

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006

MARY WHO?

After rising from the dead, Jesus appeared early on Sunday morning to Mary Magdalene...

~Mark 16: 9

A few months ago I mentioned in a casual conversation that I planned to devote my summer sermon series to Mary Magdalene. "So you're getting on the DaVinci Code bandwagon?" was the response. "Not exactly," I offered. "I'm getting on the proverbial "there's more to the story" wagon, and I think it deserves our attention."

The proclamation *I have seen the Lord*, as told in the gospel narratives of the story of the resurrection begins the history of Christianity. It is Mary Magdalene's simple and few words to the apostles. It also ends the Christian Scriptures or New Testament history of Mary Magdalene. Jesus male followers Peter and Paul form the new church, Stephen dies a martyr's death and John the Divine has detailed visions of an age to come. And Mary Magdalene - a critical figure in Jesus' earthly circle - is neither seen nor heard from again.

But. There is more to the story. The Magdalene - which part of her name derives from Magdala, her hometown near Capernaum, a town that was a center of commercial fishing on the northwest bank of the Sea of Galilee - lives on in another tradition that can be found in a previously unknown early Christian writing from Egypt. The Gospel of Mary is found in a 5th century papyrus book that came onto the Cairo antiquities market in 1896. It was purchased by a German scholar and taken to Berlin, where it was first published in 1955. "Many feminists and liberal theologians see the Gospel of Mary as suggesting that the Magdalene, the first witness to the resurrection, was the "apostle to the apostles," a figure with equal (or perhaps even favored) status to the men around Jesus - a woman so threatening that the apostles suppressed her role, and those of other women, in a bid to build a patriarchal hierarchy in the early church. To others, shaped by orthodoxy, Mary was an important player in the life and ministry of Jesus, but subordinate to the men who followed him," reported Jonathan Darman in the May 29 edition of Newsweek Magazine. Still others say: "To have silenced and suppressed women's leadership in the tradition with respect to the most prominent woman in Christian circles isn't an accident," writes Jane Schaberg, a professor of religious studies and women's studies and the author of *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*. Yes, I would agree - there is more to this story.

Needless to say, I, along with many others, do have Dan Brown, author of the DaVinci Code, to thank on some level.

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006

Now read by some 60 million people and seen in over three thousand theatres nationwide, the popularity of the novel and subsequent movie (though met with fairly tepid mainstream reviews) has no doubt elevated Mary Magdalene to unsurpassed levels. You can find her occupying her

own shelf in many bookstores, and incidentally, one in my personal library. In fact, in the Gospel of Mary, from which we'll hear an excerpt next week - now you have to come back! - the apostle Peter asks regarding Mary Magdalene: "should we all turn and listen to her?" Apparently it might be as good a time as any. And perhaps history may yet set Mary of Magdala free.

That said, I begin our series this morning with two questions:

Who is Mary Magdalene and why should we pay attention?

Karen L. King, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard Divinity School and author of *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* has suggested that we pay attention to Mary Magdalene because so much in Christian belief and practice rests upon historical claims that an accurate view of history is crucial. One criterion for good history is accounting for all the evidence and not marginalizing the parts one does not like or promoting unfairly the parts one does like. "Given the importance of religion in today's world," writes King, "especially notable in the intersection of religion and violence - it is important to recognize that all religious traditions contain many voices and offer a variety of possibilities for addressing complex issues. In that sense, religious tradition is not fixed, but is continually being constructed as we draw upon the past to address the present. Religion is not simply given - something one can only accept or reject. Religious traditions are constantly being interpreted, which means that people must take responsibility for their religion and its effects."

With all due respect, this is where I take issue with Dan Brown and *The DaVinci Code*. I've read the book. I've seen the movie. (If I asked for a show of hands this morning, I bet I know what that would look like) It is a murder mystery set in modern times (not a documentary or non-fiction work) and its intrigue for so many has been its historical claims about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The specific portrayal of Mary Magdalene is indeed a captivating feature. According to *The Code's* leading characters, historical sleuths who appear to know everything there is to know about the Holy Grail (a mysterious cup whose original purpose and exact nature no one agrees on) and its origins in the life of Mary Magdalene, Jesus and Mary were married.

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006

Their union was covered over by the ecclesiastical authorities. Not only were they sexually intimate, but also they produced offspring. After Jesus' crucifixion, Mary fled Palestine for France and gave birth to a daughter who became the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, so French royalty - and surprise - Sophie Neve (Tom Hanks sidekick in *The DaVinci Code*) - could claim a divine bloodline.

