

# Who Was Mary Magdalene? (And Was She Really a 'Penitent Prostitute'?)

Who was Mary Magdalene? What do we know about her? And how do we know it? These questions resurface with the release of a new movie, [Mary Magdalene](#), starring Rooney Mara in the titular role.

The question of how we know about her is a relatively simple one. She appears in a number of early Christian texts associated with the ministry of Jesus.

These texts comprise Gospels written in the first and second century of the Common Era (CE). The earliest of them are included in the New Testament, where Magdalene plays a significant role. She also appears in later Gospels, which were not included in the Bible and come from a later period in early Christianity.

The answer about who she was and what we know of her is more complex. In Western art, literature and theology, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a prostitute who meets Jesus, repents of her sins, and pours oil on his feet in a gesture of humility, penitence and gratitude. She is sometimes depicted kneeling at the foot of the cross, hair unbound, emphasising the sinful past from which she can never quite escape, despite being declared a saint.

The tradition of the penitent prostitute has persisted in the Western tradition. Institutions that cared for prostitutes from the 18th century onwards were called "Magdalenes" to encourage amendment of life in the women who took refuge in them. The word came into English as "maudlin", meaning a tearful sentimentality. It is not a flattering description.



Titian's Penitent Magdalene, circa 1565. Wikimedia Commons

Artistic depictions continued to emphasise Magdalene's sexuality in various ways, under a facade of piety. In another twist on the same theme, she is presented as the wife of Jesus, most notably in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

The tradition of Mary Magdalene as the archetypal penitent whore, whose sexuality somehow manages to persist beyond her conversion, can be dated to a sermon preached by Gregory the Great in the sixth century CE.

Admittedly, there are a confusing number of women called "Mary" in the Gospels and we might assume Pope Gregory was tired of distinguishing between them. He reduced them to two: on the one hand, Mary, the mother of Jesus, perpetual virgin, symbol of purity and goodness, and, on the other, Mary Magdalene, promiscuous whore, symbol of feminine evil from which the world must be redeemed.

## A disciple of Jesus

Yet nowhere in the Gospels is Mary Magdalene associated either overtly or covertly with sexuality. The four Gospels of the

New Testament present her in two significant roles.

In the first place, she is a disciple of Jesus: one among a band of women and men from Galilee who believed in his message of love and justice and followed him in his ministry.

Secondly, Magdalene is a primary witness in the Gospels to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Unlike many of the other disciples, she does not flee when Jesus is arrested. She remains at the cross when he dies and later visits his tomb to find it empty, with a vision of angels declaring his resurrection.

Mark's Gospel, which we now know to be the earliest Gospel to be written, speaks of Magdalene as a disciple of Jesus who has followed him from Galilee along with other women, but it does not mention her until the crucifixion. These women disciples now stand near the cross, despite the danger in being present at the execution of a dissident.

Three of them, including Magdalene, visit the tomb on Easter morning where they meet an angel who informs them that Jesus has risen from the dead (Mark 16:1-8). The women's subsequent departure from the tomb is ambiguous, and they leave in fear and silence, which is where the manuscript of Mark's Gospel abruptly ends. An ending added later makes mention of the risen Jesus making an appearance first to Magdalene.

In Matthew's Gospel, Magdalene meets the risen Christ as she leaves the tomb, this time with only one other female companion, who is also called "Mary" (Matt 28:1-10). In Luke's account, Magdalene appears at the cross and at the empty tomb to hear the angel's words, but she and her female companions are not believed when they convey the message of the resurrection to the apostles (Luke 24:1-11).



Mary Magdalene anoints Christ's feet in Dieric Bouts' Christ in the House of Simon (circa 1420–1475). Wikimedia Commons

In Luke, there is an earlier mention of Magdalene in Jesus's ministry where she is present, along with other women, as a disciple and supporter of Jesus (Luke 8:1-3). She is described as having had seven demons cast from her. This description might lead to the conclusion, in some minds, that the many "demons" refer to her unfettered sexuality.

But that would be erroneous. Exorcisms – the casting out of evil spirits – are common in the first three Gospels. Those suffering demonic possession are never described as sinful but rather are victims of external evil.

These days, we would associate their symptoms with physical maladies such as epilepsy or mental illness. Magdalene, in other words, has been the victim of a serious illness and

Jesus has healed her.

