"And Also Some Women" Episode #001: Mary Magdalene (Interview with Diana Butler Bass)

Anne: What was your understanding of Mary Magdalene when you were kind of growing up?

Diana: Certainly when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the main sort of picture of Mary Magdalene that was being drawn by pretty much any church, whether that was Catholic, or Orthodox or Methodist, where I grew up as a United Methodist, or Evangelical, where I eventually kind of landed, was the same. And that is Mary Magdalene was the fallen woman who somehow came into Jesus' orbit - mostly the idea was that Jesus had healed her or forgiven her for her sins, and that out of her sense of gratitude she becomes a follower of Jesus.

And she's around in the story, but I really never thought of her as being particularly important, which is odd because she shows up in all of the resurrection narratives. And so one would think that that would have brought our attention to be a little bit more focused on Mary Magdalene, but she always seemed like a minor character - a woman who just sort of became a disciple and that was basically all we thought about her. Except for the story, of course, about her somehow being a prostitute who is redeemed by Jesus

Anne: You said that when you first met Elizabeth for coffee and she explained her research to you, you had a very visceral reaction to it - in fact, you couldn't stop crying. Why do you think that was?

Diana: You know, as I got older, I certainly didn't have the idea nearly as much as I did when I was young about Mary Magdalene being unimportant, or Mary Magdalene simply known as the redeemed prostitute, you know, those were ideas that I had, those conventional ideas. But as I went to seminary and graduate school, I got much more interested in feminist theology and Mary Magdalene shows up in some of those biblical interpretations, and so I think that by the time I was forty, or forty five, in mid-life, I had come to see Mary Magdalene as a more important character, and certainly had the idea about her being the apostle to the apostles.

Because Mary Magdalen is one of the first witnesses to the resurrection, she's the one who goes back and tells all the guys, "Hey, look, this incredible thing happened," and they don't seem to believe her, which is a pretty interesting narrative for feminist theology to be playing with. Because, you know, who hasn't had that experience where you make a great discovery, or you are the first one to realize something important, and you go back and you tell the guys and then they look at you, like, "What?" You know, "What are you talking about? We've got to go see that for ourselves." So she had taken on a feminist importance to me by mid life.

When Elizabeth and I had coffee together, when we first met face to face - and I was familiar with some of her research just because she's a PhD student at Duke, and I had gone to Duke

years earlier, so I had read about what she was doing in a Duke alumni newsletter. And so I saw it, and I was going, “Wow, this is incredibly interesting,” interesting to me from my training in church history because I realized almost immediately that she was suggesting something that would be a revolutionary re-ordering of how we understood the development of the first couple of centuries of Christianity, so that was that was pretty intense - but, we got together for coffee and she started telling me this whole tale about her discovery, and what led to it, and her own spiritual journey, and how that had shaped her doing this research.

I think that my emotional response came from realizing, in some sense, that I wasn't alone. That I had always thought there was more to this story, but I had no proof or evidence of that, and here was this woman twenty years younger than myself, a great researcher, telling me that there's actual textual, historical, archaeological evidence that something has happened to this story of Mary Magdalene, something that has obscured the power of the story from our view for centuries. And as she was peeling back these layers, that's the part for me that became very emotional. It was like, I always knew there was some truth here about how important this woman was, and what this story meant to all women, and yet I've never been able to move past my intuition on that. And to have, now, this incredible scholar - you know, she's really becoming a world class scholar in this field - to have her be able to say, “This is, true it is not just intuition.” That was the piece that just made my heart stop, and I was so grateful to her.

It was that sense, I think, of gratitude that might have been the thing that unleashed the tears. I guess, you know, it was like getting a gift that I always wanted, but never understood how much I needed. And then when she handed me that gift of interpretation, of opening that text up differently, that is really what transformed the moment for me spiritually. I've never thought about Mary Magdalene in the same way since we had that initial coffee together, several years ago now.

Anne: I feel like the moment I became radicalized on Mary Magdalene was when I was reading Jane Schaberg's book on her, and she called her the madwoman in Christianity's attic. I was like, what does that mean?

