

*Great Women of the Bible – Mary Magdalene*  
*Luke 8:1-3, 23:54- 24:1-10*  
*July 15, 2007*

Whitney Cerak and Laura VanRyn looked remarkably alike. But so much alike that a coroner investigating a traffic accident could confuse one, who died, with the other, who lived? That Laura's family could tend the injured Whitney for five weeks before realizing that she was not their daughter? "It's just so unbelievable," Whitney's grandfather Emil Frank said of a case of mistaken identities that left one family and one hometown exultant; another family and another town crushed; and a shaken coroner concluding that he's not cut out for the job. It was in June 2006, as reported by USA today that this awful tale of mistaken identity occurred. It began April 26, when two college students were involved in a violent crash in Northern Indiana. Whitney, now 18, and Laura, 22, were riding with a group from Taylor University when a tractor-trailer slammed into their van, killing five people. Whitney's family was told that she was among the dead. Laura's family were told that their daughter was alive, but in a coma-like state. Whitney's family held a closed-casket funeral that drew 1400 people. The VanRyn's stayed by their daughter's bedside for weeks. They wrote on a daily web log or her gradual recovery and the small improvements she was making, such as eating applesauce and playing her favorite game, Connect Four. But while things were coming back to her memory, she still said things that didn't make sense to them. They soon found out why. The young girl that they had been nursing back to health was not their beloved Laura. How could this happen? There were several key reasons. Personal effects were strewn at the accident scene and early on their identifications were mismatched. No DNA was ever taken or matched. The grieving Ceraks never looked at

the body that they assumed to be their daughters. The girls looked remarkably similar in hair color and facial features. Whitney's face was hideously swollen by the accident and really didn't look like their daughter for many days. Even though there were visible and audible clues as she began to gain consciousness, the family didn't pick up on them. Finally, as psychologists pointed out, there was the perfect atmosphere of denial and wishful thinking that might have reinforced this case of mistaken identity. On their blog Thursday after this agonizing discovery, Laura's family cited Psalms 18: "In my distress I call to the Lord; I cry to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice. ... He reached down from on high and took hold of me."

Mistaken identity is the theme of the last of our character studies of the great women of the Bible. Mary Magdalene – penitent prostitute, wife of Jesus, secret author of the fourth gospel, or just a wonderful, beloved disciple and apostle of the gospel of Jesus Christ? We will never know the historical Mary Magdalene for sure, just like we will never know the historical Jesus with absolute certainty, for we were not there. But these two prominent figures of the New Testament, perhaps more than any figures in the entire Bible continue to intrigue us and provide a continuous stream of mystery and intrigue to the Bible. Mary remains a 2000-year-old enigma for us. It is perhaps appropriate, on the Sunday before the feast of Mary Magdalene on July 22<sup>nd</sup> celebrated in the Roman Catholic tradition, that we look at this fabulous woman, through the lens of our two bookend Lukan texts in our reading and through the tradition that has often debased her in multiple cases of mistaken identity.

The first mistaken identity of Mary Magdalene was that of the penitent prostitute. This confusion was perpetuated for nearly 1400 years in the Roman Catholic tradition

and through art for centuries. This assumption of her identity even appeared in fictional works of recent times in Martin Scorsese's movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* and Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Is it historically accurate and how did this identity emerge? In the year 597 Pope Gregory I, in one of his sermons, interpreted that the unnamed woman in chapter seven of Luke who anoints his feet and is named a sinner, the Mary of Bethany (sister of Lazarus) and the Mary Magdalene of our text today were all the same woman. Now Mary was a very common name in Jesus' day and it would have been easy to confuse and mix them up. But with a stroke of a pen Gregory I mixed the DNA of all three women. For centuries in the great art of Titian and other masters she became the red-haired repentant harlot.

The next reported identity of most recent times is Mary, wife of Jesus. Writers like Dan Brown, relying on fragile fragments of Gnostic gospels that didn't make the Bible and the shadowy androgynous figure next to Jesus in Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, claim that Jesus was married to Mary and they gave birth to a holy bloodline. Because Peter was quoted to have said in the gospel of Philip, "Jesus loved Mary more than other women," are we to assume that their love was romantic? That seems like pretty flimsy evidence. In fact the word that this Gnostic gospel uses to describe their relationship can mean confidante or spiritual companion. But of course it is the stuff that sells pulp fiction and made a nice attempt at a blockbuster movie. In the end we will never know for sure.