Furthermore, the description is unusual here in that she is not described in relation to a male figure, as other women at the time generally were: father, husband, brother. She is simply referred to as “the Magdalene”, that is, the woman from Magdala, a Jewish village in Galilee.

We might well assume, from Luke’s description, that she is an independent woman of some means, who is well able to fund, as well as participate in, the movement around Jesus.

## **Her most significant role**

John’s Gospel, however, gives Magdalene her most significant role. Once again, she does not appear until the crucifixion. In the narrative that follows, she comes alone to the tomb on Easter morning, finds it empty, tries unsuccessfully to gain help from two other prominent disciples, and eventually meets the risen Christ himself in the garden (20:1-18). He is alive and commissions her to proclaim the message of his resurrection.

On the basis of John’s story, later tradition gave Magdalene the title of “apostle to the apostles” and recognised something of her significance for Christian faith, witness and leadership. A tragic consequence is that her role as witness to the resurrection was later overshadowed by the apparently more alluring but inaccurate picture of her as the penitent whore.





A more accurate portrayal of Mary Magdalene announcing the risen Christ from the 12th-century English illuminated manuscript St Albans Psalter. Wikimedia Commons

The later Gospels, beyond the New Testament, also emphasise Magdalene's importance as a disciple of Jesus and witness to the resurrection. The manuscript of the Gospel of Mary, which describes her discussions with the risen Christ, is unfortunately damaged and the central section is missing. In this and other similar Gospels, however, Magdalene is presented as the favoured disciple. This situation leads to some tension with the other disciples, who are jealous of her closeness to Jesus and the teaching she alone is given.

One Gospel speaks of Jesus kissing her, but the imagery in the Gospel of Philip is metaphorical and refers to a spiritual union with Christ. In response to the objection by the other disciples, Jesus asks why he does not kiss them in the same way, implying that they do not as yet possess the same degree of spiritual knowledge.

## **No evidence of Magdalene anointing Jesus**

There is no evidence, incidentally, that Magdalene ever anointed Jesus.

There are three anointing traditions in the Gospels. In one, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus's head in prophetic recognition of his identity (Gospels of Mark & Matthew). In another, a named and known disciple, Mary of Bethany, who is a model disciple, anoints Jesus's feet in gratitude for his raising her brother Lazarus from the dead (Gospel of John). In the third, a "sinful woman", who is not explicitly identified as a prostitute, anoints Jesus's feet in a gesture of repentance, gratitude and hospitality. None of these three figures is associated in any way with Mary Magdalene in the texts.

The movie *Mary Magdalene*, directed by Garth Davis, is a significant portrayal of this early Christian figure in the light of evidence from the earliest texts. The screenwriters,



Helen Edmundson and Philippa Goslett, are quite clear that Mary is not to be associated with Jesus through her sexuality, either as harlot or wife. On the contrary, she is depicted as a faithful and deeply insightful disciple of Jesus, on whom he draws for his message of love, mercy and forgiveness.

Magdalene is beautifully portrayed in the movie, which draws on traditions from the earlier and later Gospels. She possesses an intense and compelling presence, which does much to restore her character from its later distortions.

It is true that the film makes somewhat erratic use of the New Testament, both in its presentation of Magdalene and of other characters in the story. Towards the end, for example, there is an implication that Magdalene and the church stand on opposite sides, the one in sympathy with Jesus's teaching and the other anxious to build a self-glorifying edifice on his assumed identity.

This is unfortunate, as the New Testament itself is quite clear about the priority and identity of Magdalene as a key disciple, witness and leader in the early church, without seeing her in opposition to others.

Indeed, those who campaigned in a number of Christian churches for the ordination of women in the 20th century used precisely the example of Mary Magdalene from the New Testament as "apostle to the apostles" to support their case for women's equality and leadership.

The recent installation of Kay Goldsworthy as Archbishop of the Anglican Diocese of Perth – the first woman in this country and across the world to be given this title – is the true heir of Magdalene as she is portrayed in the earliest Christian writings.



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*The film Mary Magdalene opens in Australian cinemas on March 22.*

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[Image Credit: Detail from Caravaggio's Mary Magdalene, painted circa 1594-1596. Wikimedia Commons]