Diana: Yeah, that idea of her being the madwoman in Christianity's attic, it's a little bit like the story of Jane Eyre. You know, it's like, there's this major figure that's locked up in the attic, and you don't even know she's there until the whole house burns down. And so, to take that image of the madwoman in the attic, and to think about it in terms of literature, especially literature that's been a sort of a meaningful literature in the writing of women, is really powerful. It makes you wonder if that isn't the intention of Jane Eyre, is to make us think of those kinds of characters that we lock away. You know, she's important! She's the whole motivating reason for the story! But because she's been isolated, and cut off from our view, we can't see the whole picture. And so, of course, then the house has to burn down in order for the story to be corrected, and for us to finally see the truth that was hidden from view.

Now, I know that Elizabeth has no intention of burning down the Christian house. I think she wants to make sure the doors are open before the fire starts, so that we can really just get that

fuller picture and then we can adjudicate the history differently. She's a very gentle interpreter of her own data. She loves this discovery, because she thinks it will keep the house from being burned down. I think it's a little bit up for grabs as to what's going to happen as a result of all of this, but I know that her intention is not destruction or disruption - it's really to restore what has been lost.

Anne: Can you tell me about the Wild Goose Festival, and what happened there when you preached your sermon about Mary Magdalene?

Diana: The Wild Goose festival is a lot like the Green Belt Festival in England, and that is that it's a summer festival of arts, and justice, and spirituality, and theology, and preaching, and music. 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.

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 and let them have something that they can sort of hold on to as they leave.

It's a very hard group to preach to, because probably about two thirds of the people grew up in Evangelicalism, and that means they have heard thousands of sermons and they know the Bible inside and out. And since they're mostly ex- or post-Evangelicals, they are really skeptical about the Bible, and they do not know how much of all this they want to hold on to.

So I was sitting in my hotel room literally two days before this task that I was facing, and I was thinking, "How in the world do I preach to these folks?" And I realized I wanted to preach something that would remind them how important the Bible actually is. That is, in getting rid of so much of the baggage of Evangelicalism, I didn't really want them to throw the Bible away. So I had a couple of different ideas and then I remembered Elizabeth's research on Mary Magdalene.

I thought, that's what I want to tell them about. I want to tell them about how the Bible isn't really what they think it is, and that there are more ways to approach scripture, and some of this biblical research right now is at a really astonishing place. I think that we have more tools and more capabilities in terms of doing biblical research because of archeology, because of history, because of literary techniques and discoveries, but most of all because of the internet having all

of this stuff, all these texts digitized and available to scholars across the world. We can put so many new eyes on things that we thought we knew and that's basically the story of Elizabeth and this Mary Magdalene research.

These texts that she's working from, they've been available since 1952, we've known that they existed, but very few people had looked at them, and I don't know that any other female scholar had ever looked at them, and so here's this young female scholar who is able to finally see this stuff online and when she looks at the text she sees something that hasn't been seen before by the much more conventional male scholars who came before her. And so that, to me, it's very exciting, and I wanted to lift that up, to point toward - don't give up, don't give up on scripture because there's more there than our ancestors told us about.

And so that was the intention of the sermon was to encourage this particular audience to keep with a part of Christianity that's really central to Christian identity, even though they were moving away from being Christians in significant other aspects. So that wound into the fact that the theme for the Wild Goose Festival this year was *Imagine*. And so when people had driven their cars into the campground where the festival was, there were all these signs, like, “Imagine a New World,” “Imagine Justice,” “Imagine Beauty,” “Imagine Real Acceptance.” So there were all these signs about imagine, and what I asked them to do was imagine what Christianity would have been like for the last two thousand years if this story hadn't been obscured from our view.

There was this audible gasp across the whole of the auditorium. There were probably about a thousand people left for that final morning, and I could hear there were a couple of people crying in the 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: imagining a kind of christianity that included women like that. Imagining a kind of Christianity that wasn't based just on, as Elizabeth’s works says, Peter the Rock, but also Mary the Tower. Imagining if women had been allowed to stand tall, and speak their voices, and be witnesses for these last two thousand years. Imagining what that Christianity would be like. And that's what people were hungry to hear.

Anne: Can you speak a bit more about that name The Tower, and how it changes the way we understand Mary Magdalen?

Diana: In many ways, I think the important part of Elizabeth’s research is connecting several different aspects of it. And so she has this amazing textual research about John chapter eleven and whether or not Mary Magdalene is the figure who is the sister of Lazarus, the fellow who Jesus raises from the dead. And so her argument, of course, is that there is only one sister, Maria, and that one sister is Mary Magdalene. And so that re-orders how we think about these characters in the Bible.

