

"And Also Some Women" Episode #001: Mary Magdalene (Interview with Elizabeth Schrader Polczer)

Elizabeth: Hi, my name is Elizabeth Schrader Polczer, and I'm a PhD candidate in Early Christianity and New Testament at Duke University

Anne: Can tell me a little bit about how your career as a musician led you into becoming Mary Magdalene scholar?

Elizabeth: 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.

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?

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. And I just 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 what's the oldest copy of the Gospel of John, because that's the one where Mary Magdalene features the most prominently.

I wondered what it said about Mary Magdalene and if anything had been changed, because I had read from the Complete Idiot's Guide that she was very controversial. So I was like, okay, I want to look at that oldest copy. And honestly, now that I am in academia, that's a pretty presumptuous thought for a lay person to have, because there are extremely intelligent, highly respectable academics who devote their entire lives to looking at every pen stroke of the ancient papyri of these manuscripts.

I found out, though, that the oldest manuscript in the world of the Gospel of John is Papyrus 66. There's a little fragment that's slightly older, Papyrus 52, that just has a couple of verses, but the oldest codex of the Gospel of John is Papyrus 66, and that's usually dated to about 200 AD. And so I said, okay, well what does that one say? And I was trying to look at it, and I couldn't find it anywhere on the internet, so through a friend of my hometown parish priest I was able to

get in touch with Professor Deirdre Good at the General Theological Seminary in Manhattan. That was my denomination - the Episcopal Church - and she studied the Marys, so that was lucky, and also, I could just take the train to meet her.

I met her for coffee, and she was able to send me a link to a transcription of Papyrus 66, and it was all in Greek, and I was like, what? Hasn't anybody translated this? You know, come on, I can't read Greek. I don't know why, but I really wanted to know what the manuscript said. So I basically opened three internet windows - one to the text of the Bible, one to an interlinear study Bible, and one to this Greek text of Papyrus 66. And I looked, of course, in John 19, the scene of the cross, and John 20, and they both said in Papyrus 66 basically what they're supposed to say - the Greek was not too different from what the interlinear Bible said.

But I had read from my Complete Idiot's Guide that some people have always wondered whether Lazarus's sister Mary - Mary of Bethany - was Mary Magdalene, and in church tradition she's often thought to be Mary Magdalen. It turns out commentators as far back as the third century have thought that Mary Magdalene was Mary of Bethany. So, well, let's just go at that chapter too, just to double check. So if you look at the website lohannes.com, and you look at chapter eleven, 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 eleven verse three, 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.

And then there are some other changes that, as I got better at Greek, anyway, caused me to actually enter a Master's program, because I found out that nobody had really done much about it. I said, what have the scholars done about these changes? And I walked back over to the Brooklyn Public Library, and I asked on interlibrary loan if I could get any scholarly articles about what people have said about Papyrus 66.

And in the 1960s - because the papyrus was discovered in the 1950s, and published in 1958, and commented about in the 1960s - you get these really eminent text critics, including Gordon Fee, who just passed away, Gordon Fee said, "Oh, this change where the woman is split in two, and it was Mary, and then it became the sisters, that's the most interesting change in the whole manuscript."

Okay? And then what did they do? What did the scholars do? That was basically the end of the scholarship on it in the 1960s. And I said, why hasn't anybody done anything about this? You know, people have always wondered if Lazarus's sister Mary was Mary Magdalene, and this discovery was like sixty years previous, and nobody had pursued that. And I was like, well, I've got to go write about that. And so I basically entered a Master's program for that purpose, and Dr. Good became my Master's thesis supervisor, and over the course of my Master's thesis.

I ended up looking not just at that manuscript, but at over a hundred manuscripts of the Gospel of John, and it's happening all throughout the text transmission - you can see Marys change to Marthas, you can see singular verbs where you'd expect plural verbs, you can see Mary doing things in some manuscripts that you would expect Martha to do, like serving the supper in John chapter twelve.

You also see some church fathers saying weird things, like saying Mary did things that you expect Martha to do. The most important of these is that Tertullian, who wrote at the beginning of the third century, Tertullian says that Mary gave the christological confession, which is, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." And this is all really important!

