

Resistance and Resurrection: Mary Magdalene Tells Her Story
Rev. Krista Taves, March 2016

I have been called so many things - a woman possessed of demons, a sexless saint, and a prostitute. The likes of Dan Brown and Martin Scorsese have said that Jesus and I were married. Anything that has been held up as the best and worst of woman has been projected onto me.

So let me tell you who I am. I am Mary Magdalene, Chief Female Disciple, first Apostle and beloved friend of Christ and this is my story about resistance and new life in the midst of cruelty and betrayal. As it says in the Gospel of Mary Magdalene "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

I was born to a wealthy family in the town of Magdala and I was cursed with wanting more for my life than allowed. My responsibility as a woman was to marry the man chosen for me and I was incapable of that. My resistance took shape in a refusal to behave as I should when in the company of a suitor. This successfully sabotaged all prospects.

But in this victory, I had no future. In my time, a woman unmarried is no one, a burden passed from family member to family member. I became depressed and delusional. I was known as the woman possessed of seven demons. Truth be told, I was possessed - by anger, resentment, and hopelessness. I yearned for freedom and believed it to be unattainable.

One day, a travelling prophet came into town. This was nothing unusual. Some predicted the end of the world. Some promised an end to Roman occupation. All of them claimed to be healers. I'd visited every one in the hopes of finding freedom.

As I walked up to this latest prophet, the crowd parted. It always did. Who wants to be defiled by the touch of a possessed woman? This prophet put his hands on my shoulders and said, "Your faith has healed you."

I was surprised. Healers in my time were very flamboyant in how they spoke and acted. It was our entertainment! But this man was so quiet and unassuming.

“Can I follow you,” I said. With as little drama as the healing he offered, he welcomed me as an equal into the circle of his followers and began to teach me as he was teaching the others. He told us parables that stretched our minds and spirits. He preached from the scriptures in ways I did not know was possible. He taught us how to change our thinking. He taught us how to shift our actions. We watched him heal others and then he would ask us to take his place. The first time I healed a person, I used the words he had used with me, “Your faith has healed you.” When the woman left up rejoicing I ran to him, so proud of myself. “Remember,” he said. “Her faith healed her as your faith healed you. You were but the medium.”

Jesus also gave us new ways to look at our oppression under the Romans. We did live in terrible times and were reminded at every turn that we were dispensable and had no rights. He taught us how our suffering had turned into self-hatred and we internalized our legal inferiority into a deep-seated internalized inferiority. This became clear when we turned against each other. It became clear when we used the weapons of our enemy to try and bring it down- surprise attacks on Roman troops, assassination attempts. Jesus said we needed to a new order. The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

I understood what he meant by internalized oppression. We women disciples would see the male disciples answer Jesus’ questions with confidence and assertiveness. In speaking together afterwards, we would find that we had the same thoughts and ideas but had hesitated, questioning the worth of what we had to offer. Sometimes in our doubts, we would unleash our insecurities on Jesus and the others. Even though Jesus engaged us as equals, it took a long time to learn to believe it and to trust ourselves.

I saw the same thing happen for us all, male and female. For instance, when we travelled, and we travelled a lot, it was not uncommon to see the crucified lining the roads. The Romans used crucifixions as a way to shame and intimidate us. We heard the groans of the not yet dead. We

passed by the half eaten remains of the recently dead and the dried husks of the long dead and heard the empire telling us that our children did not matter, our dignity did not matter, and that ultimately, our lives did not matter. We were nothing.

On those days it wasn't unusual for us to turn against each other. Like most families, we knew how to say just the right thing and do just the right thing to really level some damage. That's what you can do when you become vulnerable to each other. But when emotions cooled, Jesus would help us to understand that this was the ugliness of the crucifixions lodging like a poison in our hearts. This separated us from each other and from our own inner worth and dignity, and only served the powers that oppressed us.

And so our way of life was resistance. Resistance was in everything we did and said. One Sabbath as we came out of the temple, a woman asked for healing and he gave it. The religious authorities scolded him. "Don't you know it's against the law to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus said to them, "Man was not made for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man." Our resistance was not in the sword, but in acts of love that broke the rules and challenged the power behind them.

We would say: The Kingdom of Heaven is not for the powerful or wealthy, it is for the weak and the poor. The Kingdom of Heaven is not for those who hold onto, it is for those who let go. Forgive seventy times seven times. If someone asks for your shirt, give them your cloak as well. A few loaves and fishes will feed thousands. Your faith has healed you.

