

Quick: What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the name Mary Magdalene? If you're like most Americans, the word "prostitute" comes to mind, and no wonder: Mary Magdalene is depicted as a prostitute or former prostitute in countless movies, novels, paintings, and books.

The gospels say quite bluntly that Jesus ate with prostitutes, and Jesus even tells the elders and chief priests, "The tax-collectors and the **prostitutes** are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." I bet they loved that. Neither the gospel writers nor Jesus are shy on this topic.

The interesting thing is, there is absolutely nothing anywhere in scripture that even remotely suggests that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Nothing whatsoever. There was nothing in the early Church that even remotely suggested that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Nothing whatsoever.

In fact, the idea didn't even exist until 591 A.D. In that year, there was a sermon given in which the preacher got Mary Magdalene mixed up with the sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet with ointment, and this preacher talked about the two women as if they were the same person. Since the preacher was Pope Gregory, his mistake got passed along in the popular imagination.

In recent years, various people have come up to me and expected me to be scandalized by their speculations about what was "the real relationship" between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, as if these folks were naughty teenagers whispering about sex scandals in the back row of the classroom. Well, sex sells, and you can get rich writing books and making movies if you want to exploit the sex thing with Mary Magdalene.

But what I really feel like saying is, "Come on guys, does it always have to be about sex?" Could there be other aspects of women's lives that are also important?

If you ask a group of people, "Which person in the Bible would you most want to be?" you get a wide variety of answers, but nobody says, Mary Magdalene. We are so used to thinking of her as a prostitute that we forget: the person who gets to witness the

central event of the entire Christian faith is Mary Magdalene! If you had the chance to witness the Resurrection, wouldn't you take it?

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Mary Magdalene is called "the apostle to the apostles." She is the apostle who witnesses the resurrection, and goes to tell the male disciples about it. Every single one of the gospels mentions Mary Magdalene by name at the resurrection.

I point this out because my own clergy kid daughter asked me once, "Were there any women disciples?"

It is no surprise that a woman can be a prostitute. What surprises us is that a woman can be an apostle. That's the real scandal.

In fact, the gospels specifically say that Mary Magdalene witnessed both the crucifixion and the resurrection. That's pretty important stuff in Christianity, wouldn't you say? And I expect there's a significant connection there.

When Matthew describes the crucifixion, he tells us, "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." (Mt 27:55-56)

Mary Magdalene has obviously been a devoted follower of Jesus. And there is nothing more difficult than watching someone you love be condemned, humiliated, and tortured to death. Mary Magdalene is also a believer. There is nothing that tests your faith like watching the person you believed was the Son of God become gradually reduced to a helpless corpse.

Still, she stays. As Jesus' agony intensifies, she stays. Mary Magdalene does not run away from seeing the pain. Even though there is nothing she can do to stop the intensifying agony, she stays. Mary Magdalene has the courage not to run away during the test of her faith, but to stay near Jesus through it all. She stays with Jesus to the bitter end.

And she stays beyond the bitter end. When Joseph of Arimathea uses his new tomb as a burial spot for Jesus, Matthew tells us, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb." (Mt. 27:61) She stays with Jesus at his burial.

And after the day in which the most horrifying events of her life are over, she gets up before dawn. And, Matthew tells us, “as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.” She gets up, and she goes back to the tomb. Even when it seems there is nothing left to be committed to, she gets up, and she goes back to the tomb. That’s the level of devotion she has. She might not even know herself why she goes to see the tomb. But she goes. She’s there.

And so, she’s there when the miracle happens. She’s there for the earthquake. She’s there for the angel of the Lord descending from heaven to roll back the stone, and sit on it. She’s there for the guards falling like dead men from the fear. She’s there for the angel to speak to her and say, “Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he had been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then quickly go and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him. This is my message for you.’”

She is willing to be there when it involves facing pain. She is willing to be there when it involves facing doubt. She is willing to be there when it involves facing loss. And when God works miracles, she is there to witness it.

And the energy is very different now. Once the angel tells the women what to do, we get this great verse: “they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.” With fear and great joy.

There is still the fear. Fear is the natural reaction to things we don’t understand. Is there a part of us that is afraid of believing in miracles? Is there a part of us that is afraid of being wrong if it turns out not to be a miracle? Is there a part of us that is afraid of being fooled? But the angel tells us, “Do not be afraid. Go ahead. Go for the joy. Go for the great joy. Believe in miracles. Believe in the resurrection. Jesus has been raised, as he said.” Don’t worry. Be happy. Be faithful.

So, dear people of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Heathsville, Virginia, Which person in the Bible would you most want to be? Who will you be?