It was like a treasure hunt, I just kept digging and kept finding things. It was like, oh, I'm going to the library again, what am I going to find today? And you can actually reconstruct a really sizeable chunk of the text of John 11 with just Lazarus and Mary as the Bethany siblings using real manuscripts, so that's not that's not a conjecture, that's called an eclectic text when you have real readings, and real manuscripts, and you sort of cobble them together, and then you get an alternate version of the story where Lazarus has only one sister.

So I said, okay, well, I think I found a problem in the Gospel of John, I think I should maybe submit this for publication. I very ambitiously thought, like, oh, I want this to go somewhere important, so I submitted it to the Harvard Theological Review. I was just a Master's student, my advisor said, you know, you should maybe write to them and tell them that you're just a Master's student and you don't want to be presumptuous, but is it okay? And they wrote back and said, well, as long as it's within the word limit, it's fine. It turns out that it got through the review process and it was published, so my Master's thesis was published in the Harvard Theological Review, it was called Was Martha of Bethany Added to the Fourth Gospel in the Second Century?

And then everybody said, where are you going to do your PhD? I was like, what are you talking about? I'm a singer-songwriter, I just wanted people to know that there was something funny going on in Papyrus 66. But it turns out that the world had other plans, or perhaps the Marys had other plans, and so then I enrolled in a PhD program, first at Boston University with Jennifer Knust, and then Jennifer Knust got hired by Duke, and she brought me with her. And I'm now here at Duke writing my dissertation, and she'll be my dissertation supervisor. And so, now I'm like a text critic. I was a singer-songwriter, and now I'm a text critic, so life is very surprising.

Anne: That's wild! It's like a real-life Dan Brown story.

Elizabeth: Well, hopefully not too much like Dan Brown. I mean, hopefully nobody is going to come chasing me down and trying to kill me or anything. But it's definitely been wild! Like, I'm this singer-songwriter in Brooklyn reading a book about Mary Magdalene, and then suddenly I'm talking with some of the world's best text critics about the Gospel of John. I find it very strange, but I'm glad to tell people about it. My goal was: people need to know about this Mary being

crossed out twice in the world's oldest copy of the Gospel of John, and I'm thankful to you and to Broadview for helping get the word out about that.

Anne: It's very exciting for us to talk to you! Something I'm curious about, having read about your work, is what you think is the possibility that there are other women in the New Testament who have had their stories diminished or altered in a similar way?

Elizabeth: Yeah that's a great question. I'm so interested in this question, and now I'm fervently looking up all of these places in the New Testament where there's textual variation regarding women's names, and there are actually a lot of places.

One of the bigger ones is that some of the earliest copies of Luke chapter one have Elizabeth singing the Magnificat rather than Mary, and that's really important, because, of course, Elizabeth is the one who was barren and who is given a son. And also a lot of people think that there's reference to the Song of Hannah from 1 Samuel chapter two, and Hannah was barren and Elizabeth was barren, so it kind of makes sense that maybe Elizabeth would sing the Magnificat. Also, Luke might want to pair the hymn-singer with her husband, Zachariah, who also sings a hymn, just as Simeon and Anna are paired. So there's good reason to think that, oh, maybe Luke did want Elizabeth to be the singer of the Magnificat.

I'm not the person who's discovered this, this has been talked about in scholarship for quite a while. Adolf von Harnack had a whole theory that originally Luke just wrote "and she said," and there was no name, and then later copyists supplied either Elizabeth or Mary. So that's a big one that has huge consequences certainly in liturgy, and also for just understanding what the Magnificat is trying to do. When it says about the lowliness of His handmaiden, is that Elizabeth or is it Mary? And, you know, there was nothing that Mary had to be ashamed of at the time of the Magnificat, she was just a betrothed virgin, whereas Elizabeth did have her barrenness that she could be ashamed of. So that just creates a different interpretation of the story.

I also just submitted an article for publication about how sometimes Salome is not there in some early copies of Mark chapter sixteen. So, Salome is at the cross in Mark's gospel, but in two of our oldest manuscripts of Mark sixteen it's just Mary Magdalene and a second woman named Mary who are at the entombment, and then they go to the empty tomb with spices. Salome is not actually there in the story in Codex Bezae, which is probably late fourth century, and Codex Bezae, from 400 CE, so in that article I am arguing that there are so many controversies raging around these women.

