

**Reflection**

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
 Guilty of dust and sin.  
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
 If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
 Love said, 'You shall be she.'  
 'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
 I cannot look on Thee.'  
 Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
 'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
 Go where it doth deserve.'  
 'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
 'My dear, then I will serve.'  
 'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'  
 So I did sit and eat. George Herbert. 1593–1632

We could perhaps imagine a glorious interchange such as this between Mary Magdalene and Jesus on their first meeting as Mary struggled with her seven demons – the demons which Jesus reportedly cast out. Mary of Magdala encountered Love incarnate – unconditional, all-embracing – a Love that healed her, affirmed her and transformed her life. Her response was to return that love with complete devotion, leaving her Galilean town to follow her Rabbouni and – along with other women of independent means – support Jesus in his ministry.

When women are mentioned in the Gospels, Mary Magdalene is almost always listed first. She was likely the leader among the women. Biblical scholar, Bart Ehrman reminds us, “With Mary, we are dealing not only with how an important woman was remembered in the years and centuries after her death but also how she was remembered by men.” [vi]

Even in the orthodox, patriarchal tradition, Mary was remembered as the one who stayed with Jesus as he died and came first to the tomb....

*“Woman, why are you weeping?”*

She said to them, *“They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.”* And then, mistaking Jesus for the gardener:

*“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.”*

Mary's grief is overwhelming. Her love is ardent. Her commitment, total.

No wonder our Lectionary treats us to a taste of the sensual delights of the Song of Solomon on Magdalene's feast day:

*“Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”*  
 Scarcely had I passed them,

when I found him whom my soul loves.  
I held him, and would not let him go  
until I brought him into my mother's house,  
and into the chamber of her that conceived me. Song of Solomon 3:3b-4

Passionate, incarnate love is alive and well in our scriptures and the feast of Mary Magdalene reminds us to encounter and celebrate the divine in the exquisite ordinariness and earthiness of life and love. Miribai Starr in her book, *Wild Mercy*, speaks of the Sabbath (Shabbat) as reclaiming the power of love-longing in Judaism. She writes: "Like the Bride in Solomon's Song of Songs – the startlingly sensuous book of the Torah – we rise from our bed, and, dishevelled and rife with need, we rush out onto the darkened streets and plazas searching for the One who captivated and then abandoned us."<sup>i</sup>

Starr introduces Sabbath ritual, describing Shekinah – the indwelling feminine presence of the divine – as 'coming home for Shabbat' and awakening those participating, to Love's presence, particularly in the blessing of wine. 'The empty kiddush cup is a symbol of the heart that cries out in longing for God' she writes. 'The wine is the quantum response of love rushing in and filling us to overflowing. On Shabbat we pour the wine to the brim so that it sloshes onto the dish beneath it and splatters the tablecloth and stains our hands. Divine Love is messy and riotous; it is intoxicating.'<sup>ii</sup> I wonder, is that how Mary Magdalene encountered divine love in Jesus? Is that how we encounter Divine Love in our daily lives – messy and riotous? Intoxicating? Christianity's love language is recognised in bridal mysticism, in which the soul merges with the Divine in an intimate union that dissolves the distinction of subject and object.<sup>iii</sup>

Priest, writer and mystic, Cynthia Bourgeault in her book, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* wrote, "When a new infusion of love is needed, Mary Magdalene shows up." [iii] She's been there all along – hidden in plain sight, distorted and discounted but still right there. All four canonical gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - show her love and steadfastness.<sup>iv</sup>

All four gospels insist that when all the other disciples are fleeing, Mary Magdalene stands firm. She does not run; she does not betray or lie about her commitment; she witnesses. In John, as we heard, she is "the first to witness the resurrection, she is also the one who 'commissions' the others to go and announce the good news of the resurrection." She is Apostle to the Apostles iv] Hers is clearly a demonstration of the deepest human love or the highest spiritual understanding of what Jesus was teaching, perhaps both. Theologian Bart Ehrman maintains that Mary Magdalene is the woman who started Christianity.

With the discovery and translation of the so-called Gnostic Gospels and other early Christian literature, we now have a different picture of early Christian communities and more evidence about Mary as a spiritual teacher and leader.

There were many women leaders in the early years. They had no canonical gospels; there were many books. Gospels were written for particular communities of believers and to communicate particular theological ideas. Theological diversity was the norm.

Groups followed certain teachers. Third century theologian, "Origen, wrote that Mary had followers devoted to her understanding of the religion." We don't really know what Mary taught, but the recently discovered gospels add to our knowledge. It is clear from these books that Mary was widely respected - for some, clearly more important than the male disciples. "Mary is portrayed as the one who is beyond the others in her spiritual perception and progress."

Biblical scholar, Karen King of Harvard Divinity School together with Cynthia Bourgeault tell us that Mary Magdalene was an apostolic leader and a wisdom teacher.

Most of all, Mary Magdalene taught the way of the heart, the way of spiritual awakening and love.

May we too honour the way of the heart, the way of spiritual awakening and love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Starr, Miribai, *Wild Mercy; Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom of the Women Mystics*, p.35, Sounds True, Boulder (2019)

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p.35

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, p.36

<sup>iv</sup> Rev. Kathy Ellis, Philadelphia, on Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles