

CRACKING THE DA VINCI CODE
Was Mary Magdalene the First Apostle?
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Was Mary Magdalene the first apostle? . . . Yes. . . . She was the first person sent forth by the risen Christ to tell the good news of his resurrection. In this sense, she was the first apostle.

In Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Mary Magdalene is depicted as the wife of Jesus and the mother of his children, and that is a secret the church wanted to cover up to protect the divinity of Jesus. Furthermore, the story of the Holy Grail is really the story about the royal bloodline of Jesus and Mary. Last week, we explored the claim that Jesus was married to Mary, and we found that the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that *neither* Mary nor Jesus were married, and so they most certainly were not married to each other. In our last lesson, we also examined the accusation that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, and we found that such was not the case. First advocated in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591, the medieval tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute is false, which ironically is one of the few things *The Da Vinci Code* is right about.

But there is something else about Mary that we need to consider. *The Da Vinci Code* claims a special leadership role in the church for Mary Magdalene that later was suppressed. We are told that the early church deliberately defamed Mary in order to limit the influence of women and to deny women the leadership role in the church Jesus had given them.

In the novel, a climatic point in the plot is reached when the British, religious historian Leigh Teabing and the American professor of religious symbols Robert Langdon tell the tale of the Holy Grail to the French cryptologist Sophie Neveu. In the excerpt I am about to read, Teabing and Sophie are conversing. Teabing refers to the *Gospel of Mary*, a Gnostic document that was written at the earliest at the end of the

second century A.D.

. . . He [Teabing] motioned to another passage. “This is from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.”

Sophie had not known a gospel existed in Magdalene’s words. She read the text:

And Peter said, “Did the Saviour really speak with a woman without our knowledge? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?”

And Levi answered, “Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like an adversary. If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.”

“The woman they are speaking of,” Teabing explained, “is Mary Magdalene. Peter is jealous of her.”

“Because Jesus preferred Mary?”

“Not only that. The stakes were far greater than mere affection. At this point in the gospels, Jesus suspects He will soon be captured and crucified. So He gives Mary Magdalene instructions on how to carry on His Church after He is gone. As a result, Peter expresses his discontent over playing second fiddle to a woman. I daresay Peter was something of a sexist.”

Sophie was trying to keep up. “This is *Saint* Peter. The rock on which Jesus built His Church.”

“The same, except for one catch. According to these unaltered gospels, it was not *Peter* to whom Christ gave directions with which to establish the Christian Church. It was *Mary Magdalene*.”

Sophie looked at him. “You’re saying the Christian Church was to be carried on by a *woman*?”

“That was the plan. Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene” (pp. 247-248).

Was Jesus “the original feminist”? Was Mary Magdalene’s role as the founder of the church such a threat to the predominantly male church that they made women the enemy and used their full political clout to destroy Mary’s reputation, turning her into a prostitute? This claim is complex because it is one of the few places in Dan Brown’s book where there is some merit to certain aspects of what is affirmed. The claim, however, is grossly exaggerated, and the “suppression of Mary” theory is greatly overdrawn.

Before we turn to the New Testament Gospels, I want to say something about the “canon”. In biblical studies, the term “canon” means “standard” and refers to the books received as Scripture by the church. We will talk about the canon in our next lesson. Here is the point I want to emphasize: If the canon—the “altered” gospels according to Leigh Teabing—had really sought to suppress the role of women, then it would have

removed all evidence that women were the first to hear about Jesus' resurrection; but, this is something none of the four Gospels do. Because they seek to tell the story truthfully, the four Gospels stand in contrast to the culture around them, a culture that did not regard women as reliable enough to be witnesses. All four Gospels insist that Jesus first appeared to women. This detail, running against the grain of the ancient culture as it does, is one of the key evidences that the resurrection stories were not invented by a church trying to turn the human Jesus into the divine Christ. Had early Christians merely invented these appearance-and-empty-tomb stories with the hope of convincing their culture about Jesus, they would not have unanimously picked women to bear the story's burden to be true. That Jesus selected women as the first witnesses to his resurrection is an affirmation of their value and worth before God.

Mary Magdalene is not mentioned in the Gospel of Mark or in the Gospel of Matthew before the stories about the last week of Jesus' life, and she's not mentioned in the Gospel of John prior to the crucifixion. The first real mention we have of Mary Magdalene in the New Testament is found in a brief passage in Luke 8:1-3.¹

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means (TNIV).

