

I Met Jesus: Mary Magdalene

John 20:1-18

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Our series, *I Met Jesus*, is in the final stretch. We have just a few characters yet to study, most of whom find their place of prominence near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Pilate. Judas. Thomas and John.

Today we have the challenge of learning about a woman who is already well-known. Other than Jesus' mother Mary, she is perhaps the best known woman in the gospels. Yet what is not so well-known is the back story of her life. Where she came from and what happened to her there is the explanation of the devotion that made her so special.

Allow me to introduce you to Mary Magdalene. I Googled her name and found that she has her own website, Wikipedia entry, sainthood, churches named after her, a Gnostic gospel named after her, and even a rock band bearing her name. She makes news to this day as Dan Brown's recent novel *The Da Vinci Code* scandalously suggested she and Jesus were married.

All this would be quite surprising to Mary Magdalene, particularly given her background. Mary was a woman with a tragic and painful past. Her life before Christ was the stuff of whispers and mockery. We would say it this way: she had lots of baggage. What makes her so unique is that it was her baggage that was the cause for her devotion, and the privileges she had in Jesus' story. To understand Mary Magdalene, you have to understand her BC and AC – Before Christ and After Christ.

Mary Magdalene BC

The gospel of John doesn't give us her background, but Luke does. To tell her story, I will be reading quite a bit of Scripture. I hope you don't mind.

"Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." (Luke 8:1-3)

Mary was from the Sea of Galilee in the town of Magdala

Let's first make sure we realize this Mary is different from other Marys in the story. Jesus' mother was named Mary. We recently studied the life of Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus. This Mary was "called Magdalene" (Verse 2). You may think Magdalene was her last name, but actually it was a nickname for where she was from. Kind of like Jesus the Nazarene was from Nazareth. Mary Magdalene was called that because she was from the town of Magdala.

This is particularly enjoyable for me today having just got back from a trip to Israel where we got on a boat in Tiberias and boated right past Magdala. There is little there now. Back in the day it was a prosperous and important town. It was known for its pickled fish. That may not sound too good to you, but in a society without refrigeration, pickled fish was much better than no fish at all. It was also known for its artists and creative types, so to be from

Magdala meant something. It has a certain panache; je ne sais quoi. I would compare it to being from Iowa.



Mary was a woman wholly controlled by demons

Mary from Magdala. Mary Magdalene. More important to the story is her spiritual condition before meeting Jesus. We can often zip past these details. Read slowly.

"...and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out..." (Verse 2)

In our modern sophisticated culture, we sometimes blush at statements in the Bible that describe the spiritual world of Satan and demons. Since we can't see the spiritual world, our culture assumes it doesn't exist. I read this week of a leading scientist who lost his job because he suggested the universe indicates intelligent design. For there to be a design, there has to be a designer, and that must mean a person or force beyond us. "You're fired!"

The Bible doesn't blush at all to speak of the spiritual world, Satan, or demons, as Paul writes, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."* (Ephesians 6:12)

If the Bible is an accurate guide to reality, which we, of course, believe it is, then there is a Satan and there are demons. What is a demon? Demons are fallen angels who followed Satan in his rebellion and are the sworn enemies of God. The Bible describes demons as having the ability to influence and control people; not apart from their will, but somehow internally in collaboration with their own will – but not like the movies with heads spinning around.

The New Testament lists 11 people who were controlled by demons including Judas Iscariot (Luke 22:3). Wayne Grudem is helpful here in his *Systematic Theology*. He points out that our common use of the phrase "demon possession" is taught nowhere in Scripture. Demons don't possess people as much as they control, manipulate, and oppress. To be under demon oppression is a devastating experience. One example is the man of Gadara in Mark 5. He is described this way, *"Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones."* (Mark 5:5)

Why would a demon cause someone to abuse their body? The demonic world hates God and hates every good reflection of his beauty and glory. Humans are made in the image of God. We reflect God's beauty and personhood. Demons hate him so they hate us. The demons led the man of Gadara to cut and abuse his body. They hate the gospel and the truth and the church so they seek to distort the gospel and confuse the church through false teaching. Paul calls false teaching "the doctrine of demons." (1 Tim. 4:1, NKJV)

The reason this is important in the life story of Mary Magdalene is that prior to meeting Jesus, she suffered under the oppression of seven demons. Seven is typically the number for completion or totality. This would hint at a severe level of oppression. What would Mary's life have been like in that condition? Anguish. Psychological anguish. Emotional anguish. No internal peace or wholeness. Moral and spiritual agony. If the Gadara demoniac is any guide, her behavior would have been bizarre and would have ostracized her from her family and society. Loneliness. Whispers. Fear. Before she was Mary Magdalene, she was Mary the demoniac. Mary the crazy woman. Likely Mary the immoral woman. Mary was a woman in pain. She suffered tremendously. Somewhere in the recesses of her soul, she would have cried out for relief and freedom.

