdala. The event was designed to promote contemporary scholarship about Jesus' inclusive practice and to provide a place for women to serve in visible liturgical roles. The popularity of the celebrations grew rapidly from 23 in 1997 to several hundred each succeeding year. They are held in Catholic parishes, Protestant churches, retreat houses, schools, convent chapels, private homes, and include special celebrations during Lent and Holy Week.

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## Readings and prayers appointed for the Commemoration

### *Collect*

Almighty God, whose blessed Son restored Mary Magdalene to health of body and of mind, and called her to be a witness of his resurrection: Mercifully grant that by your grace we may be healed from all our infirmities and know you in the power of his unending life; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

### **Judith 9:1, 11-14**

Then Judith prostrated herself, put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing. At the very time when the evening incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice, and said:

<sup>11</sup> “Your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope. <sup>12</sup> Please, please, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! <sup>13</sup> Make my deceitful words bring wound and bruise on those who have planned cruel things against your covenant, and against your sacred house, and against Mount Zion, and against the house your children possess. <sup>14</sup> Let your whole nation and every tribe know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!”

### **Psalm 42:1-7**

- 1 As the deer longs for the water-brooks, \*  
so longs my soul for you, O God.
- 2 My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God; \*  
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?
- 3 My tears have been my food day and night, \*  
while all day long they say to me, “Where now is your God?”
- 4 I pour out my soul when I think on these things: \*  
how I went with the multitude and led them into the house of God,
- 5 With the voice of praise and thanksgiving, \*  
among those who keep holy-day.
- 6 Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? \*  
and why are you so disquieted within me?
- 7 Put your trust in God; \* for I will yet give thanks to him,  
who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

### **2 Corinthians 5:14-18**

<sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. <sup>15</sup> And he died for all, so that those who

## 6

live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. <sup>16</sup> From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. <sup>17</sup> So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

### **John 20:11-18**

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, <sup>b</sup> “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> 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.’ ” <sup>18</sup> 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.