Luke informs us that Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary. Seven was the number of completion or perfection, and so we are meant to think that Mary was particularly captivated by the dark presence in her life and she required deliverance by an external power. Jesus delivered Mary from this condition, and this apparently prompted her to drop everything to follow him around Galilee. We are also told in this text that she and other women helped provide for the traveling disciples, which may imply that she was a person of means. We cannot be sure of this, however, because she may have simply cooked or cleaned for others. Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's estate manager, is more

¹In my previous sermon it was noted that "in an age before there were chapters and verses in the New Testament Gospels, it is easy to see how the story of a prostitute in Luke 7:36-50 might be confused with the immediately following story about Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:1-3. It is incorrect to associate the two stories as if they are talking about the same woman."

clearly a high-status person who may have provided funds for the group of disciples.

Imagine, for a moment, the effect it must have had on Galileans that the controversial teacher from Nazareth had both male and female disciples, and he even traveled from place to place with this entourage. Not only was having female disciples unprecedented, it was scandalous. Men and women were supposed to travel with members of their own family. Of course, Jesus claimed his disciples as his brothers and sisters in the faith, but this would not have stopped tongues from wagging. More importantly, the fact that Jesus both recruited women and allowed them to travel with him on ministry trips tells us that he intentionally takes a new and more inclusive approach to women and their roles. Furthermore, Jesus does not allow Mary's past association with the demonic to disqualify her from being a traveling disciple.

After this, we do not hear of Mary Magdalene again until the Passion narrative. We do not know what Mary did during the time between when she first traveled with Jesus in Galilee and this last week of Jesus' life. Matthew 27:55-56 states that several women, including Mary, traveled to Jerusalem with Jesus and the other disciples for the Passover celebration. This tells us at least two things: (1) Jesus associated with and traveled with women and men throughout his ministry, even if this scandalized the more conservative Galileans and Judeans, and (2) it shows just how devoted Mary and others were to Jesus. In their honor-and-shame culture, these women were taking a major risk of becoming outcasts in their own hometowns by traveling and studying with Jesus.

According to Mark 15:40-41 a group of women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome—watched the crucifixion from a distance, and the first person mentioned in the list is Mary Magdalene. While the male disciples—with the possible exception of John—had all denied, deserted, or betrayed Jesus, the same could not be said about these female disciples; they were there till the bitter end.

Mark 15:47 says that the two Marys saw that Jesus was buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Immediately thereafter in Mark 16:1, we have a brief reference to them coming to the tomb on Easter morning. Apparently they were going to anoint Jesus' body and change the linens during the period of mourning. What they found instead was the empty tomb! Mark reports their encounter with an angel at the tomb, and

the appearance of Jesus to these women is recounted in Matthew 28 and John 20.²

Let's read together the well-known story of Jesus' appearance to Mary as told to us by John.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" . . .

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He said to her, "Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her (John 20:1-2, 11-18; TNIV).

Mary's activity at the empty tomb is similar to Peter's, only Mary is apparently more spiritually perceptive than Peter because she sees angels in the tomb, and Peter does not. Mary does not immediately recognize Jesus, for her mind is fixed on the past. She responds to his voice with "Rabboni," which shows that she has yet to see or acknowledge him as the risen Lord. When Mary grasps Jesus, he reacts by saying, "Stop clinging to me." Jesus did not command "touch me not," as some Bible versions read, but rather said to Mary "do not cling to me" / "do not hold on to me." Mary is approaching Jesus with a view to the past, and Jesus puts a stop to it. Notice the contrast between the way Jesus later commands Thomas to touch him (John 20:27) and the way he rebukes Mary here. Jesus does not want Mary to embrace him. This is hardly a

²Mark 16:9-20 is missing from all the earliest and best manuscripts of Mark's Gospel.

family reunion scene between husband and wife! In fact, Jesus is not interested in renewing relationships with Mary or anyone else on the old terms, for he is no longer the old Jesus. He is now truly on the way to returning to the Father. In a little while, he would no longer be with the disciples in the flesh, so he does not want Mary to depend on a temporary state of affairs. Having learned where Jesus is going, she gets the point and bears witness to the male disciples: “Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’” These words demonstrate that Mary is no longer fixated on the past but rather focuses on the task before her.

The New Testament tells us nothing more of Mary, nor does any other first-century Christian literature. She disappears into the sands of time, and the later conjectures about her seem to have little or no historical basis.

Mary Magdalene: she was last at the cross, first at the tomb, and first to see and to proclaim the risen Lord. She became *the* witness to the heart of the gospel, and she was commissioned by Jesus himself to proclaim that gospel. It is neither a surprise nor inappropriate that the third-century church father Hippolytus called Mary the “apostle to the apostles.”

Has the church suppressed women? Do we, even today, deny them the role that Jesus granted to them? If Jesus were physically among us today, would his approach to women be scandalous to us? Do we treat female disciples like Jesus treated them? Does the church suppress Christian women?

I think we still have a lot to learn from Mary Magdalene.

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