Also the question of whether Mary of James is the same person as Mary of Joseph, is it Mary the mother of James and Joseph? Is that the same person as Mary of James and Mary of Joseph? Are they all three different ladies, or two different ladies, all mixed up in the text transmission? And so I'm basically arguing that it's all these questions going on about whether Jesus' mother had other sons, James and Joseph, like in Mark 6 he has those brothers. That could totally affect the copying of the text. There might be some controversy around Salome, some early church fathers were commenting about how Salome was sort of a leader of maybe

some gnostic sects, and was she controversial. Or maybe she just wasn't very famous, and so they just didn't copy her name.

So the question you're asking is exactly what I'm interested in: how possible controversies around the women, not just Mary Magdalen, but maybe Mary the Mother of Jesus, maybe Salome, have affected the way that the scriptures were copied, and how the received text that you assume is pure text often masks nodes of textual instability in the manuscripts' selves, and sometimes whatever the author wrote cannot be confidently recovered. Sometimes we can't be certain what the author wrote, and in those cases I'm interested in multiple strands of interpretation. You can interpret multiple versions of the stories. That's what I'm writing about for my dissertation, I find that really interesting.

Anne: What do you think was the motivating force for early church fathers or writers to be making those changes, particularly for Mary Magdalene?

Elizabeth: Well, it's not as though the women are the only thing that things are getting changed. I mean, certainly modern women like me are very interested in textual variations around the women, but there are textual changes happening at all stages of the text transmission. I mean, there's textual multiplicity all over the place, it was a pretty common practice to change stories from the moment they began to be copied.

For those of you who know that Matthew and Luke had access to Mark's gospel, and they probably used it as a source text, but they changed it. They changed it to write slightly different versions of their stories, and this can be shown in hundreds of examples. So it's not actually just the women. I would say it's an overall tendency of story changing that happened in antiquity that was considered maybe not totally kosher, but people did it nevertheless, it was fairly commonplace.

I could give lots of examples that have nothing to do with women and gender, like some manuscript of Matthew 3, there's a light that flashes on the Jordan when Jesus gets baptized, and Justin Martyr, who's writing in the second century, he knows about that flash of light on the Jordan, and he writes about, "Oh, the apostles wrote that there was a flash of light on the Jordan as Jesus got baptized, where did that come from?" I don't think it's necessarily about any sort of controversy, it might just be that some people added this interesting detail, and so they just wanted to make the story more lively. Or maybe somebody didn't like it and they took it out. It's impossible to know, because as far back as the record can be traced you have multiple versions of the story, so different text critics make different arguments either way.

Sometimes there's controversy, I think that in the case of Mary Magdalene you can argue that she's a controversial character, and I have argued in multiple articles that it's something about her status, perhaps a leader, that was being debated, and that causes the text of John to get edited. And a really clear example that I give of that is in John chapter twenty, there's an article I co-wrote with Dr Brandon Simonson of Boston University that came out last year called 'Rabbouni', Which Means Lord: Narrative Variants in John 20:16, and anybody can read it,

though it's really dense and boring text-critical study.

But there's a lot of interesting information about how the oldest manuscripts are split on what happens in John 20:16, usually when Jesus says, "Mary," and she says, "Rabbouni" - you think, "Rabbouni, which means teacher" - and then he says, "Don't touch me." But there are actually four different versions of what happens. In some of the oldest manuscripts, Jesus says, Mary, she says, "Rabbouni, which means Lord." And that matters, because for people who study the Gospel of John, a lot of people notice that they are sort of ascending christological titles as over the course of the gospel - it starts out Rabbi, which means teacher, in John 1, and it sort of finishes with Thomas's declaration, "My Lord and my God."

And as the gospel goes on, they get higher and higher and higher. Higher christological titles for higher levels of insight about who Jesus is. So if Mary Magdalene calls Jesus teacher, which is the same thing that Jesus is called in John chapter one, you can argue she's not very smart, she didn't have a very good insight about who the risen Lord was, and, in fact church fathers like Eusebius and Jerome say exactly that. They say she wasn't very smart, she didn't know who he was, the faith of the apostles is much greater than hers. Meanwhile, other manuscripts say Lord, and people like Augustine know that, and he says, "Oh, when she sees him, she calls him the Lord, and she sees who he really is. Romanus the Melodist says the same thing, he's like, "Oh, she sees who he really is, my Lord."

