



sisters
and
brothers

MARY KAY DOBROVOLNY

Mary Magdalene: An Icon for Women Religious

About six years ago I fell in love for the first time. The experience opened entire new worlds to me and taught me a great deal about honesty, integrity, intimacy, and myself in relationship with others. It also brought tremendous conflict and turmoil. I was inexperienced in matters of the heart, and I had made a public commitment to live vowed religious life, including celibacy, for at least three years. Being in my second year of this three-year commitment, I prayed daily for the grace to live my life with faithfulness and integrity as I discerned whether to leave my religious community or stay as a vowed member.

Today I am very happily a perpetually professed Sister of Mercy, having made final vows in July 1998. But I remember clearly those days of my first love and the struggle in the months thereafter to freely choose vowed religious life. Beyond the intense grief for the path not chosen, there was the great void of role models for how to negotiate a love relationship while choosing to remain a vowed member of a religious community. Loud in my consciousness were the myr-

Mary Kay Dobrovolny RSM is pursuing a doctorate in New Testament studies at Vanderbilt University. Her address is 3335 Acklen Avenue; Nashville, Tennessee 37212.

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riad stories of women who left in the 1960s and 1970s to marry or pursue a committed relationship with another. Deafening by its silence was the reluctance of current members to speak of their own experiences of falling in love and being in love. As a new member I began to wonder if it was possible to fall in love and choose to remain part of vowed religious life.

To help fill the void of role models, this paper will present Mary Magdalene as an icon for celibate loving and apostolic mission, using the resurrection story found in the Gospel of John. This passage speaks of a love and intimacy between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. In addition, as the first to encounter the resurrected Jesus and receive the commission to "go and tell," Mary Magdalene becomes the "apostle to the apostles." This paper will (1) explore who Mary Magdalene is, sorting through the myths in the tradition; (2) examine the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in chapter 20 of John's Gospel; and (3) note some insights suggested by this examination regarding celibate loving and apostolic mission for vowed women religious.

Sorting through the Myths of the Tradition

When I began working on this paper, a theologically educated friend of mine gave me an article on Luke 7:36-50, a passage the New American Bible calls "The Pardon of the Sinful Woman."¹ I looked at my friend, smiled, thanked her for the article, and then said, "You do know that the woman in this passage is not Mary Magdalene, don't you?" Gasping slightly, she said, "I can never keep those Marys straight." My friend is not alone in this, and she has had much help combining the women of Scripture. In the tradition of the West, the unnamed woman in Luke 7, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and sometimes even the woman who was caught in adultery (Jn 8) have all been interwoven and confused. The confusion can be traced as far back as the 6th century. Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) merged the identities of these women into one woman in several homilies. Since that time, veneration of Mary Magdalene in the West has diverged from the Gospels' portrayal of her. While none of the biblical women is called "a prostitute," Mary Magdalene's most frequent portrayal in stories, legends, art, and worship has been as a prostitute and repentant sinner.

The combination of these women's identities was not shared by the Eastern churches, which have treated the women as separate individuals. The East has looked at Mary Magdalene as equal to the apostles. Shortly after the time of Pope Gregory the Great, Modestus, patriarch of Jerusalem, said that Mary Magdalene, the myrrh-bearer, was "chief among the women disciples," a teacher of other holy women, a lifelong virgin, and a martyr.²

While the popular mind continues to think of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, recent scholarship is replacing this image with a view of her as faithful disciple, witness to

the resurrection, and apostle to and with the twelve. This is a retrieval in the West of a previously held image, not a new creation. Each of the Gospels portrays Mary Magdalene as a follower of Jesus through his Galilean ministry, a witness and mourner of his crucifixion and death, a witness of the empty tomb, the first to whom the risen

Jesus appears, and the first to proclaim his resurrection. Accordingly, Hippolytus (ca. 170-235), bishop of Rome, named her *apostola apostolorum*, apostle to the apostles. This title, revived by recent scholars, was repeated as late as Thomas Aquinas.