These historical claims in the novel and movie have intrigued modern readers and viewers to the point that a surprisingly large number assume it to be gospel truth.

That is troubling to many others and me. There are a number of historical problems in Dan Brown's narrative and as a result there has been some fine scholarship produced over the last few years to help shed some light on ancient sources and early Christian history. One of these scholars (Bart D. Ehrman, Chair of the Dept. of Religious Studies at UNC Chapel Hill and author of the recent *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*) has said that audiences he speaks to are all too eager to know where Dan Brown got it wrong. But, Ehrman reports that when it comes to Mary Magdalene, there are always a few who want to insist that he must have gotten it right. Regular folk who think it just makes sense: Jesus and Mary must have been married and had kids.

"Unfortunately," writes Ehrman, "history cannot be written simply on the basis of what makes sense. It makes best sense to me, for example, to think that there should never have been influenza epidemics, tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, mudslides, world wars, killing fields...that have wiped millions of people off the face of the earth. Like it or not, disaster happens, whatever my preferences or best sense. History has to be written on the basis of evidence, and that applies to the history of the 2004 tsunami, the 1918 influenza outbreak, the 1860's Civil War and everything else in history, including less personally tragic matters such as the life of Mary Magdalene."

Now lest you suspect I am here to prove or disprove whether Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, let me assure you that this is not the road I'm taking. My impetus and desire to devote a sermon series to Mary Magdalene, not only has to do with the improprieties of historical claims, but more so with the notion that we have been left too often with widespread perceptions of Mary Magdalene that have been fueled by Broadway (remember Jesus Christ Superstar and the top 40 hit "I don't know how to love him?") Hollywood (*The Last Temptation of Christ* and now *The DaVinci Code*) and Barnes and Noble. The common thread in these is very focused on her sexuality, though no early Christian writings speak of her sexuality. Finally, I'm aware along with many others that what is considered to be a centuries old case of

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006

mistaken identity needs to be rectified. It appears as though it is quite possible that Mary Magdalene's true biblical portrait is being resurrected and this "apostle to the apostles" can take her rightful place in history as a beloved disciple of Jesus and a prominent early church leader. That time is long overdue!

"Why do we feel the need to re-sexualize Mary?" wonders Karen King. "We've gotten rid of the myth of the prostitute. Now there's this move to see her as wife and mother. Why isn't it adequate to see her as disciple and perhaps apostle?" Bart Ehrman asks: "What do historians say about her as both a historical figure and as one remembered not just since the 1970's, but during the early centuries of Christianity? Is it true that she was a close companion of Jesus? That they might

have been married? Is it true that she was a prostitute reformed by the message of Christ? That she was nearly stoned for her illicit sexual activities?"

What else is there to know and who was Mary Magdalene? Does she yet remain a prisoner, a mistaken creature of sex? Popular culture and art, as well as religious texts have certainly contributed to a classic case of mistaken, and perhaps more importantly, limited identity.

There are many questions, so many questions. And there is more to the story. But for today's purposes, this is a beginning, meant as an introduction to a figure that history may well set free at some point. It's been suggested that there are still undiscovered gospels sitting in unknown deserts of which scholars say is only a matter of time some of them surface and upend our notions of Mary Magdalene and Jesus once again. I tend to agree.

What we can say today is that the fragments about Mary Magdalene in the Christian Testament are of course visible and ready to hand as a living document. The so-called Gnostic materials (i.e. *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Phillip*) have been available since their rediscovery in the 20th century. (The term Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. It is used in some ancient sources to refer to people who have special, often esoteric religious knowledge) Incidentally, next week we'll address a bit about the Gnostic writings, as they are quite illuminating and also considered by some as heretical in regard to Mary Magdalene.

Regardless, according to all four Christian New Testament gospels, Mary Magdalene is a - perhaps the - primary witness to the fundamental data of the early Christian faith. She is said to have participated in the Galilean career of Jesus

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006

of Nazareth, followed him to Jerusalem, stood by at his execution and burial, found his tomb empty and received an explanation of that emptiness. Two texts mention that seven demons had come out of her (Luke and today's we read from Mark). There are 3 accounts (Mark, Matthew And John) of Mary sent with a commission to deliver the explanation of the empty tomb to the disciples. Also according to 3 accounts (Matthew, John and Mark today) she was the first to experience a vision or appearance of the resurrected Jesus. Additionally, Gnostic materials present her as a leading intellectual and spiritual guide of the early, post-Easter community, as a visionary, the Savior's beloved companion, a conduit for and interpreter of his teachings.

Yet, in spite of her importance in the gospel narratives (note she appears in all four gospels of the Christian New Testament) and noncanonical works there is often silence and confusion around Mary Magdalene.