And so you can actually see that there's this question about Mary's authority and her level of insight depending upon how that word is translated. And there's multiplicity in the manuscripts - some other manuscripts also add this extra piece where she runs to touch Jesus, which just makes it a different story, because then maybe she's the one who touches Jesus first in John 20. Or is Thomas the first to touch the risen Jesus? It depends on the manuscript, and so I've argued that all of these changes are because the oldest copies that we have, they're being copied at the same time as texts like the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, the Pistis Sophia, and the Gospel of Philip are also circulating, which all shows that there was some sort of controversy around Mary and her authority early Christianity.

And I think we would be naive not to think that these debates that are happening - independently attested in the Gospel of Thomas, which is a totally different codex than the Gospel of Mary, which is a totally different codex than the Pistis Sophia, these are all different and copied in different centuries - so you can see that for centuries, and in different communities, there's some awareness that Mary's authority causes consternation or anxiety from people like Peter, or Andrew, or the other disciples there. Like, why does [it say in the Gospel of Mary Magdalene] that [Christ] love[d] her more than us? And as you've written about so beautifully in your peace on Mary Magdalene, [in the Gospel of Philip] Jesus says that when someone who's blinded and someone who sees are both in the darkness, there's no difference, but when the light comes, then the person who can see actually sees, whereas the blind can't see. So Jesus is kind of dissing the disciples there, right? That's in the Gospel of Philip, and so you can see that there is some sort of debate happening in certain communities about whether Mary Magdalene has more insight, or about her closeness to Jesus, or whether he should be

talking with a woman about these sorts of things.

I think we have to acknowledge that the job of text critics is to understand the debates that were happening in Christianity at the time that these manuscripts were copied. And because there's so much variation in John 20:16, you can absolutely argue that that question about Mary's authority, especially when you place it next to people like Jerome, who is saying, "Oh, the faith of the apostles is much greater than hers, she never said Lord, she said teacher" - that those kinds of debates are affecting the outcome of how the manuscripts are being copied. So I think I've shown that pretty clearly with Dr Simonson in our article on Rabbouni, but then in John 11, that's a whole other game, because we were wondering if Mary of Bethany is Mary Magdalene. And so that's a whole other conversation.

Anne: What was your understanding of Mary Magdalene before you started your academic career, and how has that evolved throughout all the work that you've been doing?

Elizabeth: Well, let's see, before I did my academic work I just grew up in the Episcopal Church. I went to church, you know, I had heard that some people thought Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, but some people thought that she was a really important leader. In the Episcopal Church, we do read out the story of John 20 on Easter. It changes each year, depending upon which lectionary year we're reading, but I had heard the story of Jesus appearing just to Mary Magdalene in the garden, so I knew she was very important.

I didn't care much one way or the other. Like so many people, I had read The Da Vinci Code, but it didn't grip me. I wasn't particularly interested in it. I think I read it years before I wrote that song, and I read it once, and didn't turn back to it. I didn't have strong feelings about it one way or the other.

I always say that Mary Magdalene hijacked my life, because it doesn't really feel like I chose this, it sort of feels like it chose me. I wasn't particularly interested in her - I was more interested, I would say, in the Virgin Mary. I had just been starting to become interested in the Virgin Mary in the year leading up to my writing that song, but now that I study Mary Magdalene, I think I am really interested in who controls the story.

First of all, gospel writers all differ in their presentations of her, each presentation is different, and that's interesting to me because sometimes Matthew copies what Mark said exactly, sometimes Luke copies what Mark said exactly, and sometimes they change it. And when it comes to the story of Mary Magdalene, there are huge changes in the narrative, which indicates to me that there might have been something about her that causes anxiety.

I'm interested, actually, in this idea that the text warps whenever she enters the scene, whether that be from gospel to gospel - the different crucifixion scenes where Luke doesn't even name the women at the crucifixion, or the empty tomb scenes where John just has Mary Magdalene, but then there's Mary Magdalene and the other Mary in Matthew, and then Luke, again, doesn't name the women until they deliver the message to the men, and then you find out what their

names are after the message has and delivered to the men. And, of course, the women around Mary Magdalene are always changing - is it Salome, is it Mary of James, is it the mother of the Sons of Zebedee, is it Joanna? It's always changing.