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Narrative Analysis of John 20

John 20:1-18 is a single narrative unit divided into three scenes. Verses 1-2 depict Mary Magdalene's discovery of the empty tomb, verses 3-10 describe the race between Peter and the beloved disciple to the tomb, and verses 11-18 find Mary Magdalene alone, weeping outside the tomb. She went to the tomb of the crucified Jesus "early . . . while it was still dark." Immediately after discovering that the stone had been removed from the tomb, she ran to tell Peter and the beloved disciple that "they have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." This is the first of three times that she announces that the body of Jesus has been removed from the tomb (see also 20:13 and 15). This announcement to

Peter and the beloved disciple is the catalyst for the second scene, in which these two characters race to the tomb to discover it empty, albeit for linen wrappings.

After these two have returned home (20:10), Mary Magdalene stands weeping beside the tomb. Still weeping, she stoops and looks inside, continuing her search for Jesus' body. Her weeping is mentioned twice in one verse, suggesting both intense frustration and intense grief. She stays in this place of grief and pain rather than return home like the other disciples. She turns toward suffering, pain, and death.³

The setting for Mary Magdalene's search for the body of Jesus is both a graveyard and a garden. Her weeping in the graveyard is reminiscent of the grief of Mary of Bethany upon the death of her brother Lazarus, and the garden (Jn 19:41) brings to mind both the primeval male-female intimacy of Adam and Eve in Genesis and the passionate love in the Song of Songs (4:12-5:1; 6:2-3; 8:13).⁴

Mary looks into the tomb and sees "two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying" (20:12). Rather than deliver a message of hope, comfort, or resurrection, these angels question her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" This question calls attention to her tears for a third time. Mary reiterates the cause of her pain: "They have taken my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (20:2 and 13). Apparently not awed by the angels, Mary turns from the tomb to see the unrecognized Jesus. A conversation with this "gardener" takes place, three exchanges between them.

Jesus asks the reason for her weeping—tears mentioned now a fourth and final time. The intensity of Mary's grief and worry and serves to fulfill the prediction Jesus made earlier in the Gospel: "Amen, Amen, I say you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice" (16:20). In this Gospel, Mary Magdalene is the only character who weeps and mourns when she can "no longer see [Jesus]" (16:19).⁵ Soon the rest of Jesus' prediction will be fulfilled: "You will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy" (16:20 and 22).

Jesus asks not only the reason for her weeping, but also "Whom are you seeking?" (20:15). She reiterates for the third time her search for the crucified Jesus, asking the "gardener" to help her find him. The focus on Mary's unrelenting search for

the crucified Jesus echoes the lover's intense search for her beloved in the Song of Songs:

Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. "I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves." I sought him, but found him not. The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me. (Sg 3:1-4, NRSV)

In this passage and in the narrative about Mary at Jesus' tomb, the women are seeking and failing to find their beloved. The searches occur in a garden (Sg 4:12-5:1; 6:2-3; 8:13; Jn 19:41-42). The women inquire where their beloved might be. And, as we will see shortly, neither woman wants to release her beloved once he has been found. This is stated strongly in the Song of Songs 3:4: "I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me."

The second exchange is marked by recognition. Mary Magdalene has not recognized the resurrected Jesus by sight, but now, his voice sounding her name, she recognizes him. This recognition reminds us of the shepherd who "calls his own by name" and they "follow him because they know his voice" (10:3-4). Mary exclaims, "Rabbouni!" (meaning Teacher). This title and "Lord," the title she has used before (20:2, 13, and also 15), are titles Jesus has mentioned as fitting ones: "You call me Teacher and Lord—and you speak correctly, for indeed I am" (13:13).

Before Mary's "Rabbouni!" the Greek text says of her (using a participle) *strapheisa*. This can simply mean *having turned*, but it can also mean *having changed inwardly, having been converted*.⁶ The New Revised Standard Version uses the former meaning of physical motion, saying "she turned." But she has already turned from the tomb toward this "gardener" (20:14); turning physically again does not make narrative sense. It seems instead that, hear-

ing her name spoken by that beloved voice, she is inwardly changed by that recognition. Most likely the transformation of her weeping and mourning into the joy described in John 16:20 and 22 is at the heart of that change.