I certainly had never thought about the possibility that Mary Magdalene was the sister of Lazarus. And so that's what her basic research is about, looking at those texts to figure out if that's true, and what happened to the text along the way so that that piece of historical

information gets diluted, or sort of muted in translation. But it connects with several other pieces of Mary Magdalene's story, and the other piece is a bit more of a church history problem.

And so she's been working with a church historian who lives in London about the actual name Mary Magdalene, and where does that come from. 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 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 the tour guides to take you there and says, "Oh, this is where Mary Magdalene was from, this is the fishing village." And I guess there's even a church there that's named after her.

The problem is, of course, that that town wasn't called Magdala in the first century. It had completely a different name, and, as a matter fact, we don't know if there was a town that was even called Magdala. There are 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 that she was Mary of Magdala, it just doesn't work historically.

And so Elizabeth and - I think the other scholar's name is Joan Taylor, I could have that wrong, just because I don't know the other scholar personally - but they have been looking at early Christian texts and maps and all the kinds of stuff that historians look at, and they have come up with this idea that Magdala is what is called an honorific, and that is, it's not a place but it's a term that is applied to a character in the Bible. This also happens in history regularly - Peter the Great, Richard the Lionhearted - that's the kind of thing that an honorific is. So in the Bible, we do have several honorifics: we have Peter the Rock, we have James and John, the Sons of Thunder, we have Thomas the Doubter. So there are these different characters who are known by something they do or some object they become associated with that portrays their power and their purpose in the story.

And 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 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 harbor.

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 all of the sudden this picture of this incredible character who the early church held in such high regard that she was considered to be the lighthouse of the church. And then her proclamation of the resurrection, her announcing of the events of Easter Sunday morning to the disciples, that all becomes much more meaningful than what Christianity has taken under consideration before.

Anne: What does it mean to you that we can still be making these discoveries about the

gospels so many years later?

Diana: I was actually trained as a church historian, and so one of the things that is true from the perspective of my training is that history is about a set of facts: there are people who lived and died, there are certain events that happened, there's a timeline of events that we can track through chronologies. Those things occurred, and are a sort of unchangeable set of characters, and events, and times, and places, et cetera.

Now, we are often discovering new things about those kinds of facts, new things do come to light, stuff that has been missed, or things that just had been ignored for whatever reason, or journals are found, or new discoveries are made in terms of archeology. All of that can have an impact on how we understand history. But there's another part of history as well, and that is the idea of interpreting all of that data. And when we come to that data in every new generation, we come with a different set of experiences, and a different set of questions, because we change through time.

The simple thing in the Mary Magdalene story is that up until the last two generations, there were very, very, very, very few women who did biblical studies, or theology, or church history. And so when the events of history, when the events of bible, were explored, they were explored through mostly the experiences of these elite white men teaching in very significant universities, you know, Oxford, and Harvard, and stuff like that. And so people from that class, and people from who are just now one gender, and people who have basically the same set of training, when they come to the unchangeable kinds of facts of history, they're going to see things through those lenses.

And in the last two generations, we have so many more people with different experiences from different classes, from different parts of the world, with different kinds of education now looking at the text. And that means the interpretations are really beginning to be very radically questioned.

As a historian, I always tell people that there's part of history that never changes, and there's part of history that is never the same. And to me that's a really significant part of what's happening here with Mary Magdalene, that the only people who looked at this story before were largely elite men, mostly from the western Christian tradition, who had particular ideas about the role of women in church, and in society, and they saw the story of Mary Magdalene through those lenses, and through those prejudices, and through those biases. And now that's part of what is being questioned, and really being undone.

So it's not about destroying the Bible, or it's not about saying that there's no Peter, for example, or that Mary is more important than Peter. Some people might come to that conclusion, and that will be something that will be argued about, I think, going from this point forward. But the real issue here is that now Mary is being added to the story, and so the story itself is going to change from this moment into the future. And so that is the way that both what we know sort of stays important, and it is also allowing for the creativity and the experience of every new

generation of people to add their voice, their insight, and their wisdom to a very ancient school.

So for me that's what is sort of the heartbeat of history, is to take something that is inherited and to then ask the question, “Well what does all this mean now, through the experience of this wider table of people looking at this material?” And also just a whole different sort of historical, social, economic set of questions that we’re struggling with in our world, and we'll add our voices to that process. And twenty, thirty, forty years from now somebody else will do the same thing. And that's that's how we build this story out, and that's why I don't want people to think that they necessarily have to throw everything away. Because history in and of itself holds the possibility for reinterpretation and readjustment. And that becomes, for me, part of the excitement and the creativity of being a historian.

