

MARY MAGDALENE

WHO WAS MARY?

Mary Magdalene was not the wife or lover of Jesus, but after his mother she was probably the main woman in his life. She was certainly his financial backer and leader of the women who followed Jesus as disciples. She was with him during that fateful Passover week in Jerusalem, and stood by him during the blasphemy of the crucifixion. She was the first witness of the Resurrection, and first Apostle to spread news of that event.

There is nothing romantic or even sexy about Mary's story. Her hometown Magdala was a thriving center of the fishing industry, producing smoked fish in large quantities, for sale to the surrounding countries. Dried fish - that's where Mary probably made her money, not in prostitution as the legends would have us believe - Mary the astute businesswoman is not nearly as fascinating as Mary the repentant prostitute.

MARY'S ILLNESS

But she did have a serious illness, though just what it was we do not know. At the time, people believed that some illnesses like schizophrenia or epilepsy were caused by evil spirits, which entered the body and controlled it. Mary is described in the gospels as having seven of these demons living inside her body, the number seven being an indication of the severity of her illness - she was very ill indeed.

MARY MEETS JESUS

At some point in her life Mary met an itinerant miracle worker called Jesus, and the power of his personality and teachings bowled her over. He cured her of her illness, and she became a wholehearted supporter of this man and his mission.

You have to imagine what Jesus' life was during the three years of his wandering mission throughout Galilee and Judea. He moved around the villages and towns with two separate groups of men and women - they had to be separate and respectable, to maintain his credibility as a religious teacher. Mary seems to have been in charge of the group of women who traveled with Jesus and supported him financially. As far as it is possible to tell, Mary led the women's group, Peter led the men's.

THE HORROR OF THE CRUCIFIXION

When things went badly wrong at that fateful Passover in Jerusalem, Mary stood resolutely by Jesus. None of them knew what would happen, not even Jesus - Jesus' humanity is often ignored. People assume that because he was divine he knew every detail of what would happen. But he was also human like us, not knowing exactly what was coming, having bad things happen and having to respond to them the best he could - just as we do.

When the worst that could happen did happen, Mary was there. She had been close to him during his life, and she would be close to him when he faced death. The men disciples fled - there was every possibility they might be the next victims of the Roman authorities. But Mary stood as near to the cross as she could, watching every dreadful action, hearing every scream. No one can imagine what it was like for her, or for the other women standing there.

When Jesus was finally dead, silent at last, they took him down from the cross. Then Mary faced the task that every Jewish woman had to do sooner or later - preparing the body of someone she loved for burial. This entailed washing the body - in Jesus' case the pitifully torn and mangled body, gently wiping it with a mixture of spices and then wrapping it in linen strips. While this was happening, prayers from the Scriptures were softly chanted.

PREPARING JESUS' BODY FOR BURIAL

The women's work had to be done quickly - the Sabbath was about to begin. But there had not been time to buy the ointments and spices, so they knew they have to come back after the Sabbath to complete the task.

At the earliest opportunity, they returned to the tomb where his body had been placed - but there was no one there. The soldiers were nowhere in sight, and the place seemed deserted. Jesus' body was gone. Where was it? A young man at the tomb said that Jesus was gone - but gone where?

'MARY'. SHE RECOGNIZED THE VOICE

Mary collapsed on the ground. Everything was wrong. His body should have been there. Then someone spoke to Mary, said her name, and she recognized the voice. It was Jesus. She was mute with shock. She made as if to grab hold of him, but he pulled back. Don't hold on to me, he said. Just tell the others.

She ran back to the house where the men were hidden. He's alive, she said. He's alive.