

Mary Magdalene (or Mary of Magdala), sometimes known as the Magdalene, travelled with Jesus as one of his followers. She is said to have witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and she is named twelve times in the four canonical Gospels, more than most of the apostles!

Luke says seven demons had gone out of her [8:2] and the longer ending of Mark says Jesus had cast seven demons out of her [16:9]. She is most prominent in the narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus, at which she was present, and she was also present two days later, immediately following the Sabbath, when, according to all four canonical Gospels [Matthew 28:1–8] [Mark 16:9–10] [Luke 24:10] [John 20:18] she was, either alone or as a member of a group of women, the first to testify to the resurrection of Jesus. John 20 and Mark 16:9 specifically name her as the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection. This means that her principal part in the gospel story is as *a witness to the Resurrection*.

Ideas that go beyond the gospel presentation of Mary Magdalene as a prominent representative of the women who followed Jesus have been put forward over the

centuries. The notion of her being a former prostitute or loose woman (cf Jesus Christ Superstar) dates to a claim by Pope Gregory I ("Gregory the Great") made in an influential homily in around 591 in which he identified the Magdalene not only with the anonymous sinner with the perfume in Luke's gospel, but also with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus; this interpretation is often called the "composite Magdalene" in modern scholarship. The seven devils removed from her by Jesus "morphed into the seven capital sins", and Mary Magdalene began to be condemned not only for lust but for pride and covetousness as well. The aspect of the repentant sinner became almost equally significant as the disciple in her persona as depicted in Western art and religious literature, fitting well with the great importance of penitence in medieval theology, which fed off and nourished the power of the clergy, who were the dispensers of forgiveness. The "composite Magdalene" was never accepted by the Eastern Orthodox churches, who saw only Mary the disciple, and believed that after the Resurrection she lived as a companion to the Virgin Mary, and not even in the West was it universally accepted.

Nonetheless Christian tradition has come to equate holiness as moral achievement, the elimination of defects, rather than a state of being which accepts our need of God's free gift of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, in other words *his capacity to change us!*

The Franciscan writer Richard Rohr observes that in effect, most Christian groups and individuals dissipate the power of the resurrection by emphasizing the importance of achievable goals usually associated with embodiment (attending church on Sundays, not committing adultery, not being a thief, etc.). He argues that we do this because these are goals which we might accomplish and for which *we might also take credit*, and which therefore serve only to inflate our own image of ourselves, rather than our sheer dependence on God. Jesus never spoke much about being good, (cf Mk10.18 & Luke 18.19 "why do you call me good?"), perhaps (argues Rohr), because good behaviour can be achieved without any foundational love of God or love of neighbour - in other words, *without a basic conversion of either consciousness or identity*. We can achieve this limited perfection through willpower, by "thinking correctly" about it, or by agreeing with a certain

moral stance. This appeals to the grandiosity of the small self and ignores the real moral purpose of the Gospel which is to do the *impossible things* like seeing people (including ourselves) transformed, whether it is by loving enemies, caring for the powerless, overlooking personal offences, living simply, eschewing riches... Richard Rohr reminds us that these things can only be achieved through *surrender and participation*. Being good is one of the fruits of this kind of change, but it's not the point. Our faith, like Mary Magdalene's, is defined by our openness to God, and yet also not being tempted to use him for our own purposes.