Anne: How do you hope Elizabeth’s discovery might shape Christianity in the years to come? In the centuries to come?

Diana: Well, my sort of immediate dream for how this Mary Magdalene story will change how we tell the story of the New Testament, and how it might set up new questions as we move ahead, is not so much that Mary the Tower is going to cast out Peter the Rock - although there are times, I have to confess, when I wish that Peter would just cool it, since we've heard a lot of Christianity shaped around the idea of Peter the Rock of the Church for the last 2,000 years, and it really is more than past time that we got a new perspective on it, so I'm really glad that we're getting this this possibility of this corrective figure to come in and say, “Well what does Mary the Tower say to this?” And so that makes me very excited.

And I think that's going to be the short term discussion: what do these two figures, Peter the Rock and Mary the Tower, have to say about the shape that emerges of these early Christian communities? And what does it mean? Because clearly there was a fight during the first couple of centuries of Christianity between these different traditions. We have evidence of that fight not just in what Elizabeth is researching, but we also have it in other texts. We have it in some gnostic gospels, where there's literally a gnostic gospel where Peter and Mary actually have a fight.

And so that means that the early Church was well aware of these tensions, and that somewhere along the line the Mary part of the argument was excluded and lost. So we're restoring that now. And that's what I think is going to be very exciting coming out of this research, is the reinvigoration of that argument. And so how that argument unfolds will then set some trajectories for the future that we can't even begin to imagine at this point. But right now, having that argument that was buried probably sometime in the second century, maybe as late as the third century, having that put back on the table, and saying, “Look, we never completed this, and we're going to have at it now, and we're going to come to some sort of better conclusion than the one that the church came to seventeen or eighteen hundred years ago, which was the exclusion of Mary.”

I don't think that women and Christianity are going to put up with that, if that's the conclusion of

the new argument. I think we're going to make a big noisy pitch on behalf of Mary to say that we're giving this apostle her due, and we're not going to have any more of this nonsense that there were no women apostles. Even Pope Francis in the last couple of years has come out and said that Mary is a much more important figure than any of his predecessors said. And he's insisted that the church start referring to her as the apostle to the apostles. So if the Catholic Church, one of the most patriarchal institutions on the whole of the planet, are saying, “Hey, this has got to change,” then certainly protestantism has a lot more ability to be able to change.

Then there are other communities, Pentecostal communities, and other kinds of expressions of Christianity, that have all been seen as sectarian, or they were excluded because they were not considered to be proper enough, or institutional enough, or orthodox enough, they might have some new voice in this argument that is really necessary for the future of Christianity.

So I am very committed to the idea that the Christian future is both a future that is more colourful, it is going to include people from every sort of corner of the globe, but it's also female. If Christianity survives as a global religion, it's going to have to be both a rainbow, and it's going to have to be male and female. And that's going to bring up a lot of really interesting questions that our trans friends are actually bringing up about the dualism of gender. And boy, I can't wait. It's going to be an amazing argument going forward, and I think that we're in for some exciting moments of change.

I think that moment of magic that gripped the audience at Wild Goose, and the words “Imagine a christianity that isn't just about Peter the Rock, but imagine this different kind of Christianity” - oh my gosh, that's what will save Christianity in the future. That moment of inviting the people of God into a new imagination about the stories, about where they fit in the stories, and how the stories can carry us to a place of new expressions of justice, a deeper expression of human solidarity.

And the kind of future that Jesus imagined as the beloved community, as the blessed society, as a place where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male nor female, for all people are one - Paul said that, not Jesus, but the early Christian community was saying that upon the death of Jesus, and that is considered to be probably one of the first ever baptismal creeds. So the first people baptized into the name of Jesus saw it as an act of solidarity that broke down the boundaries between male and female. And that's what I think is happening with the introduction of Mary the Tower into this story. It remembers the earliest Christian community, which was very, very, very inclusive and very based around the oneness of humankind

Anne: Do you think this new understanding of Mary is something that we could have arrived at before? Or do you think there’s something unique about this moment in history that allows us to be ready to hear this?

Diana: 300 years ago, 400 years ago, what have you, say at the time of the Protestant Reformation, that was a time of enormous change in Western Christianity. Society was still too wedded to the great chain of being, the idea that men were of more value than women, and I

think what would have happened if this had all been discovered then, it would simply have been buried again in the same way, probably, as it was in the third century or what have you.