In the third exchange, Jesus presents Mary Magdalene with two commands: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" and "Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them. . . ." In reading between the lines, it can be difficult to get the tone of Jesus' commands and their impact on Mary, whose weeping has just been transformed into joy. Some commentators try to find a fault in her or her belief, which does not permit her to touch Jesus as Thomas is later invited to do (20:27).⁷ Others have written about a "decided brutality" in Jesus' rebuke and rejection of her.⁸

Both of these interpretations miss textual clues. Far from being found at fault, Mary is given a privileged position within the Gospel of John as the first to see the risen Jesus and the first to be commissioned to proclaim the resurrection. Jesus does not find fault with her—which suggests that the Gospel's author does not intend the reader to do so either. As for the idea of "brutality," Mary does not respond as one who has been rebuked or rejected by her beloved Jesus. There is no more weeping. Instead, with jubilation Mary proclaims, "I have seen the Lord!" (20:18).

Still, inasmuch as Mary's inclination to hold on to her beloved after seeking him unrelentingly with intense longing is quite understandable (as in Sg 3:4), Jesus' command is perplexing. It can only be understood in light of his explanation: "for I have *not yet ascended* to the Father." Later in this same verse, Jesus tells Mary to announce "I *am ascending*. . . ." The text seems to indicate that Jesus is in a transitional phase in which he is in the process of ascending.⁹ The appearance of Jesus at this threshold moment between his resurrection from the dead and his ascension to the Father is unique, and it

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involves only Mary Magdalene. By the time Jesus appears and invites Thomas to touch him (20:27), he has already ascended to the Father and returned, bringing and bestowing the Advocate upon the disciples (20:22). Mary's encounter with Jesus is recognizable as a uniquely privileged one.

After telling Mary not to hold on to him, Jesus commissions her to "go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17). There are three noteworthy pieces of this commission: (1) the phrase *tous adelphous mou*, translated above as "my brothers and sisters"; (2) the phrase "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"; and (3) the verb tense used in the commission to "go and tell."

The phrase "my brothers and sisters" denotes a new relationship between Jesus and his followers and among his followers.¹⁰ Previously, in his final discourse to the disciples, Jesus has called his disciples friends rather than slaves (15:15), and, while hanging on the cross, he has created a new relationship between his mother and the beloved disciple (19:26-27). Now (20:17) he proclaims that all members of the believing community are his brothers and sisters and, by implication, brothers and sisters to each other. This new relationship recalls and fulfills the imagery in the Johannine Prologue: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:12).

The fulfillment of the words of the Prologue is made more explicit in what follows: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17). The rhythm of these words recalls the covenant Ruth made with her mother-in-law Naomi: "Your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Despite the differences in race, Ruth, a Moabite, casts her lot with her Hebrew mother-in-law, making their futures forever intertwined. In the same way, Jesus proclaims that, despite the differences (see 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me"), a new covenantal family relationship has been established.

This new covenantal family relationship encompasses all of the believing community in the postresurrection community. Mary Magdalene is commissioned to "go to my brothers and

sisters and tell them. . . ." The imperative verb *poreuou* (go) is in the present tense. A present imperative "generally denotes a command to continue to do an action or to do it repeatedly."¹¹ Thus, Mary Magdalene is commissioned, not for a one-time telling of her revelation of the risen Jesus (such as that recorded to the disciples in 20:18), but to go repeatedly to the community, continuing to tell the story of her encounter with the risen Jesus.¹²

The Gospel of John does not narrate any additional conversation between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Instead, Mary is presented as going immediately to the disciples to proclaim: "I have seen the Lord!" Her weeping and mourning have been transformed into joy. Her intense searching for her beloved has been transformed into assured confidence of continuing in her relationship with Jesus. Her encounter with the risen Jesus establishes her authority among the disciples. And, through her conveying the message of the risen Jesus, a new relationship among the community of believers is established, enabling them to be "brothers and sisters" in the one God and Father of them all. It is on the authority of her witness and the new relationship that she is given to proclaim that the tradition correctly bestows upon her the identity of *apostola apostolorum*, "apostle to the apostles."

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Iconic Insights for Celibate Love and Apostolic Mission

The command in the Gospel of John is clear: "Love one another" (13:34, 15:12). The Gospel further indicates that it is through our love for one another that we will be recognized as

disciples of Jesus—that Jesus will be made known in our world. As apostolic women religious, we do love deeply. We are drawn by Love and called by Love. We express our love in prayer, in community, in ministry. Sometimes we even fall in love.