I'm interested in how the text from gospel to gospel changes when she's present, but I'm also interested in how it changes from manuscript to manuscript of the gospel, that something about her presence causes the text itself to warp. And that's actually a thesis that I would love to develop further. I am also interested in the possibility that Mary of Bethany, at least in John's gospel, is Mary Magdalene, and you can see that the text also is warping there. And considering all the other textual problems in the other places in that gospel, to me that strengthens the possibility that Lazarus's sister Mary is Mary Magdalene, because something about her presence is causing this sort of mode of textual instability in the manuscript, so that different manuscripts have different versions of the story. And that, to me, is what's so fascinating about it.

I think that there's something about her that's sort of like a lightning rod that's causing so much anxiety. That each telling - whether it be a different gospel, or a different manuscript, or gospels that didn't make it into the Bible - is telling you something different. That, to me, is what's most interesting about Mary Magdalene.

Anne: What is the significance for you of Mary being changed to Martha?

Elizabeth: Well, I first want to start by saying that Martha definitely belongs in the Bible. She's there in Luke chapter ten no matter what, the story of Martha and Mary, and Martha's cooking, and Mary's sitting at Jesus's feet - that's not going anywhere, that story is absolutely part of the Gospels. Martha belongs in the Bible.

But notice in Luke chapter ten that they don't have a brother. There is no brother in that story, it's just Martha and Mary. Also, as far as Jesus's journey is concerned, he's in Galilee or Samaria at that point in the story, he's not anywhere near Bethany. Whereas in John's gospel, Bethany is sort of a suburb of Jerusalem. And so my theory is that Martha and Mary are a different family than Lazarus and Mary. Martha and Mary are in the north, Lazarus and Mary are in the south.

And if Martha is not there in John chapter eleven and twelve, there are a lot of similarities between Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene that you are more likely to see if Martha is not present. Not only are there a lot of textual parallels between the Lazarus story and the story of Jesus rising from the dead - obviously there's a woman named Mary who is crying and there's a stone, and there's a tomb, and somebody rises from the dead, obviously those plot elements are there - what's also interesting is that Jesus asks a question, and he says, "Where have you laid him?" And that's the same question Mary Magdalene asks Jesus in John chapter twenty. It's the same Greek verb and pronouns, "Where have you laid him? I do not know where you have laid him."

Also there is a very rare Latin loan word called a sudarium that only appears a couple of times

in the New Testament. It means handkerchief, and they take the handkerchief off of Lazarus in John chapter eleven, and then in chapter twenty, they look in the tomb and the handkerchief is there rolled up. And I think that for someone who's reading John - not someone who reads all four gospels, like we do today, and then kind of mixes up all the story details and thinks, oh, historically this or that thing happened, I'm not talking about historically what happened, I'm interested in the intention of the Evangelist John - it seems as though John has deliberately crafted parallels between the Lazarus story and the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden, so that on the first probably not the first read, but the second or the third time reading, the gospel the reader might think, "Hey, wait a second, there's this woman named Mary who's crying, and, wait, Jesus says, *Where have you laid him*, isn't what Mary Magdalene asked Jesus in the tomb scene? And then there's also this scene where Mary anoints Jesus, and he says, "Let her keep the ointment for the day of my burial." And anyone who is reading John is like, wait, what happens to that Mary? Isn't there only one woman named Mary who's at Jesus' tomb in John's gospel?

I think John has absolutely deliberately crafted a narrative where the reader, upon reading a few times, will wonder whether Lazarus' sister Mary is Mary Magdalene, because of those many parallels between John chapters eleven and twelve, and John chapter twenty. And of course, Martha - I'm saying that maybe someone who had read Luke's gospel understood what John was doing, and might not have liked what John was doing, because in John 11:27, the woman gives the central christological confession in John's gospel, which is quite comparable to Peter's christological confession in Matthew 16:16.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And then Jesus says, "You are Simon, and on this rock I will build My church, I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. You know, it's a pretty big reward for giving the christological confession in Matthew's gospel, and I'm saying that maybe John was trying to give the same sort of confession to Mary. John had some access to Matthew, but definitely Mark, where Peter gets that confession, so maybe John is like, okay, I want to give that to somebody else, but might know that it might be problematic to give it to Mary Magdalene, so the strategy might be to say, okay, she gets the confession, she also gets the anointing - which, by the way, Mark and Matthew also leave anonymous.