The masterpiece of our resistance was the protest march that became Palm Sunday. Jesus had been preparing us to visit Jerusalem for Passover. Many of us didn't want to go. It was becoming so dangerous for us. As the crowds that followed us grew, the authorities were watching us more closely. We were afraid we would end up on those crucifixes.

But Jesus said that if we were to step up these acts of counter cultural resistance, we had to go where the power was and we had to go for Passover.

Passover commemorates the freedom of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and has remained a powerful observance because our people have been occupied and oppressed more than we have been free. At the Seder meal we remember the plagues and Pharaoh's resistance. We remember the lamb that was slain and the blood on every Jewish Door. We remember the Angel of Death landing in every Egyptian home and taking the eldest son. We remember Pharaoh finally ordering us out of Egypt.

In my time, it was tragically easy for us to see the Romans as our modern day Pharaoh. When we told the stories of our slavery, some, especially the young men who had not yet learned to keep their heads down, would become enraged. As in many times, perhaps as in yours, it's the young men who receive the brunt of state oppression most visibly. It was not unusual for acts of violent insurgence to take place during Passover, often by our younger men who just couldn't bear it anymore. Guerilla-type actions against Roman troops could erupt anywhere, but mostly in Jerusalem where the insult of the Roman presence in our holy city was especially hated.

The Romans responded by creating a diversion, a massive parade of mighty war horses, glimmering chariots and Roman troops with shining armor, culminating in the presentation of Pontius Pilot on a massive steed, the embodiment of Roman might. This parade was an act of intimidation and a statement that Egypt indeed had prevailed and always would prevail.

We created a parody of the parade. As Pontius Pilote mounted his war horse for the parade, Jesus mounted a donkey. As the Roman Troops marched through gilded gates, we entered Jerusalem through a small gate into the poorest part of the city. As the official parade wound through the streets of the powerful, our parade wound through the slums. Jesus was quickly recognized and soon the streets were filled with people shouting, "Hosanna! Our King has come! Hosanna!" Our parade became a mockery of the haughty empire and its life-killing

idolatry happening on the other side of town. Our parade became an affirmation of our inherent worth and dignity. Everyone who stood there waving palm leaves and laying their threadbare cloaks before Jesus knew exactly what they were doing. We had offered the common people a way to join the resistance.

At least that is how I understood it at the time.

The parade wound through the slums and to the temple, the center of religious power, criticized by many Jews as being co-opted by the Romans. Jesus went into the outer sanctuary, turned over the money tables and freed the sacrificial animals. Nothing should keep the poor and disenfranchised from the heart of the temple, the heart of power, the heart of our God.

Then we hid in the home of one of our supporters who gave us a place to rest and to prepare for the Passover meal.

We disciples were elated and fearful. This was the most brazen act we had accomplished and it was certain to provoke a response from the authorities. We had made solid enemies of both the religious authorities and our Roman occupiers.

What was next, we wondered? We were anxious to plan our next action. On the night of Passover, we gathered. Many of us, me included, expected Jesus to use this night to refocus on the resistance. None of us expected what happened.

“One of you will betray me,” he said.

Each of us said, “Not I Lord!” Then he turned to Judas and said, “Do what you need to do.” Judas left.

Jesus held up bread and said, “Take, this is my body, broken for you.” He took the wine and said, “Take, this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit

of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”
The wine tasted like blood and the bread was heavy and tasteless. I felt
nauseous.

We started to argue with him.

“We should leave Jerusalem while we have the chance.”

“We have just started. We should not squander this opportunity.”

“The people are with you. We have critical mass now. We can use that.”

“You are such a powerful leader. We have only begun. Withdraw and
consolidate so that we can come out stronger!”

“I need to pray,” he said.

I was furious? “This is no time for prayer. We have work to do. Are you
crazy?”

“Come with me to the Garden of Gethsamane,” he responded.

This was not what we wanted to hear. We wanted him to be our
fearless leader, guiding us to greater heights than we had imagined and
bringing down the Roman Empire. It was not time to pray. It was time
to escalate!

At the garden we continued to argue with him. He would not relent. He
never did lose an argument!

Some of us considered leaving, and begged him to come. He asked us to
pray with him. Finally, we tired of arguing. I was tired of being afraid,
tired of trying to understand, tired of arguing. One by one, we fell
asleep.

I awoke as the guards arrived. Judas was with them. “Get up!” said
Jesus, “Let us be going. My betrayer is at hand.” Judas kissed Jesus.
Some words were said. Peter even tried to fight the guards. It was no
use. As they took him away we fled.

What a terrible night. We wept. We argued. We searched our memories for clues of Judas' betrayal. Some disciples decided they were finished and returned to their families. I stayed. These were my people. This was my family.

