

MARY THE TOWER

Rev. JT Smiedendorf
Acting Lead & Intentional Interim Minister

May 31, 2026

Text: The Gospel of Mary Magdalene 4:10 – 5:9

CENTRAL FOCUS:

It is time to know the full import of Mary Magdalene's presence and ministry as Apostle to the Apostles and that it reshapes Christian image and practice.

"Having said all this, the Risen One departed. The disciples were in sorrow shedding many tears and saying: "How are we to go among the unbelievers and announce the gospel of the Kingdom of the Son of Man? They did not spare his life so why should they spare ours?"

Then Mary arose, embraced them all, and began to speak to her brothers: "Do not remain in sorrow and doubt, for his Grace will guide you and comfort you. Instead, let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us for this. He is calling upon us to become fully human. Thus, Mary turned their hearts toward the good, and they began to discuss the meaning of the Teacher's words."

These are the words of our ancient tradition.

May the Living Word of God in Scripture be alive within us, among us, and beyond us.

Libbie sat in the library, thunderstruck. The realization had just landed: Sometime in the fourth century, someone had altered the oldest text of John's Gospel.

Elizabeth Schrader, still just a doctoral student of New Testament at Duke, had gone through the whole of John 11 and John 12 in the most ancient manuscript, finding that a 4th century editor had gone in and changed every place we now read "Mary and Martha" in chapters 11 and 12 of John. It had originally said only "Mary." Mary became Mary and Martha. The editor changed it so that the story about Lazarus and the resurrection involves two sisters, Mary and Martha of Bethany.

Do you remember Mary and Martha? There is a story about two women with those names in the last part of Chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel, something about the one sister being busy fixing dinner and the other just sitting and listening to Jesus. If you like that story, you can keep it. That passage is not related to this story from John's Gospel.

This story in John is different, and this emerging research has profound implications for our faith, for the Mary we are talking about being edited is likely Mary Magdalene and the likely intended effect is to dilute her status.

Let me explain:

There are two stories of confessions from Jesus' followers in the canonical Gospels about him being an anointed one, a Messiah, a Christ-ed. (They are called Christological confessions.) Since the Gospels' purpose is to communicate the presence and purpose and teaching of Jesus as Christ, these statements and who makes them are critical in the Gospel story. One such statement is uttered by Peter to which Jesus responds in Matthew, "You are Peter the Rock and upon this Rock I will build my church."

But in the Gospel of John, Martha makes this critical confession in Chapter 11.... or so we thought. Now known as Dr. Elizabeth Schrader Polczer and teaching at Villanova, Libbie discovered that Mary originally had said this. And this Mary in the Gospel of John has long been suspected to be Mary Magdalene.

Wait you say, "Mary is from Magdala, not Bethany, as the story in John says."

Ahh, but historical research has shown that at the time of Jesus there was no village of Magdala. The village where tourists go today to visit Magdalene shrines wasn't known as Magdala at that time, and nobody knows where there would have been any such village in that first century period.

There is another possibility.

In Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, *magdala* means tower.

Mary Magdalene is not a name of birthplace origin, it is a title: Mary the Tower.

It appears my friends that Christological confession and its place of honor in the Gospel of John was taken away from Mary Magdalene and given to another character, likely to dilute Mary's place and influence as a Tower of faith.

This effort to dilute Mary Magdalene's influence fits into a larger historical and theological pattern. Scholarly work of the last 50 years has been so important in helping us see how significant the influence of culture and empire was in re-shaping and domesticating the radical reform and potent message of Jesus, especially in relation to women and to Mary Magdalene. According to biblical and historical scholarship by Karen King, Ann Brock Thomas, Elaine Pagels, and others, it seems that there was amongst the early Christian factions and leaders, a contest for eminence. That contest was eventually won by Peter and Paul and fixed into place by the Roman Empire who took over the church in the 4th century. That outcome and empire influence would not have been friendly to women's leadership in the church.

As a Protestant church youth, I heard very little about Magdalene, only passing references in Scripture that were never explored or expanded or uplifted. Moreover, the only thing that did stick was the storyline mentioned by somebody that she was a reformed prostitute, or, at best, a really needy person that Jesus helped out. This official church storyline may be the apex of the misinformation about her. But I dare anyone to find any description of her as a prostitute or even a so-called sinner in Scripture. It doesn't exist. Anywhere.

