

“And Also Some Women” Podcast Transcript

EPISODE 1 – MARY MAGDALENE

June: Welcome to “And Also Some Women,” a podcast from Broadview magazine. I’m your host, June Joplin.

Anne: And I’m Anne Thériault.

June: In this five-part series, we’ll examine some of the most compelling women in the Bible. We’re gonna be investigating how new interpretations challenge centuries-old understanding of who they were. Today, we’re talking about Mary Magdalene, someone who has been depicted in a lot of different ways: as a sex worker, as the apostle to the apostles, even as Jesus’ wife. In this episode we’ll try to figure out what, if any, of those characterizations are accurate. You know, as a pastor working in churches, I love helping people see ancient stories of faith in a new light, and Mary Magdalene is a big part of all those stories, but it seems like her role is changing a lot these days.

Anne: I’ve written about Mary before, actually for Broadview Magazine, and it was such an interesting rabbit hole to go down, so I’m excited to sink my teeth even deeper into this. Today we’re going to talk to some people that you’d expect - biblical scholars - and some people that you might not expect. So without further ado, let’s jump in.

Last summer, [Diana Butler Bass](#), an American author and historian of Christianity, had an unusual experience. It started out typically enough, with her doing something she does every year: attending the [Wild Goose Festival](#). This is Diana, explaining exactly what the festival is.

Diana Butler Bass: It’s a summer festival of arts, and justice, and spirituality, and theology, and preaching, and music, and it’s this wonderful outdoor festival. Before the pandemic there were about 4,500, 5,000 people who might come. It’s held in North Carolina in July, usually, and it was becoming – in the before times, I guess we can say – the largest gathering nationally of progressive Christians, and because of that there’s, like, all of these people who are post-evangelicals, and ex-evangelicals, and kind of what I would call semi-lost mainliners who no longer feel entirely comfortable in their denominations, and they sort of show up at this outdoor festival to have fun and see things differently. So it’s quite an amazing event. We’re still kind of – I go every year, I’ve always been invited to preach. And so we’re sort of getting back on our feet after Covid. This past year, I believe, there were just shy of 2,000 people who came. And so I had never preached the closing sermon before, I had always preached a sermon in the middle of the festival, but this year they asked me if I would do that last piece, and when you preach any kind of closing sermon it’s a, you know, you’re trying to sort of summarize the event, you’re trying to gather up all the pieces and send folks out with a real enthusiastic sort of hurrah.

Anne: Diana decided to preach about Mary Magdalene — specifically, about a discovery made by a friend of hers, [Elizabeth Schrader Polczer](#), who is a New Testament scholar and a PhD candidate at Duke University. We'll hear from Elizabeth a little bit later. First we need to find out more about Diana's experience at Wild Goose. The crowd's reaction to her sermon was enthusiastic, to say the least.

Diana Butler Bass: There was this audible gasp across the whole of the auditorium. There were probably about 1,000 people left for that final morning, and I could hear there were a couple of people crying in the audience and then people just started applauding, like, wildly applauding, and that was a moment in which the whole of the festival, I think, felt very complete, and that was what so many people in that auditorium were hungry for.

June: Oh wow, that's a really strong response. It also sounds like there's more to the story.

Anne: So much more. Before the sermon, Diana did what she always does when she preaches: she set up her phone to record. Afterwards, she [uploaded it to her Substack newsletter, The Cottage](#). Then she and her husband got in the car to drive home to Washington DC. Every time she had cell service, Diana would check how many people were listening to her sermon. And at first, the numbers were pretty stable, but then ...

Diana Butler Bass: All of the sudden, the shares on that sermon just started going up so fast, and by the time we got back to DC, which is about four hours, five hours from the campsite, it had been shared well over 10,000 times. And I said, wow, you know, I don't think I've preached a sermon that's been shared 10,000 times, and it just didn't stop. Within the first week it was shared over 200,000 times.

June: So in other words, it went viral.

Anne: Yeah. And [this 40-minute sermon](#) that was originally intended for a relatively small audience of progressive American protestants, and it went viral. Diana said she got messages about it from all over the world.

June: Okay, so now everyone has to be wondering: what exactly is in that Mary Magdalene sermon?

Anne: Before we get to that, I think it might be a good idea to talk about who Mary Magdalene is, which is a complicated story.

Nikole Mitchell: I think my understanding was, what I'd been taught was that she was, like, a prostitute-turned-saint, right, like, she had fixed her wayward ways and had, like, come to Christ.