The next morning it was decided that we women would go to the court. Generally, it was the women we sent on the covert missions. The silver lining of second-class citizenship is that no one noticed us. We heard things and saw things without being observed.

We didn't have much hope. Friday always was a big execution day. The Romans wanted to clear the jails before the start of the Sabbath. If Jesus was to be executed, it would be soon.

When the prison doors opened, he staggered into the sunlight covered in blood and carrying the beam upon which he would die.

I don't need to tell you what came next because you know.

We went home heartbroken and told the others what had come to pass.

I didn't understand why did he let this happen. Just that week we had entered the city with crowds proclaiming Jesus as their King. Why had they grown silent? Where had they gone? Why had Jesus grown silent? He was filled with such power that Palm Sunday, such righteous cleansing anger. But now, "The King," my king, had been betrayed by one of us, crucified, and he had done nothing to save himself. Did he not know how we needed him?

It felt like the last three years had been a cruel joke, a mockery of my hope and trust. The crowds were a mirage. The healings had been self-deception and our resistance the delusional attempt of a marginalized people to reclaim something worth living for.

That afternoon, Joseph of Arimathea had Jesus buried before the Sabbath began. We disciples who remained hid in fear that we would be next. We were devastated and wracked with guilt that we had failed the one we loved.

When the Sabbath ended, we women were determined to prepare his body as it should have been for a proper burial. Some of the disciples tried to stop us, saying that spies could be waiting for us and would follow us back to our hiding place. Jesus' mother and I insisted that we needed to honor the one who had brought us new life. Jesus had urged us to let go of traditions that sacrificed life and to hold on to traditions that gave us hope. We had watched our mothers and aunts and grandmothers prepare the bodies of loved ones for burial. It helped them find peace. We deserved that chance.

We bought spices to anoint the body and went to his tomb. When we arrived, we were alarmed that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. My first thought was that someone had stolen him, another cruel mockery of our loss. I wiped away the tears and thought maybe I should go back to my family after all. This was too much to bear.

We entered the tomb and inside stood a man in a white robe and he said, "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell the others that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Mary and I look at each other. Was this a trap? Another cruel disappointment? It seemed, though, that we were desperate enough to believe him. We had lost so much, what more could we lose by choosing to believe that he had indeed risen?

We ran back to the other disciples and told them what we had seen. They dismissed me. Was I not the woman possessed of seven demons?

It would have been easy to be offended. This was not the first time we were disbelieved by the male disciples. But we knew what we had seen. We urged them to come out of hiding and that it was time to go to

Galilee, that all would become clear on our travels. Finally, they relented and we left Jerusalem.

Indeed as we walked, Jesus appeared to a few of the male disciples. Once they saw for themselves, they believed. He then came to us at Pentecost, when he descended as a spirit into all of us. After this, we knew we were not alone.

I knew I was not alone.

I know there are many interpretations of what happened in those days, but I'm going to share mine with you, knowing it is but one of many. I trust you to understand my words as you are compelled to.

When we marched into Jerusalem and the crowd became enthralled, Jesus realized he had been transformed from the messenger into the message. What began as a parody meant to cast a shadow on the concept of a divine political leader turned into a crowning, his leadership inscribed with the language of the oppressor, the language of Kingship. The crowd could not hear "Your faith has healed you." They wanted a hero who would say, "I will save you." But the master's tools would never dismantle the master's house. And so, the one who became the master of resistance allowed the master's tools to kill what he had become. He allowed even the possibility of his own idolatry to be destroyed for the sake of truth and freedom. And then, he entered into the true power of the one who sent him. He rose from the dead, surviving against the best that the empire could throw at him. In his power, he entered into the hearts of those who could hear him.

This truth was now in us and it was our responsibility to nurture it and share it so that the resistance would live on. When I understood that, I slowly came to rejoice and to realize that we had won. The Roman Empire, like all empires, would destroy itself with its own violence. We, however, were bound to a different power, the power of love, and love always wins.

Resistance is a way of learning and unlearning life itself for the purposes of unleashing love and compassion into all that is. If we can be broken,

our idolatries crucified, then from the brokenness will come the ultimate reconciliation, renewal and love.

I am Mary Magdalene, Chief Female Disciple, first Apostle and beloved friend of Christ. Let us embrace the promise of resistance and renewal. Let us celebrate the broken and risen Universal love that is made real by our living and our dying.

Amen and blessed be.

Inspired by the following sources:

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospels of Mark, Luke, Matthew

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem. Harper One: 2007.

Susan Haskins. Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor. Harcourt: 1994.