



The Wisdom of Women

Week 1: Mary Magdalene

Brian Mattson - 05/04/2025

The secretive Papal Conclave begins this week. Around 130 Cardinals from across the globe will gather in the Sistine Chapel to elect the next pope. I, like a million other people over the past week, streamed the movie *Conclave* to get a better grasp on what is about to take place. I also read the book *Angels & Demons* by Dan Brown 20 years ago, though I imagine this conclave will be much less dramatic than the one presented in the book.

There have been 266 popes in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. I'm not a gambling man, but I think it would be easy money to bet that the next pope, number 267, will be of the male variety. Call it a hunch. Or we can say that past performance predicts future behavior. There is one legend that became popular for a few hundred years about a female pontiff, Pope Joan. I learned about it in a song by one of my favorite singer/songwriters, Randall Goodgame. The original tale was born in the 13th century. It picked up steam and was passed around Europe, showing up in different literary works through the years, becoming widely believed and circulated until a 17th century Protestant church historian dismissed the claim with the research to back it up.

I say all this to state the obvious: Church leadership through the ages has relegated women to supporting roles in the life of faith.

As a society, at least in Western Civilization, we have come a long way in our journey to egalitarian values, but that is a very modern mindset in the grand scheme of things. Traditional gender roles have, by and large, dominated cultures since the beginning of time. Women have only recently, in the last 60 years or so, entered the workforce in large numbers. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was quite ahead of his time when it came to integrating women into positions of influence and authority in the life of faith. His sermon *On Visiting the Sick* included this gem:

“It has long passed for a maxim with many that ‘women are only to be seen but not heard.’ And accordingly many of them are brought up in such a manner as if they were only designed for agreeable playthings! No, it is the deepest unkindness; it is horrid cruelty. And I know not how any women of sense and spirit can submit to it.”

-John Wesley

Then, in 1787 he authorized Sarah Mallet to preach as long as "she proclaimed the doctrines and adhered to the disciplines that all Methodist preachers were expected to accept," despite objections from some male preachers.

Nearly 100 years later, in 1876, Anna Oliver was the first woman to graduate from an American seminary. Fast forward to 1944, 1948, and 1952, when the Woman's Society of Christian Service of The Methodist Church petitioned the General Conference for full clergy rights for women, but was rejected each time. Finally, in 1956, The Methodist

Church granted full clergy rights to women, and affirmed them again in 1968 when two denominations merged to create the United Methodist Church.

That's quite a long and winding road from the very first evangelist in the Bible, the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. No, not Peter or Paul. Not James or Matthew. I would accept an argument on behalf of John the Baptist, but the first person Jesus revealed his true identity to was the Samaritan woman at the well, who then went and told her village.

And the very first person to tell other people the Good News of the resurrection was Mary Magdalene. She was the one who discovered the empty tomb, alerted the others, and then stayed at the tomb in disbelief. And through her tears, she saw Jesus, who she thought was the gardener. He revealed himself to her and told her to go tell the others.

Mary Magdalene is a fascinating character in scripture. She is mentioned by name in all four of the canonical gospels, more than most of the 12 Disciples, and more than any other woman besides Jesus' mother, Mary. Her story is one of a devoted follower whose life was transformed. She walked with Jesus during his ministry. She was a witness to his crucifixion. And she was the first to see him alive again.

Mary Magdalene has been venerated in the Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran denominations, and of course, the Roman Catholic church. And in 2016, Pope Francis elevated her liturgical memory to a feast, like that of the other apostles, honoring her with the title "Apostle of the apostles."

There's also a fair bit of intrigue surrounding Mary Magdalene, and much has been made of her close relationship with Jesus, her

backstory, and even what happened to her later in life. She's been known as a sinner. A prostitute. Even demon-possessed. There have been famous paintings of Mary in many different generations. She has appeared in songs and movies. And author Dan Brown made a ton of money and headlines when his followup book, *The Da Vinci Code*, told the story of Mary Magdalene carrying Jesus' baby, and the ensuing bloodline that was carried on and protected into the modern age.

That's all fiction, of course. *The Da Vinci Code* is not scripture, so we won't be spending much more time on that today. But that doesn't mean there isn't still intrigue around Mary Magdalene. There are scholars today who are wondering if she's perhaps even more important than our Bibles would have us believe. That's because the Bible sitting in your pew is a collection of ancient texts that have been copied, translated, and edited over millennia. Setting aside the formation and complicated history of our Old Testament, let's instead look at how the New Testament developed into what we have today.

The 27 books of our New Testament were written over a period of about 45 years, comprising letters to churches and individuals, Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, and the prophetic book of Revelation. Pastor Adam Hamilton gives a brief summary.

“While many Christians assume that the Gospels are the oldest parts of the New Testament, it is likely a letter from Paul has that distinction. Paul’s letters were written between approximately AD 50 and AD 65. The first of the New Testament Gospels was likely Mark, and scholars tend to date it around AD 65–70. Matthew and Luke are thought to have been written in the 70s or 80s, and John in the 80s or 90s.”

-Adam Hamilton

And while these books were written and distributed, often verbally dictated to a scribe, it's important to remember that many of these communities would have been largely illiterate, and there was no standard for how to copy and disseminate these letters. Edits and errors were commonplace. For that first generation of Christians, documenting their faith was probably haphazard and varied. Consider the introduction from the Gospel of Luke:

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed.

-Luke 1:1-4

With these words as a starting point, it's easy to see why there may be discrepancies and variations amongst the Gospel accounts. They were written and compiled by many people over many years. And then they were copied and copied again, most likely being slightly edited or corrected as each scribe could've been using multiple sources to create a new copy. Some of the edits changed or corrected minor details. Others updated ancient words to the language of the time. And this happened for generations until a council in Carthage in 397 agreed upon a canon of New Testament scriptures. That's about 360 years after the death of Christ!