That was Mary BC. How about you, Christian? What were you like BC? What were your days in Magdala like? Do you remember? What was it like to be spiritually adrift? Lost? Morally and spiritually empty? Perhaps you filled that ache with illicit passions and pleasures. Maybe you were angry. Abused. Selfish. Immoral. Profane. Violent. Titus 3:3 describes BC days well, "*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.*" (Titus 3:3)

Do you remember your BC? Some of us came to faith as a child and this is a little harder. It forces us to think theologically and to realize what our life would have been if we were not blessed to hear and believe the gospel at a young age. Young people, if you are truly saved today you are blessed that your BC days are brief and your depravity did not flower too fully. In truth, all of us are like Mary Magdalene. Our BC days were days apart from God and apart from his grace and apart from the hopeful expectation of eternal life.

For Mary, her BC days were as painful as they get. Controlled by the enemy of God. A demoniac. A life of total brokenness and pain.

Then one day Jesus walked into Magdala. He may have been on his way to Capernaum. You had to go through Magdala if you were coming from Nazareth. It was an apparently chance meeting. Can you imagine the sight of her? What did Jesus see when he first saw her? What would a woman with seven demons controlling her look like? Probably unkempt. Unruly. Defiant. You can often tell a woman who has lived a hard life; her face reflects it. Mary Magdalene had that kind of face.

But Jesus saw past that and saw a woman who wanted to be free from it. And to her Jesus spoke a word of healing. A tender word. *Demons, be gone. Mary, be free.* How long had it been since anyone treated Mary like a real person? How long had it been since anyone cared about her? In that moment, Mary realized that this Jesus was different. His words had power and love. In that moment, Mary got her mind back and in her right mind, she devoted herself to this rabbi, this Jesus of Nazareth. Mary the demoniac became Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene AC

Let's see the spiritual qualities that marked her life after meeting Jesus.

Self-Sacrifice - She left Magdala to serve and support Jesus' ministry

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." (Luke 8:2)

Somehow in spite of her demon oppression, Mary was apparently financially well-off. She may have inherited it as Magdala was a rich city. She and a few other women of means traveled with and provided for the disciples out of their own resources. Would BC Mary have done that? Would her life have had a generosity about it? No.

Amazing loyalty/devotion

This is what has endeared her to centuries of Christians. When the other disciples fled, Mary's devotion was not circumstantial and we see her devotion through Jesus' darkest hours.

During his crucifixion and death

"...So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." So the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. (John 19:24-25)

While Jesus was being buried

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb." (Matthew 27:57-61)

While Jesus lay in the grave

"The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment." (Luke 23:55-56)

You can know who your real friends are by who is there for you when the chips are down. Just five days before, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives to the praises of all the people. Now his polling numbers are all negative. He was tried as a criminal. Now to be identified with him was so dangerous that even Peter denied him three times.

Was there any denial in Mary Magdalene? She stood by the cross until he died. She kept watch as his body was taken down and buried. Her devotion to Christ was absolute and she was faithful to him even as the stone rolled over his tomb.

First to the tomb

"Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away 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)

Can you understand her bewilderment? On our tour, we saw one of these large round stones that was rolled in front of a first century tomb. It was very large and heavy. To arrive early and see the stone rolled away could only mean that someone had stolen his body. So Mary runs to tell Peter and John. Peter and John run to the tomb, but see nothing but grave clothes and they leave. Mary comes back to the tomb. Here is her defining moment.

"But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 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." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for 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.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:11-18)

Time does not allow an exposition of this section. In many ways it speaks for itself. Her tears. Her searching. Her words. Rabboni (Dear Rabbi, dear teacher!). Take notice here. Who is the first person to see the risen Christ? It wasn't at all who we might expect. It wasn't Peter, John, Pilate, Herod, the Sanhedrin, James, or even Jesus' mother, Mary.

Who was given this incredible privilege? It was Mary Magdalene. Who was the first person to joyously announce the resurrection of Christ? *I have seen the Lord!* It was Mary, the former demoniac. Now the grand point is before us.

When we are AC, our BC is not held against us. When we are forgiven by faith in Jesus, when he is our Savior and Lord, even the vilest things in our past are gone. We like to see ourselves in our heroes, and perhaps there is no better illustration than that of a former demoniac woman who was the first to see the risen Christ, speak to the risen Christ, touch the risen Christ, and announce the risen Christ. *I have seen the Lord!*

This ought to cause us to ask the question, where did Mary's devotion and loyalty come from? ***Her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little. (Luke 7:47)***

Mary had been forgiven much and she knew it. This produced a great love. Therein lies our challenge. To daily remind ourselves of our BC condition. To preach the gospel to ourselves: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior. We allow that to humble us, and from that gospel humility, to spring a day of devotion to the one who set us free.

Mary Magdalene is an emblem of Jesus' mission in the world. Each of us is. BC. AC. We are called to love the Marys in our Magdala and to allow the power of salvation in Christ to set them free.

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