Diana Butler Bass: Mary Magdalene was the fallen woman who somehow came into Jesus' orbit mostly the idea was that Jesus had healed her or forgiven her her sins, and that out of her sense of gratitude she becomes a follower of Jesus.

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: You know, I had heard that Mary Magdalene, you know, there was a question, like, some people thought she was a prostitute but some people thought that she was a really important leader.

June: Ok but, of course, most of that stuff, it's not actually in the Bible.

Anne: Exactly! Here's Diana Butler Bass again on the biblical narrative of Mary Magdalene.

Diana Butler Bass: Mary Magdalene is an interesting figure in the New Testament because it's a little bit controversial as to how many times she actually appears in the New Testament. One of the stories that is definitely a story about Mary Magdalene is a woman who comes to Jesus seeking healing, and Jesus frees her from seven demons that have inhabited her and tortured her, really, through her life. And then we see a number of other figures in the New Testament accounts, and in all four of the gospels, named Mary, and some of them have become associated with Mary Magdalene, especially the woman who anoints Jesus with oil, and the woman who takes her hair and cleans Jesus' feet of that oil. And then there are the accounts at the resurrection. And Mary shows up in, I believe, every one of them as either a major or minor figure with a number of other women.

June: Okay, so that first story that Diana references is the earliest mention of Mary Magdalene, and that comes to us from the Gospel of Luke. Luke says that Jesus is traveling around and proclaiming the good news with his apostles and also some women. Of course, that little throwaway line inspired the name for this very podcast. These are women that Jesus has cured of various afflictions, and they're helping to support Jesus' mission out of their own means. And one of those women is someone that Luke refers to as Mary called Magdalene.

Anne: Right. And there's contention over what is meant by the seven demons that Luke says went out of her. Some people interpret them as symbolizing sin, particularly sexual sin. But there isn't anywhere else in the scripture where that kind of language is used to denote sinfulness. So some scholars think that it could mean a kind of illness, maybe something psychiatric or involving seizures, since Jesus is described as curing it. And if the number seven is significant, it might be related to the fact that in Judaism, seven symbolizes completion, meaning Mary was completely overwhelmed by her condition before Jesus came along.

June: As Diana mentioned, there are a few stories in there that have become associated with Mary Magdalene but don't use her name specifically. The next time that Mary shows up in the biblical narrative is at the crucifixion, and there's this question of what happened between her being cured of the demons and then showing up at the cross. Has she been traveling with Jesus the whole time? Matthew tells us that she has been following him from Galilee ministering to him, so that suggests that she has been with him all along, even if she doesn't get mentioned. Anyway, she shows up again at the foot of the cross with a bunch of other women, including an assortment of Marys. Virgin Mary, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, as well as Mary the wife of Clopas.

Anne: And, fun fact, something like six of the 16 named women in the gospels are called Mary. Some of them might be the same Mary, just called by different names in different gospels, but it was also just a very popular name in the first century Judea. The name Miriam, from which Mary is derived, had links to both Jewish history and the dynasty that ruled an independent Judea before the Roman occupation, so it was a politically significant name and kind of a middle finger to the Romans.

June: Nice. So some, or maybe even all of those Marys at the crucifixion, also witnessed Jesus' burial. And then Mary Magdalene gets her big moment where she sees the resurrection. And in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, she's accompanied by other women at the tomb, but in John's gospel, she's there all alone. And that's when we get to see that really lovely scene where she mistakes the risen Christ for the gardener. Now, when she realizes who he is, Jesus tells Mary to go and tell the disciples that he's alive, which of course she does. And that's why she's sometimes called the apostle to the apostles, because apostle just means messenger, and this is the biggest message there has ever been to deliver.

Anne: And then after that big moment... that's it. No more Mary. She disappears from the text.

June: Now, one thing to note here is that nowhere in this text is Mary Magdalene described as a sex worker. But somehow that's probably the most common association people have with her today.

Anne: Right. Because that was completely [made up in the 6th century by Pope Gregory I](#), also known as St. Gregory the Great. Okay, maybe not completely made up, but definitely something that involved him loosely knitting bits of gospels together and drawing some of his own conclusions. It all started at a Good Friday Mass in 591. During his homily, Gregory talked about how Mary Magdalene had been a sinner in the city before being redeemed. Then he talked a bit about the resurrection before veering back to the whole sinner thing. He said Mary was the same person as the sinful woman from the Gospel of Luke who appears at Simon the Pharisee's house and anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.