Indeed, the prostitute characterization was an invention of Pope Gregory in the late 6th century and, if it were possible, Magdalene could have taken him to court and won a defamation lawsuit. (Only in 1969 did the Roman Catholic church rescind the teaching that she was a prostitute.) In fact, there is nothing in Scripture to even suggest she was a troubled woman of deficit.

There is only one reference to her as someone from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. But remember, in mythic and symbolic language seven is a number of wholeness—like the seven chakras in Hindu images or the seven directions of many First Nations or even the seven deadly sins in some Christian traditions.

To have seven demons cast out is like saying that this woman has done her inner work fully and is truly whole and empowered.

Moreover, hiding in plain sight right in front of us is her critical importance in the Gospel story. Mary Magdalene is the only figure who was present at the crucifixion and first at the resurrection according to all four canonical gospels. There are only a few stories and details that all four canonical gospels share. That broad commonality is a sign of the importance of a story and in these very important stories of faith Magdalene is there, front and center.

Indeed, it is Magdalene who is the first witness to the Resurrection and the one to share this news with the others. Yet instead of being honored and uplifted over the centuries as the first apostle, the Apostle to the Apostles, she was defamed and her influence, perspectives, and teachings were obscured and diminished.

All of Elizabeth's Schrader Polczer's research, published by the Harvard Theological Review, is consistent with this historical pattern of diluting Mary Magdalene's place and influence. And her research is so significant that the group of scholars who ensure translations like the one we most often use here, The New Revised Standard Version, is engaged with this research.

And perhaps this same group should consider adding another *book* to the Christian Scriptures, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene from which I read a few moments ago. It was discovered in 1896 in Cairo and authenticated as being of the time of the early church. Sadly, many pages are missing, and it took decades and decades for it to be translated and circulated widely. And what we do have of Magdalene's Gospel shows what me might expect, resistance to her leadership as a woman, and that she had a special relationship with Jesus. This is in keeping with the Spirit of the canonical Gospels who show her as first witness and first apostle. It seems she was the one who really stayed close to Jesus and who deeply understood and could embody the Way of Love he was talking about. It seems Magdalene was at the head of the class.

It's a beautiful passage to me that we heard from her Gospel. Distraught by the leaving of the Resurrected Christ, fearful of what may happen to them, the disciples are comforted by Mary who speaks words of strength and encouragement and "turns their hearts to the Good." I feel strengthened and encouraged when I hear it. Moreover, she summarizes the intent of the Way of Love of Jesus as calling upon us to become fully human (*Anthropos* is the Greek manuscript word), to be in the process of becoming, of transforming.

So what does this mean for us, my friends?

It means to me that God is still speaking, even enough perhaps to change the Biblical library!

It means to me that we continue to learn from the God who blows the doors off gender limitations.

And that we have been gifted by Magdalene and the many women who have pointed us back to her life-giving presence.

And, most importantly, it means that we might begin to wonder with church historian and author Diana Butler Bass who said,

What if we'd known about Mary the Tower all along? What kind of Christianity would we have if the faith hadn't only been based upon, "Peter, you are the Rock and upon this Rock I will build my church"? But what if we'd always known, "Mary, you are the Tower, and by this Tower we shall all stand?"

I suspect if we'd known Mary the Tower our faith journey over the centuries would have had more to do with the embodiment and experience of love, and less to do with beliefs and doctrines—more with the integration of heart, body and soul, and less with mistrust and persecution of others who seem different.

I am indebted to Diana Butler Bass for this message this morning and for her sharing of the story of her friend Libbie whose biblical work is an important part of a larger quest to rediscover and renew our relationship to Mary, the Tower of faith.

I have heard over recent years from many who are hearing from Mary Magdalene in their prayer life. She has been heard in our household so much so that Allison and I have led prayer pilgrimages to the south of France where Mary is said to have gone after the Resurrection to continue her ministry and where a movement existed that followed her. I'm pleased to say that The Board of Spiritual Formation is arranging for Allison to come here and lead a Plymouth retreat with me in early November to discuss Jesus and Magdalene as Wisdom Teachers. More info coming soon.

As a church that received the Spirit at Pentecost, and in this Age of the Spirit, where the experience of Spirit in community and service and prayer is paramount, I invite us to discover the treasure of spiritual teaching and embodiment that Magdalene represents. May we continue to seek what Mary the Tower is saying to us about becoming whole human beings and about what it takes to turn our hearts to the Good even in a time of trial.

It's time for us all to recognize, to make room for, and to move with Mary the Tower to strengthen and enliven our faith.

AMEN