I used to fear falling in love and being in love. I thought it would jeopardize my identity as a Sister of Mercy. I thought it would place my ability and my commitment to live the vow of celibacy at too great a risk. I was wrong. Through experiences of falling in love and being in love, I have been drawn deeper into the mystery of Love. Through my love experiences, I have been taught how to love, and I have been taught what it means to be another person's "beloved." With my own longing for the touch of another, I discovered the depth of my longing for God. Through the words of another person's longing for me, I have heard God's longing for me. These love experiences have drawn me deeper into the mysterious and mystical love of God.

I am not saying that as apostolic women religious we *need* to have one or more experiences of falling in love and being in love to be drawn deeply into the mystical love of God. I am simply saying that it *can* happen through these love experiences because it *has* happened. I would venture to guess that many of us have been taught how to love God as God's own beloved through experiences of loving another and being loved. That is part of the mystery of the incarnation, the revelation of God in human form.

As one who has dared to love deeply, I resonate with Mary Magdalene, who dared to love Jesus deeply. Through my experience of choosing not to follow my beloved and commit myself to that love relationship, I identify with her intense longing, her intense searching, her utter grief. There is a point in which it seems that tears will never end.

In the midst of risking to love deeply as vowed religious, we risk being led to the depths of our pain, our longing, our searching. But a wise woman once taught me that, if I am unwilling or unable to feel the depth of my own pain, or longing, or grief, then I am also not able to journey with another person to the depths of her or his pain.¹³ Our choices do impact our ministry. By feeling the depths of our pain and our grief, our hearts are opened to feel the pain of others around us and of our world. As apostolic women religious, we are called to feel that pain, to

name that pain, to witness to the suffering of those around us. We are called to stand with those who are marginalized, to mourn and weep with them for all that is not right in our world. We are called to name destructive violence for what it is, to name the things that rob individuals, communities, and countries of fullness of life. Tears can seem unending.

Mary Magdalene chose to stay at the tomb; she chose to stand in the emptiness, in the void, in the confusion, in the pain. She chose to weep and mourn. She continued her search for her beloved Jesus. She sought him out, persisting in the search even when others did not. Her actions are characterized by initiative, persistence, and determination. Her search betrays an intense longing and yearning. As apostolic women religious, we too are called to stand in the emptiness of a broken world. We are called to search for our beloved God in the midst of this brokenness. We are called to long and yearn for a world that is imbued with the presence and love of God in every corner, in every action between individual persons, and in all diplomacy and business between countries. We are called to work for such a world with our own efforts, our own initiative, persistence, and determination.

Mary Magdalene searched for what she knew was possible to find—the body of her crucified Jesus, her beloved. Ultimately, instead of finding what it seemed humanly possible to find, she was found by a divine reality beyond her fondest hope; she was found by the risen Jesus. In turning toward Jesus, in hearing her name called by her beloved, she was transformed. She was able to turn to a new reality and allow her life and the world she knew to be transformed.

As apostolic women religious, we are called to model Mary Magdalene. We are called to seek out and work toward what we know is realistically possible. In our ministerial commitments, we are called to set attainable goals and strive to meet them. We are called not to be overwhelmed by the extent of brokenness in our world, not to let ourselves be paralyzed by grief and despair. In our searching and striving, we are called to have an open heart that is ready to be transformed, a heart ready to be found by a divine reality beyond our imagination.

The words of the risen Jesus are again perplexing: "Do not hold on to me." After such intense searching and longing, it is

completely understandable to want to hold on to whatever sign of life and love, whatever divine revelation, we see in the midst of a broken and pain-filled world. Yet love and the things of this world are not ours to hold on to. With open hands and open hearts, we instead hear Jesus' words: "Go to my brothers and sisters." Like Mary Magdalene, we are commissioned to proclaim the living God here in our midst.

Mary Magdalene was in a privileged place with a unique encounter with the risen but not-yet-ascended Jesus. Her encounter cannot be replicated.