June: So you can almost see how he gets there. Now, I know you know this Anne, but a lot of medieval Christians believe that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were the same person. And Mary of Bethany has that scene in the Gospel of John where she also anoints Jesus' feet with perfume. And so Gregory definitely wasn't the only person who believed that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the unnamed sinful woman were all one and the same. But how do we get from there to sex work?

Anne: That's where things get interesting amidst all the foot anointing. Not long after this Good Friday Mass, Gregory gives another sermon about Mary Magdalene and says that the seven demons that came out of her actually represented sins she'd committed. He even gets kind of graphic and says that the jar of ointment that she's using on Jesus has previously been used to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts.

June: Ah, well, that's kind of kinky, I guess. But, why would the Pope say that?

Anne: There are a couple of theories, and they aren't mutually exclusive. One is that he wanted to discredit Mary Magdalene, maybe because she seemed too powerful to him even over 500 years after Jesus' death, for reasons that we'll get into. The other is that he was codifying what would become the cardinal sins, and Mary offered him a great way to help spread the word about them, since she had once been possessed by those seven demons. Gregory told people that, you guessed it, those seven demons were actually the seven deadly sins.

June: Yeah, and this reputation has stuck with her even in Christian denominations that reject Catholic dogma. You know, speaking of rejecting Catholic dogma, I think it was Martin Luther who said that the word of God is quite clear that women were made either to be wives or prostitutes, and I guess since Mary Magdalene isn't anybody's wife, then she must be that other thing.

Anne: Absolutely. Here's [Nikole Mitchell](#), who's a former evangelical pastor turned sex worker and life coach, which I think gives her a unique insight into Mary Magdalene

Nikole Mitchell: I think what makes the sex worker narrative so prevalent in the text is, I think men have an obsession with keeping women in their place and they will do it one way or another. And I think there's an obsession with this narrative of the whore and if we can label a woman a whore, she is discarded, she is disposable, we can then throw her in at any point of our narrative to make it work for us.

Anne: There's been a longstanding effort to reshape Mary Magdalene's narrative, including this podcast episode, of course. In 1969, the Catholic Church assigned a different reading to Mary's feast day, which is July 22nd. It used to be that story of the unnamed sinful woman, but now it's the story of her meeting the risen Christ. And in 2016 [Pope Francis also added a little blurb to her feast day, referring to Mary as the apostle to the apostles](#). But as Nikole points out, some people actually like the idea of Mary Magdalene as a sex worker.

Nikole Mitchell: There's people in the sex work industry who are like, "we want that." We want her to be known as that, because it puts us in the narrative. And then there are those who are like, but that's not actually who she was, it's being put on her. And I actually have a both and response. I think both are really important. I think. Having her as a sex worker can help put sex workers into the narrative. And it has to be something that's talked about. And we can't just be shoved under the rug, pushed in the back. And no one has to talk about us or know that we exist. And I also don't think it's OK to just put it on someone if that wasn't their story, and especially if it's to vilify them. Right. It's one thing to be - to be a sex worker. It's one thing to say she's a sex worker who's repented from her ways when her way is pure and true and. That is her expression, so why does she have to repent from it? So I'm a fan of both. I think it highlights sex workers if that is going to be the narrative, but let's just make it more nuanced.

June: I love all the nuance, actually. You know, I think one of the really fascinating things about Mary Magdalene's story is how it keeps evolving, especially when you consider that it's based on a couple of nearly 2,000 year old texts.

Anne: Exactly. Remember that discovery we opened the episode with? The one that inspired Diana Butler Bass to write her barn-burner of a sermon? As we mentioned, it outlines a revelation made by scholar Elizabeth Schrader-Polzer, who became interested in Mary Magdalene in a very unique way.

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: Yeah, that's a funny story, so I was a singer songwriter for a long time - writing, I would say, sort of pop-rock music, definitely not Christian music in any way. And I sort of randomly wrote a song about Mary Magdalene that also surprised me.

Recording of Elizabeth Schrader Polczer singing her song "Magdalene": I went to the garden of the Holy Virgin, Mary most pure conceived without sin. I was down on my knees with the dirt on my skin and I asked for the blessing of the Magdalene.

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: I said, why is there a song about a Christian saint? And I released it in 2011 on a record that I called Magdalene, and I said to myself, you know, I can't go releasing records called Magdalene without knowing something about Mary Magdalene. I had grown up in the Episcopal church and, so, you know, I just had sort of a lay person's understanding of Mary Magdalene. I didn't have any particular interest in her. The song was sort of a result - I had sort of recently become interested in the Virgin Mary, and someone had taught me to pray the rosary, and I had been praying in a garden dedicated to the Virgin Mary. And I don't usually hear answers to prayers, you know, it's usually just feelings, but I had been praying and there was actual words in response that said, "Maybe you should talk to Mary Magdalene about that." Like, what?