So the place of women in the world has really changed, and we're fighting about that all over the world, but one of the things that's fascinating about the fight is that women are leading it. We're not laying down on the job here, and we are much noisier and far more powerful than we ever used to be. There are ways in which certain kinds of things happen in a culture when it's very difficult to go back, even allowing for the Handmaid's Tale and the wonderful work of Margaret Atwood. That's the kind of frightening tale that inspires women to keep pressing ahead.

So I think that just because of where women are in global history, and our concerns and our voices and how much better educated so many of us are, I think it's gonna be very hard for this argument to be ignored going forward. So this is a moment of real possible change, and we have at our fingertips tools that people in the last centuries just didn't have for making changes like this

Anne: What was your experience of having your sermon go viral? Has anything like that ever happened to you before?

Diana: I've gone viral on a couple of different things over the years. Fascinatingly enough, almost every viral tweet I have ever had is about women. There was one a few years ago with Greta Thunberg, when people were saying, "Oh, she's so young," and I came up with his little tweet thread where I listed all of these women in history who had done amazing things before they were thirty. That little thread went viral, and caused all kinds of havoc in my life for about a month, actually. So there have been other things I have put out in the world that have gotten quite a lot of eyes on them.

But this was remarkable because it was a sermon, and it was a forty minute sermon, so people have to actually listen to it for a really long time. The story about how it went viral surprised me, because on the day that it was preached, I simply put my phone on the pulpit, and I do that because I have this newsletter on substack called The Cottage, and this past summer it would have had about 20,000 subscribers - it has a lot more now - and what i love to do for my subscribers is to take my sermons and then I just download them onto the podcast app on substack, and I send it out. So that's exactly what happened with this sermon. I preached the sermon, it had a great reaction in the auditorium, and then that was the last thing at Wild Goose.

So my husband and I went and got in our car, I played with my phone, I downloaded the sermon, I sent it out on substack. We were driving home from North Carolina to Washington DC, and whenever I had the ability to look on the phone - because there were some places along the way where there black holes - I would look in and see what was happening. And all of a 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 camp, it had been shared well over 10,000 times. And I said wow, you know, I don't think I've ever preached a sermon that's been shared 10,000 times.

It just didn't stop. Within the first week it was shared over 200,000 times, and that's only the stuff I can see from my substack. And poor Elizabeth, she just started all of a sudden getting all these emails through her website, and I was getting just tons of stuff. I could not keep up with it. We were both getting, you know, hooked into twitter threads, and before we knew it people in Sweden, and all across Western Europe, in England, Germany, were all talking about it. We saw people from Australia and New Zealand talking about it. I literally have no idea how far that sermon went. I got notes from every continent except for Africa about that sermon, and I know that Elizabeth did too. There were some people who were angry about it, and there was a lot of tension about it. Elizabeth and I just sort of, you know, kept on.

I'm fond of reminding people that a sermon is not the research, a sermon is a preacher taking research and shaping it into a contextual presentation, into a contextual story, that will speak to the heart of the people who she's preaching to. So that's exactly what this was, and I think for me, the biggest surprise was not so much the power of Elizabeth's research, because i think her research is very powerful, but there was some way that the feelings of the people in that auditorium, and their hopes and longings for a different kind of Christianity, meshed with a lot of other people across the world. It was the combination of Elizabeth's amazing research, and, I think, the hearts of so many folks who want the Christian story to be true in different and more meaningful and more life-giving ways, that somehow combined and created what has not just become a viral moment, but it continues to be to be shared widely.

I have gone nowhere since I've preached that sermon where people haven't asked me about Mary Magdalene, and it's astonishing to me. It's like, I was trained in nineteenth century American religious history, and I write a lot about trends for the future of faith, and here I am standing in a room full of pastors or at a retreat and people are asking me to explain to them the textual evidence of john chapter eleven for Mary Magdalene. It's like, okay, well, hey, I'm in my early sixties, and I have learned so much about textual criticism, and I have one of the best teachers ever. Elizabeth has taught me an enormous amount about how she works in her field, and for me to be able to learn that and to be able to share the passion that has that led her to this place with, obviously, a waiting world that has been looking forward to hearing a better story about Mary Magdalene, and, I think, a better story about the Bible and and the Christian tradition - it's been magic.