And we can very clearly see these changes and edits when we look back at some of the oldest manuscripts we have discovered. Full disclosure:

the following research and arguments come from academic text critics and the recent work of Elizabeth Schrader, an assistant professor of New Testament at Villanova University. Dr. Schrader argues that Mary Magdalene was actually a much more prominent person in the earliest manuscripts of John, an interpretation that was up for debate in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries. Some of those earliest manuscripts would have the reader equating Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene. Why is that important, you ask? Well, if these two different Marys are actually one character, then that character becomes much more prominent. Conflating these two separate Marys in the Gospel of John wasn't heretical even.

In the 6th century, Pope Gregory goes one step further and adds the woman who anoints Jesus' feet in Luke 7 to the other anointing stories in the Gospels, which was Mary of Bethany. So now we may have a single Mary appearing with three separate designations: Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the sinner in Luke 7. Apparently, this idea didn't insult Pope Gregory, but earlier scribes and editors, perhaps, were more threatened. I don't have time to present all the evidence that Mary was edited out of some of our earliest manuscripts, but in Papyrus 66, one of our oldest and most complete copies of John, there are clear instances of Mary's name being changed to Martha. And in English, that might seem like a big change, but in the original Greek, that is simply changing the iota to a theta. One letter. That's all it took to add a new character to the Gospel accounts. And by adding Martha, Schrader argues, Mary's prominence is lessened. In our modern translations of the Gospel of John, Martha makes a critical early declaration of Jesus as Messiah. The people who first recognize Jesus as divine are held in high regard, you see. And with the shift of one letter,

the person who makes that declaration in our modern Bibles is Martha instead of Mary.

There are many other instances of confusion around the textual transmission of Mary and Martha. If you want to dive down that rabbit hole, which I highly recommend, scan those QR codes on the bulletin. They will take you to a podcast with Dr. Schrader, a presentation at Vanderbilt Divinity School, a *New Yorker* article, and an academic paper about the anointing stories potentially being one story. But the question remains, why, if this did actually happen, would the scribes and editors suppress the prominence of Mary? Dr. Schrader puts it this way:

“Mary Magdalene seems to have been controversial in second, third, fourth century circles, but not for being a prostitute. It was more that she was challenging Peter, or maybe other disciples, or people who thought that women shouldn’t—weren’t worthy to lead, or speak. That’s what she was controversial for in the opening centuries of Christianity.”

I don’t bring all this up to make you doubt scripture. I’m also not trying to cast aspersions on Peter’s followers and the scribes who helped carry scripture down through generations. I just want to be honest about the fact that women have been set aside time and time again. Are still being set aside. And maybe we have much to learn about what the real Kingdom of God looks and sounds like. And the voices and stories from men aren’t the only ones that matter in our history. I, like Pope Gregory, tend to agree that Mary Magdalene was the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with oil in Luke 7. And this act of devotion and love was because her life had been transformed.

Simon the Pharisee, the host of the meal in this story, can't believe that Jesus would allow this act to take place knowing that this woman was a sinner! How dare she be allowed close to Jesus, even touching him with her hair! Jesus responds with a parable:

“A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

-Luke 7:41-43

This sinner, maybe Mary Magdalene, showed great affection and love to Jesus. And at the end of the scene, Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Her radical hospitality to Jesus is a grateful response to salvation.

Immediately thereafter, in Luke 8, we read of Mary Magdalene, formally named this time, and a few other women accompanying Jesus and his disciples from town to town, supporting the ministry financially. They seem to be part of this “family” that is doing ministry. The theme of this chapter is all about the importance of an authentic response to Jesus and the salvation that accompanies his message.

Jesus tells a gathered crowd the Parable of the Sower, explaining the details to his disciples later. In his explanation, he raises the issue that true hearers of the word bear fruit. And by truly listening to what Jesus says, an authentic response will be to put the words into action. The actions, our actions, are obvious to the world around us. We are not

lights to be hidden under a jar, Jesus says, but lights on full display. This is what it means to be part of the family of God.

This scene concludes with Jesus' mother and brothers trying to reach him, but couldn't because of the crowd. His disciples told him his family couldn't get close, but Jesus responded, **"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."**

Mary Magdalene heard the word of God and put it into action. She was part of the family. Her's was the story of a life transformed, healed, and redeemed. And her devotion was clear. She followed Jesus, supported his ministry financially, stayed with him at the cross, and was the first witness to his resurrection, alerting others to the good news. An "Apostle of the apostles."

So what can we learn from Mary Magdalene? Lots, probably. And we probably have even more to uncover. But the heart of her story is that she was a hearer of the word, and then became a doer of the word. We are called, like Mary, to put our faith into action.

I am the product of other strong women who have put their faith into action. My wife challenges me to widen my gaze and perspectives to include people pushed to the edges. My mom instilled in me the joy of a life of faith and the lifelong love of learning. And my former pastor, your former pastor, showed me that women have a role in leading people to know Jesus. Women are just as much a part of the family of God as men. Women are just as important to the foundation of our faith as men, and all those popes. Maybe, just maybe, Mary called Magdalene, as it is written in Luke 8, is not to denote where she is from—the village of Magdala—but is instead a given title. *Magdala* in Aramaic means *tower*. A strong place, a fortification. Peter was the rock. James and John

were the sons of thunder. And as Dr. Schrader puts it, "It's possible that Lazarus's sister Mary, who confessed Jesus is the Christ, received the name *Mary the Tower*."