June: Oh, wow!

Anne: Yeah, a pretty surreal moment, I think.

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: That was totally unexpected, and that's what caused me to write the song. And then I walked over to the Brooklyn public library - I was living in New York City at the time - and I checked out the [Complete Idiot's Guide to Mary Magdalene](#).

June: I love it. Of course she did. That's where all good theologians get their start.

Anne: There is literally a Complete Idiot's guide to anything.

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: And I just, I thought it was really interesting. I was like wow, this is fun. And somewhere along the way I just got this question in my head which was, you know, what's the oldest copy of the Gospel of John, because that's the one where Mary Magdalene features the most prominently.

Anne: She was curious if anything had been changed in the original text, because the Complete Idiot's Guide had mentioned that commentators had long wondered if Mary Magdalene was the same person as Mary of Bethany. So Elizabeth connected with a professor at the General Theological Seminary in New York, who sent her a link to Papyrus sixty six, which is the oldest copy of the Gospel of John. And she started looking for changes between that text and the translations we currently have. And when she got to the story of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany in Chapter 11...

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: If you look at the website Iohannes dot com, and you look at chapter 11, and papyrus 66 it is just brightly lit up with all of these changes that the scribe is making at the opening of the chapter, and it's really clear that in verse one the name Mary has been changed to Martha. It's just one letter, Maria is changed to Martha, iota to theta in Greek. And then there's also a whole verse that had just one woman named, it's John 11:3, it originally said therefore Mary sent to him saying, Lord behold the one you love is ill. That's – her name is totally scratched out and it's changed to say *hi adelphi*, the sister, is sent. So a woman's name is completely erased and all the verbs are changed from singular to plural.

Anne: Now, Elizabeth believes that in the original text of John's Gospel, Lazarus only had one sister, Mary of Bethany, and that a later scribe created this extra sister, Martha, and then divided Mary's role up between them. Elizabeth argues that if Mary and Martha are just one person, and Mary of Bethany really *is* Mary Magdalene, then that supports this idea that Mary Magdalene is one of the most important, if not *the* most important, of Christ's followers.

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: Who is the first person who identifies Jesus as the Christ? And of course this is a very famous passage in John's gospel, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me will never die, and do you believe this?" And who is Jesus speaking to? Everybody knows that quote but they forget who he's talking to, because the character that he's talking to is a forgettable character. Martha is forgotten, and she's the one who says, yes lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, the one coming into the world.

Anne: Ok, and this is a really important moment because it's the first time someone says that Jesus is the son of God. It's called Christological confession and usually we associate it with the disciple Peter because after he says something similar, Jesus tells him that he's the leader of the disciples and the rock upon which he will build his church. But as Elizabeth mentioned, someone else in the Bible has already recognized Jesus as the Messiah. And if it's not Martha saying that at all but Mary Magdalene...

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: She confesses, Jesus is the Christ, and then she anoints Jesus. Then, if you believe she's Mary Magdalene, she's at the foot of the cross, she is the only person who goes first to the empty tomb, and she gets the first appearance by herself of the risen Jesus and the first apostolic commission. That would make her a central character throughout the entire second half of John's gospel.

Anne: And Elizabeth also believes that the name Magdalene is widely misunderstood. Here's Diana Butler Bass again.

Diana Butler Bass: And so there is a conventional understanding of that, that Mary was from a town called Magdala and lots of people who have visited the Holy Land have been to this town, a town that sits on, I guess, the Sea of Galilee. I've never been there, but I've heard this story over and over again from friends who have been there. And so there were tour guides to take you there and say, "Oh this is where, you know, Mary Magdalene was from, this is the fishing village, and I guess there's even a church there that's named after her. And the problem is, of course, is that that town wasn't called Magdala in the first century, it had a completely different name. And as a matter fact we don't know if there was a town that was even called Magdala, there's a couple of possibilities for it but it doesn't fit with any of the locations that are associated with Mary Magdalene in the text. So the idea she was Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdalene, it just doesn't work historically.

June: So, the idea that Mary Magdalene might not actually be named after the town she's from, well, that's not a new idea. But it's one that Elizabeth is breathing new life into.

Anne: Yes, exactly. In 2021, Elizabeth co-authored a paper with Dr. Joan Taylor, which Diana Butler Bass summarizes really well.