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Yet, as apostolic women religious, we sometimes do not recognize our own privileged place. We belong to religious communities that nurture and support our spiritual journey, that help us integrate contemplation into our lives of ministry. Time and money are provided for ongoing spiritual direction and annual

retreats. We are joined by others who are on this same journey; together we have companionship and a common language to name our experiences. Many days I take all of this for granted. But, like Mary Magdalene, we women religious are in a privileged place in our world. In our lives, contemplation opens us to divine revelations that may be unique to our world—and maybe our world desperately needs to hear them from us.

Through Mary Magdalene's encounter with him, the risen Jesus instituted a new relationship among his followers. He called his followers his "brothers and sisters" and said that his Father is their Father, and his God their God (20:17). We live in a fractured and broken world and a fractured and broken church. Like Mary Magdalene, we are called to give witness to a vision of unity. We are called to be sisters to each other in our communities so that we can be, beyond our communities, sisters to our world. Like Ruth's covenantal relationship with her mother-in-law Naomi, we are called to unity with others, no matter how different from us. This is the vision Mary Magdalene was given by the risen Jesus, and it is offered to us as well.

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As apostolic women religious, not only are we called to weep and mourn with those at the margins of our society and with the victims of the violence in our world. We are also called to proclaim the power of the resurrection. We are called to proclaim a God who loves us deeply and calls each of us by name. We are called to proclaim a God who transforms lives, filling the empty tombs of our lives with life unimaginable. We are called to proclaim a God who raises the dead to life and offers life eternal. Like Mary Magdalene, the première *apostola apostolorum*, "apostle to the apostles," we are called to proclaim an Easter faith to a world that is ravenously hungry for God. May God find us willing.

Notes

¹ The story in Luke 7:36-50 is of an unnamed woman who bathes the feet of Jesus with her tears, kissing them and anointing them with ointment. The setting is the home of a Pharisee who neglected the customary act of hospitality of washing his guest Jesus' feet upon his arrival in his home.

² Modestus of Jerusalem, *PG* 86, cols. 3273-3276, as quoted in Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen, Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 107.

³ This is emphasized by Dorothy A. Lee, "Turning from Death to Life: A Biblical Reflection on Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18)," *Ecumenical Review* 50 (1998): 112-120.

⁴ See F. Scott Spencer, "'You Just Don't Understand' (or Do You?): Jesus, Women, and Conversation in the Fourth Gospel," in *A Feminist Companion to John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, Vol. 4 of *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, anticipated).

⁵ Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (SBLDS 167; Atlanta: SBL, 1999), p. 193.

⁶ See John 12:40; BAGD, 2nd ed., p. 771.

⁷ Interpretations that place a fault on Mary Magdalene have been found as early in the tradition as Ambrose and Jerome. For the history of interpretation of this verse, see Harold W. Attridge, "Don't Be Touching Me: Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene," in *A Feminist Companion to John*.

⁸ See especially Alison Jasper, "Interpretative Approaches to John 20:1-18: Mary at the Tomb of Jesus," *ST* 47 (1993): 107-118.

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⁹ This interpretation has been in the tradition as early as Origen. See Attridge, "Don't Be Touching Me," pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ While many translations, including *NJB*, *NAB*, and *NRSV*, translate *adelphous* simply as "brothers," there is no good reason not to use the inclusive translation "brothers and sisters." There are a substantial number of places in both Koine and Attic Greek in which the plural *adelphoi* refers to both brothers and sisters, not just brothers. See BAGD, pp. 15-16.

¹¹ David Alan Black, *Learn to Read New Testament Greek*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 168.

¹² This provides further evidence for the appropriateness of the inclusive translation of *tous adelphous mou* as "my brothers and sisters."

¹³ My thanks to my former CPE supervisor Rosemary Ferguson OP for teaching me this lesson.

Child of Mary

*The presbytery garden, after Mass,
is busy with departing worshipers,
mostly taking the shortcut to their cars;
only Patrick, pauper of the parish
and carless, solitary wanderer-
about-town, seems unready to be gone.*

*A single point of stillness in our midst,
he lingers by the weathered blue and white
of our Lady, in her privet bower,
hands in his pockets and a cigarette –
unlit and apparently forgotten –
casually tilted between his lips.*

*It's not the first time that I've seen him there,
at Mary's shrine under the conker-trees,
in that same relaxed, attentive posture,
head bent in unobtrusive reverence
and his eyes, as now, remotely focused
on something only he is privy to.*

Ian A.T. White