So if John is familiar with Mark or Matthew, he knows that the anointing woman is an anonymous woman in Bethany, which is right before Jesus' passion. John knows that Mark has withheld that woman's name, and knows that Peter gets that christological confession, and John's like, okay, wait, I want to give those to Mary.

Maybe John knew a different tradition. John also purports to be the work of an eyewitness. John, I think, is trying to set Mark straight. There are a lot of places where John is trying to set Mark straight. There are actually whole monographs about that. So if John is trying to correct the record, and is saying, okay Mary Magdalene is the christological confessor, is the anointer, but knows that's going to be problematic. So maybe he'll just call her Mary, and make her super, super similar to Mary Magdalene, and also say, you know, that ointment, I'm going to keep it for

the day of His burial, so by the third or fourth read, a sensitive reader will pick up on the fact that maybe this is Mary Magdalene without him saying so explicitly, knowing that it's controversial.

So the reason why it matters is because that christological confession - if it is as significant as Matthew makes it out to be - it gives someone authority in the early church. Who is the first person who identifies Jesus as the Christ? Jesus - 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. And then she kind of falls off, and she doesn't have anything else that she does in this gospel.

Imagine, though, if as Tertullian says, the christological confessor is Mary, and you're already wondering if it's Mary Magdalene. You wouldn't forget then who the christological confessor is then. 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.

Today, as our gospel appears, these roles are divided up among three women: Martha and Mary, those two nice ladies from Luke's gospel, and Mary Magdalene, who has the same roles in John that we know that she had in Mark and Matthew's gospel - she's at the cross, and she's at the empty tomb, right? So it does matter who gives that christological confession, first of all because it ties the christological confessor to who gets the first appearance of the risen Jesus, and if that is the evangelist's intention, it's sort of whoever has that insight is the one who gets the appearance of the risen Jesus.

And second of all, of course, [splitting up the role of Mary of Bethany is] distracting the reader into Luke's gospel, so that you're less likely to notice those parallels between John 11 and John 20. You might think, oh, I know Martha and Mary, I love those ladies, I remember them. Then you start thinking all about Luke, and then Lazarus' sister Mary has a different identity. She's the woman who sits quietly at Jesus's feet, she's not Mary Magdalene anymore. In Luke's gospel, that's definitely not Mary Magdalene, that's a different Mary in Luke's gospel.

So it changes the identity Lazarus' sister Mary, it takes the christological confession away from - possibly - Mary Magdalene, for those who read it that way, and of course it divides up Mary Magdalene's roles into three different women, with the result there is no rival to Peter's authority. There's no rival character in John that has the same level of authority in John that Peter has in the Gospel of Matthew, so I can see a very good reason for an editor to add Martha to the Gospel of John. And I think it makes all the difference.

Anne: Given what you know, and what you've studied, what do you believe Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus was? How did they know each other, how did they fit together?

Elizabeth: I think she was one of his closest disciples, and I think she was the leader of the female disciples, similar to how Peter was the leader of the male disciples. She's in every scene and she's always listed first of the women, except for the cross in John, that's where Jesus's mother is listed first at the cross, but in every other list of women in the New Testament, Mary Magdalen is listed first of Jesus' followers.

And as you also so astutely pointed out in your article of 2020, Magdalene can just as well mean Mary the Tower. It doesn't necessarily mean Mary of Magdala. That's one way of interpreting it - woman from the place called tower. The question is, is Mary from the town called Tower, or is Mary herself the tower? I think it sounds very Jesus-like, if Peter is the Rock for giving the christological confession, then Mary is the Tower for also having the same level of insight, and the same leadership role. Peter the Rock and Mary the Tower are a pretty nice, egalitarian pair there, and I can absolutely imagine a version of Christianity where Mary has that sort of leadership role that perhaps was not able to be received at that time.

And I wonder if now we're coming to a place in Christianity where we're more ready to look at those places in ourselves where we have amplified some voices to the detriment of others. And to me there's something very Johannine about that, if that really did happen. There is something about the spirit of truth that the world cannot receive, but also that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not understand it is there. Maybe there's something about John's gospel that can actually show us in the long run something about what has happened in Christianity, and what people have done, and how the text itself is vulnerable.

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 Magdalen 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.