Diana Butler Bass: And so the word Magdala, from what these two women are saying, is actually from the Aramaic word for "tower" and their suggestion - and the article that they wrote together was published in a very prestigious journal - their suggestion is that it should be Mary not of Magdala but instead Mary the Magdala, Mary the Tower, and this would of course mean, you know, Mary's like a lighthouse. And whereas Peter is like the rock of the church, the foundation of the church, Mary becomes the guiding light of the church, the one that is standing on the horizon pointing towards the safe harbour. And so if you put together the manipulation of John chapter eleven and this idea that Mary's name has been misunderstood through history, we get then all of a sudden this picture of this incredible character who the early church held in such high regard that she was considered, in effect, the lighthouse of the church, and that her proclamation of the resurrection, that her announcing of the events of Easter Sunday morning to the disciples, that all of this is much more meaningful than what Christianity has taken under consideration before.

June: Wow. Okay. So, no wonder everybody started sharing Diana's sermon.

Anne: Yeah. And the idea of Magdalene as an honorific really makes sense to me because Jesus is such a nickname guy. Like, he calls Simon "Peter the Rock." He nicknames two of his apostles the "Sons of Thunder." So it would also make sense if he gave Mary a nickname.

June: And that supports the role that Mary has in a number of the non-canonical gospels, which are the accounts that didn't make it into the Bible. She's especially prominent in the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, which, to be clear, wasn't

written by her, but features a lot of her. In these gospels, Mary Magdalene is described as being the follower that's closest to Christ and the one who most clearly understands his message, which is obviously pretty different from the story we get in the New Testament.

Anne: Right. You get pretty much the same story with some variations across the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which are also known as the canonical gospels. But, of course, there wasn't a canon right away.

June: Yeah, there wasn't. In the first couple centuries after Jesus lived, there were a whole bunch of different accounts of his life being used by various Christian communities and some of them contain what we would now consider to be some wildly heretical and just outrageous stuff about Jesus. But then you have these early Christian leaders being like, okay, we really need one text, one story, something that's going to kind of unite all these communities under a common faith. And so there's this centuries-long process of choosing what's gonna go into that document that we now call the New Testament. And of course, all of those men are gonna have some type of agenda surrounding what they want to include and what they want to discard. And if that was true, that one of Jesus' closest followers was a woman, well, chances are they didn't like that very much, because by this point, Church leadership had become very patriarchal.

Anne: Which totally plays into what Elizabeth believes: that Peter the Rock and Mary the Tower were equals, but society wasn't ready for Mary's leadership role at that time. Elizabeth Schrader Polzcer wonders if maybe we're ready now.

Elizabeth Schrader Polzcer: And can we find a way to return back to the origins and say, can we dream up a different way of doing things that maybe isn't so harmful and that makes room for more voices at the table, where we don't have to just be the one person in charge that we can actually share leadership with different sorts of people? That's what I see Mary Magdalene as representing. It's another possibility that might have been what Christianity possibly was intended to be that we couldn't pull off at that time but maybe she gives us an opportunity to return to it now.

June: That would definitely be a radical new direction for Christianity.

Anne: Yeah! And of course it's impossible to know exactly who Mary Magdalene was and if or how her story has been changed. But it's fascinating to think about a version of her where she's Jesus' closest companion, with this expanded role in the gospels and maybe even this intention of having her be an early leader in the church.

June: Well, I just love that we can keep learning, or at least we can keep theorizing, new things about this really old text. And we are so lucky to have people like Elizabeth who are doing this kind of groundbreaking scholarship.

Anne: And it's just so wild to me that it started because she wrote this song, and got curious about Mary Magdalene, and went to the Brooklyn Public Library to check out the complete

idiot's guide to Mary Magdalene. Thanks for listening. This has been *And Also Some Women*. It was researched and written by me, Anne Thériault.

June: With script editing by Kristy Woudstra, and sound production by Michael Brown. Jocelyn Bell is our executive producer, and I'm your host, June Joplin.

Anne: It's a project of Broadview magazine, North America's oldest...

June: And sleekest

Anne: Yes! So sleek... Let me try that again. It's a project of Broadview Magazine, North America's oldest, continuously published magazine.

June: *And Also Some Women* was made possible by a generous gift from Rev. John Perigoe and Rev. Dr. Lillian Perigoe. Lillian Perigoe devoted much of her vocation to advancing feminist theology, and this podcast is inspired by her life's work. For more exceptional content from a progressive Christian perspective, please visit Broadview.org to subscribe to the magazine. And if you'd like to help us create more podcasts like this one, you can find the donate link on our website also. Thanks for listening.