

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 9, 2020**

“Mary Magdalene: ‘Apostle to the Apostles’”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Mark 16:1-20



When I board a plane, I don't give it a second thought when a man crouches into the cockpit and takes his seat at the controls. When a woman does, I take notice. Hmmm. I have been watching the NASA and Space X launches lately. I find myself curiously distracted by the fact that much of the scientific commentary about the Mars rover's instrumentation is being given by a female astrophysicist and electrical engineer. Hmmm. I will be even more honest with you. While I do not necessarily enthusiastically follow men's professional sports in the United States, I confess, I do not watch women's teams at all. I am not proud of these biases. Intellectually, I am a feminist. However, subconsciously I am still patriarchal. Politically, I believe we are long

overdue for a female president. However, culturally I still harbor subconscious predilections for men in leadership positions. Though I make these confessions for myself as a male, I also make them for our society (both male and female included). We all are complicit.



This month we are studying extra-canonical gospels, gospels not found to be authoritative by the early church ‘fathers’ and thus not included in our Bible. Most of these gospels are referred to as ‘gnostic’ gospels. Gnostic gospels, while then-‘Christian’, claim to have secret or hidden teachings. The Gnostics believed that they had revealed to them secret knowledge about who Jesus was and what he taught.

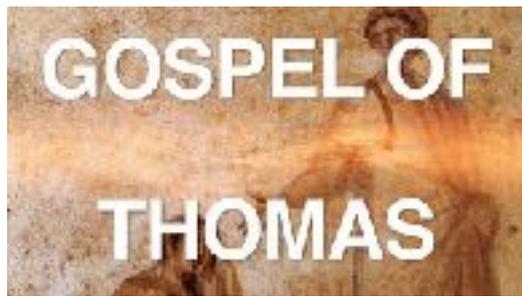
In this sermon series, I am not arguing for the accuracy or inaccuracy of the gnostic gospels. I am not arguing that their contents convey historical truth. Rather, I seek to pointing-out that some of their perspectives provide us some wisdom. For example, when I read the Gospel of Mary, I hear from the author that since ancient times women are often unheard, ignored, and marginalized. Furthermore, I hear the Gospel of Mary telling us that the marginalization of women is a *theology heresy*.



Even a cursory reading of the four gospels with which we are familiar reveals that Mary Magdalene, because she was a woman, was marginalized.¹ Mary supported Jesus' ministry from her own purse, served Jesus as a close friend and confidant throughout his ministry, accompanied him at his death when the men ran away and hid, was present at his grave to prepare his body for burial, was the first to see the resurrected Jesus, and was the first to proclaim the resurrection to the unbelieving disciples. *Despite all this*, Mary still was not considered to be one of the twelve disciples.

The Gospel of Mary offers a perspective of Jesus' ministry from Mary's perspective. The Gospel of Mary understood her to be the only true disciple and thus the one to whom Jesus disclosed his secret teachings.

¹ Biblical scholars and the church understand that Mary Magdalene is a *different* 'Mary' than 'Mary of Bethany' (Luke 10:39) and the 'sinful/promiscuous and repenting Mary' who poured nard on Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50). Mary was a popular name in first century Palestine!



We can understand Mary's perspective from another gnostic gospel, the one according to Thomas, on which my dear friend Matt will preach next week. In Thomas' gospel, Simon Peter is heard to say to the other disciples, "Let Mary [depart] from among us, for women are not worthy of the life. Jesus said: 'Behold, I shall lead her, *that I may make her male*, in order that she may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven'".² What is meant when Jesus said, "I will make her male"? Well, in the ancient world it was almost universally believed that men were superior to women. Women were understood to be flawed and incomplete men.³ Hence, Eve came from a man's rib. In this passage, Peter claimed that Mary could not be one of the disciples because as an inferior human being she is not even worthy of [eternal] life. Jesus responded that he will improve Mary, and thus make her as good as a man, so that she and other faithful women will also inherit the kingdom of God.

² Meyer, Marvin. *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*. HarperCollins, 2004. No page reference cited.

³ Ehrman, Bart. *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2006), 211-213.

I admit, there is some wackadoodle thinking in the gnostic texts. Yet, if we are honest there are also some perspectives in them, some universal truths that are accurate. Society often thinks of women as incomplete or insufficient humans when compared to males. This conception of women throughout time has stereotyped women to be irrational.



For example, the pagan philosopher Celcus declared that Mary Magdalene was nothing more than a “hysterical female...who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion...”.⁴

⁴ Schaberg, Jane. *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York City, New York and London, England: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 84-85.



The Gospel of Mary that we have access to, like the Gospel of Judas, is a Coptic copy of a text originally written in Greek. The original wrote the gospel about a hundred years after Mary died – so, of course, Mary was not the author. The fifth century Coptic version was discovered in Cairo in 1896 and it was only published in 1955.

In Mary gospel's, Mary reassured the frightened disciples after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.



She told them, “Do not weep or grieve or be in doubt, for his grace will be with you all and will protect you. Rather, let us praise his greatness for he has

prepared us and made us [women] truly human”.⁵ So, here, Mary proclaimed to the disciples that Jesus made women whole humans, as fully developed as men, and therefore they too shall inherit the kingdom of God.



Peter contested Mary’s claim and complained, “Did [Jesus] really speak with a woman in private, without our knowledge? Should we all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?”⁶ To all of these questions, the gospel of Mary responds, ‘Yes!’

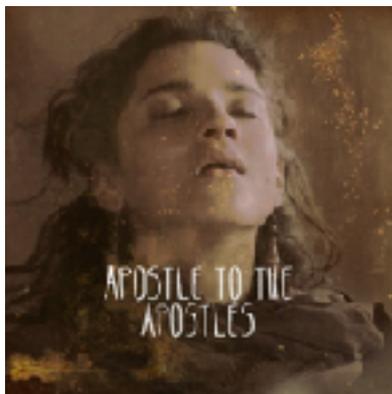
That Mary’s gospel is not in our Bible should not render it void of useful spiritual instruction.



⁵ Ehrman, 242.

⁶ Ehrman, 245.

In Mark's gospel, we hear the story of how Mary Magdalene addressed the disciples in much the same manner that Mary's gospel narrates.⁷ Mary was the first to witness the resurrection; Mary received the first instructions from Jesus; Mary related her experience to the disciples hiding in fear; Mary's testimony was not believed by the disciples. Mary first proclaimed the Gospel, the 'Good News'.



Mary was, as Thomas Aquinas rightly titled her, the 'Apostle to the Apostles'. Yet, despite that she was the Apostle to the Apostles, she nor any woman was or is considered 'a disciple' and no book in the Christian scriptures bears the name of any woman.



⁷ And, as Michael Mario rightly pointed-out in his preface to reading the scriptures, verses 9-20 of the last chapter of Mark's gospel are somewhat extra-canonical themselves! The ending of Mark is not found in the earliest manuscripts of Mark. They are only found in later copies. So, it is most likely that then ending of Mark that we read today was added on to by editors (redactors) and are thus 'inventions'.

I am proud to belong to a wider church denomination and to a local church (Centre Congregational Church) that seeks to right the wrongs of history and thus ensure that women are seen, heard, and learned from. For the wisdom of God dwells within women.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".