

Two years ago I stood before a painting in the gothic Church of Saint Anastasia of Verona. The painting, a chapel altarpiece, shows three saints: Left is Katherine, right Anastasia. The two are venerating the central figure, the holy Saint Mary of Magdala.

Today's text is another case of the clueless disciples getting it wrong. It is a particularly interesting text because it is one of the very few stories about Jesus that appears in all four gospels. The repetition of a story about or saying from Jesus is the principle way biblical text scholars have of determining whether content has a basis in fact – whether the thing really happened or really was said, or whether it was added by the writer or writers of the time. So chances are very good – excellent in fact, that: *While Jesus was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.*

What a beautiful gesture. This woman interrupts what appears to have been a private gathering and anoints Jesus with costly perfume. Anointing throughout history is a gesture of honor: the crowning of a king or queen; the ordination of a person to the clergy; the preparation of the body of a beloved one for burial: these are the events sanctified by anointing.

Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

And here we are, remembering this unnamed woman who – all on her own and at her own expense – showed Jesus that she got it: she understood what the near future held for him, and she took this public opportunity to give him the honor due a sovereign, a pastor, the body of a loved one.

Who was this woman? Though our text does not name her, the early church fathers identified her as Mary of Magdala, and with that smeared her as a whore. Why would they do such a thing? Because, in their thinking, she was too important to Jesus. The Gospels tell us that she was a Jewish woman who traveled with Jesus as one of his followers. She is said to have witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Within the four Gospels she is named at least 12 times, more than most of the apostles. Based on texts of the early Christian era in the third century, it seems that her status as an "apostle" rivals even Peter's. She is most prominent in the narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus, at which she was present. She was also present two days later, immediately following the Sabbath, when she was, either alone or as a member of a group of women, the first to testify to the resurrection of Jesus. In the gospels of John and Mark, she is specifically named as the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection.

The gospel of Luke makes it clear that Mary of Magdala is not the same as the "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus toward the beginning of his ministry: Luke 8

Soon afterward Jesus began a tour of the nearby towns and villages, preaching and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's business manager; Susanna; and many others who were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples.

These women “provided for” Jesus and the Twelve, which suggests that the women were well-to-do, respectable figures. They all had been cured of something, including Mary Magdalene. The “seven demons,” as applied to her, indicates a chronic ailment (not necessarily possession) of a certain severity.

As the story of Jesus was told and retold in those first decades, changes in event and character were inevitable – like the game of “telephone” we children used to play. Most Christians were illiterate; they received their traditions through memory and interpretation that led only eventually to texts. And over time, the status of women eroded

If we pay attention to Jesus’ teaching and his behavior toward women, it seems clear that, within his circle, women were fully equal. Around 30 years later, when Paul’s letters were being written, women’s equality is reflected in the names of women as his partners in the Christian movement. After the Gospels were written, 40 to 110 years after Jesus’ ministry, but well before the New Testament texts were selected from the hundreds of Jesus texts of the time, Jesus’ inclusion of women as equals was being eroded in the Christian community. The Gospels themselves can be read to suggest this erosion because of their emphasis on the authority of “the Twelve,” who are all males.

By the 4th century, as the books of the New Testament were being selected, the church was well on its way to marginalizing women in general and discrediting their importance in the early church and its development – thus we get the myth of Mary of Magdala as a prostitute. What we didn’t get was the Gospel of Mary, written around the same time as the Gospel of John. In this Gospel, we something quite different:

Peter said to Mary, “Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things which you know that we don’t because we haven’t heard them.”

Mary responded, “I will teach you about what is hidden from you.”

After she shares what Jesus taught her, a jealous Peter complains, “*Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?*”

Levi answered, speaking to Peter, “Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly the Savior’s knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us. “Rather we should be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and announce the good news, not laying down any other rule or law that differs from what the Savior said.” After [he had said these] things, they started going out [to] teach and to preach.

Not only did Jesus treat women with respect, as equals in his circle; not only did he refuse to reduce them to their sexuality; Jesus was expressly portrayed as a man who loved women, and whom women loved. Why is it that the church ignored Jesus when it came to women? If lack of curiosity about our scriptures and how they came to be, is at fault, this lack of curiosity has taken a huge toll on girls and women, a toll that continues to damage.

Once upon a time the church was the supreme authority for the western world. Now the moral authority of the church is weakening as church attendance declines. We Jesus lovers, who have an interest in doing what he told us to do, instead of just calling him *Lord, Lord*, might use this last week before Easter to take seriously the acts of mercy and inclusion that marked his ministry, and make them the guiding light for how we live in our families, our work, our world.