It might be helpful to mention some reasons for that and clarify a few things about Mary Magdalene, the ***inconvenient, complicated and forgotten woman***. Besides, my 15 minutes are almost up!

She is mentioned 12 times in the Christian New Testament - making her the second most mentioned woman in the Gospels after Mary, the mother of Christ. Unlike most other women in the Bible, she is not identified in relation to another person; she is not anyone's mother, wife or sister. She is simply called Mary of Magdala. She left her home to follow Jesus, and it is believed she was among several well-off, independent women who financially supported Jesus' ministry.

Further, many are surprised to learn that there is no biblical evidence that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute or public sinner. So how did she become known as a prostitute several hundred years after her death? The short answer is that she has been confused with several other women in the Bible.

Most significantly, Mary Magdalene is confused with an unnamed sinner in the Gospel of Luke. That is the story of the woman who bathes Jesus' feet with tears and anoints them with ointment from an alabaster jar. The confusion may have come from the proximity of this passage to one that identifies Mary of Magdala by name as a follower of Jesus who had seven demons cast from her. (Gospel of Luke) Whether Luke created her seven demons, or they were traditional, Mary Magdalene, as one scholar described it - "is the madwoman in Christianity's attic, open to analysis as whether that could stand for resistance and protest of the patriarchy of the time." The waters get even muddier

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006

when the unnamed sinner gets lumped in with yet another Mary - Mary of Bethany, Martha and Lazarus sister - who also anoints Jesus feet in the Gospel of John. It is quite possible that the shared symbols of ointment and tears have historically united both women with Mary Magdalene, who was among the women who brought jars of perfumed oil to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. There you have it. Are you still with me?

Finally, it's important to note that in the 6th century during the reign of Pope Gregory a homily was delivered by him to reduce confusion over the Mary's and Jesus' anointing in order to unify Church doctrine. In it Gregory decided to conflate Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and Luke's sinner into the same person. Unfortunately, this ultimately made him responsible for ending any real discussion of Mary Magdalene's true identity. And so, for about 1,400 years Gregory's declaration was officially the end of the story. Consequently, in the flurry of excitement and resurgence of Mary Magdalene in recent years, blame for her reputation has been laid squarely on Pope Gregory's shoulders.

However to be fair, it's important to mention that officially in 1969, the Roman Catholic Church quietly disentangled Mary Magdalene from Mary of Bethany and

the anonymous sinner by changing their official calendar to demonstrate what had been known for a very long time: that there is no Scriptural evidence to support the conflation of the 3 women. Nevertheless, 1,400 years of tradition does not magically disappear that easily. Mary Magdalene is still remembered as prostitute and penitent within Catholicism and many Protestant branches of Christianity. Which leaves us still in a challenging place - that is once again realizing that we are, as I began this sermon - faced with the recognition that religious traditions are not fixed, but continually being constructed as we draw upon the past to address the present. That so much of our religious belief and practice rests upon historical claims that an accurate view of history is crucial.

So for now, I'll leave you with this. It will come as no surprise to you that I've been spending much of my time in the last few weeks exploring writings and scholarship regarding Mary Magdalene. I have been quite struck with one in particular that I cited earlier, Jane Schaberg author of *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, who uses writer Virginia Woolf as her intellectual companion.

In her Diary of 1926, Woolf wrote this: **"Yet I am now and then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall be all told on one occasion; and time**

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006

shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past."

What did she have in mind? What was she glimpsing? It is Woolf who suggested that critiquing religion would attempt to free the religious spirit from its present servitude and would help, if need be, create a new religion based, it might well be, upon the New Testament, but, it might well be, very different from the religion now erected upon that basis. She possessed a perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky where writers have suggested that the forbidding, patriarchal Christian God is replaced.

As Schaberg suggests, for those of us who may not be able to base a new religion on the New Testament, (or any other Testament I would add) what use, what help, if any, will or might the New Testament be? Can it provide, or can it open to a view of the open sky?

Stay tuned.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bellevie, Lesa; *The Idiot's Guide to Mary Magdalene*; Alpha Books, Indianapolis, 2005.

Darman, Jonathan; "An Inconvenient Woman:" *Newsweek Magazine*, May 29, 2006.

Ehrman, Bart D.; *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*; Oxford University Press, New York, 2006.

Meyer, Marvin with Esther A. DeBoer; *The Gospels of Mary, The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene, the Companion of Jesus*; Harper San Francisco, 2004.

Schaberg, Jane; *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene; Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*; Continuum, New York; London, 2002.

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 13, 2006