

Today we celebrate St. Mary Magdalene. Most years, her feast day of July 22 falls during the week—but this year it lands on a Sunday. I'm glad, because I think it's important we celebrate her.

After all, she did spend the last two millennia being mis-identified by the church as prostitute, though there isn't one line in scripture that would support that. But that was the legend spread by the early church.

I wonder why?

Who decided that Mary Magdalene's love for Jesus was so dangerous that they had to tarnish it.

She disappears from the biblical record after the resurrection, though other secular texts we have from the early Christian eras show that her status as an apostle rivaled even Peter in the years following Jesus' death.

I wonder what happened to this woman who loved the Messiah?

Who was she?

Here's what the bible says about her: Her name was Mary Magdalene. Some say she was named for the fishing village of Magdala. But unlike other people who are named by their cities: Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, or even Simon of Cyrene – she is never referred to as Mary of Magdala.

What's even more interesting is that there is no historical record or archeological evidence that the town of Magdala existed until well after the gospel's were written.

Could it mean something else? Well, written Hebrew – as many of you know—only contains consonants. There are no vowels in this language. Translators add them in. That's why we have both Jehovah and Yahweh. Same series of consonants in Hebrew—different vowels.

Scholars have suggested that the consonants M, G, D, and L (with the N added to make it a modifier) are also part of a common Hebrew word: Migdal. It means “tower”, or “a large structure of some significance.”

Perhaps Mary Magdalene was a tower of strength or someone of great significance. What else does the biblical record tell us?

It says that seven demons have gone out from her. At that time illnesses, both mental and physical, were attributed to demons. Jesus had evidently healed her of something serious.

The gospel of Luke mentions that she is with two other women, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna. And it says that these three provided for the disciples and Jesus out of their own resources.

That would seem to suggest that—far from being a prostitute- a woman forced to sell her body for food—she was in fact one of the benefactors of the ministry of Jesus. According to Luke, she had been with him from his beginnings in Galilee to the cross and resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is included in every gospel account- and trust me, women weren't usually included in writings of that era unless they were too significant—too well known as part of the story-- to be left out.

Mary was the first one to arrive at the tomb in every Gospel account.

Here in John's gospel she runs to the tomb—finds the stone rolled away—and goes and gets Peter and John—they peak into the tomb, see the body gone and go home—perplexed. Then Mary runs back to the tomb, and looks inside—and sees something that wasn't there when Peter and John looked: two angels.

Do you remember how everyone we meet in the bible is terrified when they encounter an angel—the shepherds, Jesus' mother, Joseph—kings??

Mary Magdalene sees the angels and the angels don't say "fear not" and why not? Probably because she immediately demands where they've put Jesus' body. That's one brave woman.

She is trying to figure it out, and nothing-- not her safety, nor even angels means as much as her quest for Jesus.

And Jesus appears to her. This is the only one of the tomb stories where Jesus is physically present, and he comes for Mary.

She is so distraught she doesn't recognize him. Perhaps he is physically changed, perhaps she can't see through her tears, I'm not sure we'll ever know.

Then Jesus calls her by name. Mary.

Imagine someone in your life that is no longer with you, but who you have deeply loved. Now picture them saying your name. Just your name.

Would you immediately recognize the voice? Stop what you're doing and turn to that voice in amazement and love? Hardly daring to believe you were hearing it?

Mary Magdalene turned, and her world turned upside down. She realized that everything Jesus had taught was true. His words of love without end, and a kingdom being born in and around us, was true. And that changed everything—for her, and for the world.

So she had to be included. Mary Magdalene was the pivot point on which Christianity turned. If she were cut out of the bible there would be no witness to the resurrection of Jesus. No realization that in following Jesus there was no slave or free, no east or west, no male or female. She was a tower of strength. She became a new creation when she realized that. And so do we.

She was the Magdalene, and we celebrate her today. Amen.