One of the more interesting developments in recent years among Biblical scholars is the suggestion that Mary Magdalene was the secret author of the fourth Gospel, the

gospel of John. The speaker of that gospel, often referred to in the first person is referred to as “the one who Jesus loved” or the Beloved Disciple. Professor Elaine Pagels is the most famous from this school of thought. She claims that Mary Magdalene was actually the founder and early leader of what became the Johannine community of believers. These scholars also observe that the Mary Magdalene figure is consistently elevated in writings from which formal leadership roles are absent. In certain texts, while either the Peter or the Paul figure is more involved, Mary Magdalene's role is often diminished, while in other texts, the opposite occurs. A tug-of-war is evident between these two opposing systems of church government, revealing debates regarding the importance of the key roles of women in Biblical texts. Once again, we have to ask the question, “Is this a case of mistaken identity? Will the real Mary Magdalene please step forward?”

What I would like to do this morning is to strip away much of this over-analysis of scant, Biblical data and over-imaginative tradition and look merely at the text to see how Mary speaks to us from these simple texts from Luke, that I have put together as bookends on a very fragile kind of shelf of her gospel story. Because I think we can make a few, affirming conclusions about this most interesting woman.

Mary came from a particular place – Magdala, a city on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was a flourishing economic center of the fishing industry in the northern part of Palestine. She must have been a woman of some means for the text tells us that she supported Jesus’ ministry, along with two other women in our text from chapter eight. Most of all, we know that she had seven evil spirits taken out of her. Now we don’t know if this was a mental illness or spirits, which needed to be exorcised, but we know that they were very serious. How do we know this? Jesus refers to “Seven evil

spirits” in chapter 11. Jesus says in another context that when an evil spirit is loosed from a person that it roams around looking for a home. If it finds none it says to itself I will return to my home, and when it finds the home (the soul of a person) in order, it brings seven more spirits even more evil than itself with it and the last state of the person is much worse than the prior state. Hence Mary must have been *really* ill mentally or spiritually. This text suggests that Mary had these demons with her in a long struggle. But she was cured and now had become a prominent disciple and a woman who had the means to share her resources with Jesus. We also know that Mary was an effective communicator of the gospel. Of all the disciples who could have been asked to spread the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Mary was the one chosen. This is affirmed in Luke and John and in the other gospels that did not make our Bible. And finally, whatever you believe about the details of the personal relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, it is undeniable that Mary was crucial to Jesus’ ministry, both while he was living and after he had died. Mary has been repeatedly recognized in multiple gospel accounts as the one closest to the Savior. Now I believe it is true that the early church tried to minimize her influence. I believe that some even tried to slander her name. But you cannot keep a good woman down. The true identity of Mary may never emerge for us on this earth. But what emerges for me is this: witness to the resurrection, communicator of the gospel, and close confidante of our Lord, even financial supporter of his minister. That friends put her in the elite ranks of a disciple and Apostle to whom we owe much in the continuing tradition of the church. Women who are now assuming leadership in Christ’s church, like our own Janice Huie have much to admire and owe to Mary Magdalene. My prayer is that all denominations within the body of Christ will

some day recognize God's true intent, as exemplified in the call of this great woman, to call forth women into positions of ordained leadership.

How can we all continue the great legacy of Mary Magdalene and other great disciples of both genders in Christ's holy church? By recommitting ourselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ. The origin of the word "disciple" means *learner*. I can think of no better way over the next year to make a commitment to become a learner of Jesus Christ – not just his teachings in the Bible – but his commands to love God and neighbor – than by making the commitment to take a Disciple Bible Study class. We will begin both Disciple I and Disciple II Bible study groups in early September. Disciple I is the core 36-week Bible Study that covers the entire Bible from Labor Day until Memorial Day 2008. It is a big commitment, but I commit to you that you will grow in Christ and in spirituality if you make that commitment. It is also the prerequisite for all other Disciple classes. Disciple II Bible study focuses on the Genesis-Exodus cycle of the Old Testament and Luke-Acts of the New Testament. It is a great way to build upon your Bible literacy and build friendship, just like Disciple I. I have committed to co-facilitating this class, also starting in September. We have much more information on these two offerings in the next few weeks beginning today. We will have enrollment opportunities and an information desk set up in the Community Room. Like Mary Magdalene, like the Woman at the Well, like the Syro-Phoenician woman, we all desire to experience the living Christ in our lives as Christ calls us to respond as a disciple. Do you hear Christ's call? Are you ready to respond? Is the DNA of Jesus so present in your body that you could never be mistaken for anyone else than a servant of Jesus Christ?