

Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* was originally written to be a rock album, not a work written for theater, even as a rock opera. Yet, often albums get turned into musicals and books into movies, etc. That's the beautiful thing about art, you see. It doesn't have to be 100% accurate. Take this beautiful yet sometimes controversial song Bronwyn just sang, for example. Is it biblically accurate? No. It amplifies the storyline that Mary Magdalene was a former prostitute who has fallen in love with Jesus. For many, this song could be read as a confession of her unrequited romantic love and desire for Jesus. Art is someone's interpretation and along with art, one has to allow for "poetic license." That's why I've never gotten too up in arms about Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* or Dan Brown's *The Divinci Code* or Mel Gibson's *The Passion* or other Christian films, as long as people don't take it for 100% truth. As a matter of fact, on Wednesdays at 10AM there are several of us who enjoy watching *The Chosen* during Bible Study. Brian and Sandy Gearin, who lead the Wednesday Bible study lead, lead weekly with this disclaimer: "**The Chosen** is based on the True Stories of the Gospels of Jesus Christ. Some locations and time lines have been combined or condensed. Back-story and some characters or dialogue have been added. However, all Biblical and historical context and any artistic imagination are designed to support the truth and intention of the Scriptures. Viewers are encouraged to read the Gospels!" The Gearins do this because they know there are also some downsides to artistic interpretation. One of those downsides comes in perpetuating storylines that aren't true, found especially in the biblical story of Mary Magdalene. I remember teaching a Bible study on Mary Magdalene, and I

walked into the room filled with mostly older women, and I asked, “Raise your hand if you think Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.” To my surprise, every hand went into the air. I responded, “What if I were to tell you that that information is NOT in the Bible?!” There were surprised looks filling the room. One woman raised her hand. “I learned this from my Sunday School teacher.” Someone else asked, “Would it have mattered to Jesus?” My answer was “no; yet, this misconception matters.” “It matters because the way cultures and institutions view religious women shapes theology and practice” (D. L. Mayfield, [link](#)). We conflate or merge stories in the Bible all the time. Why is it though that we as people of faith, especially if we’re teaching, make things up about others without checking the facts? Growing up, I never heard sermons celebrating women like Mary Magdalene but hopefully today you will. Who was the real Mary Magdalene and what does she have to teach us about our faith? Let us listen for a word from God but first let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

“The story of how Mary Magdalene became known as a prostitute is a complicated one. One of six Marys that followed Jesus as a disciple, she was distinguished from the others through her identification with her hometown of Magdala, a fishing village off the coast of the sea of Galilee. According to the gospels of Mark and Luke, Jesus cleansed Mary of seven demons, (a backstory infinitely more complicated and mysterious than prostitution, if you ask me), after which Mary became a devoted disciple, mentioned by Luke in the same context as the twelve, who traveled with Jesus and helped finance his ministry. In 597 Pope Gregory the Great

delivered a sermon on Luke's gospel in which he combined Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany (Martha's sister), suggesting that this Mary was the same woman who wept at Jesus' feet in Luke 7, and that one of the seven demons Jesus excised from her was sexual immorality. The idea caught on and was perpetuated in medieval art and literature, which often portrayed Mary as a weeping, penitent prostitute. In fact, the English word *maudlin* ([link](#)), meaning 'weak and sentimental,' finds its derivation in this distorted image of Mary Magdalene" (Rachel Held Evans, [link](#)). In 1969, the Vatican admitted that the text of the Bible does not support the interpretation that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, although it seems not everyone got the message (looking at you, Martin Scorsese, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Mel Gibson and others). On the other extreme, there are others who use some old texts, such as the Gnostic Gospels, to suggest that perhaps Mary Magdalene's close relationship with Jesus was a source of tension with the male disciples, especially Simon Peter. Some also infer from these texts that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus or at least had a sexual relationship with him due to her promiscuity, which is also not biblically accurate. Though I have yet to see it, I've read that Garth Davis' 2019 film, *Mary Magdalene*, takes some imaginative license with Mary Magdalene's role but in a much different way. Davis portrays Mary Magdalene's connection to Jesus as spiritual rather than romantic. In the film, Mary Magdalene seems to get Jesus in a way that the other male disciples don't. Her role as a disciple is thus elevated, even where she offers Jesus advice. This can be very strange when one considers the role of women at the time the Gospels were written. The voices of women weren't

respected and most were known by their husbands, if mentioned by name at all. And yet, Luke seems to elevate Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna as having provided for Jesus' ministry out of their resources. How many of us knew that before today? Yes. "Not only was Mary Magdalene one of Jesus' most devoted followers, who stuck with him all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, from the ministry to the cross and the tomb, but also she provided for him from her own means. She may have simply been an independent woman with her own resources who found a compelling message and messenger" (Michael McKinley and David Gibson, CNN [link](#)).

Luke and Mark's Gospels both reveal that Jesus healed Mary Magdalene of seven demons, but we're never told what those demons were. One scholar says "the symptoms of demonic possession in the NT were varied. Scripture does make a clear distinction between demon possession and diseases. In every case, however, demon possession is portrayed as an affliction, not a sin" (John MacArthur, [link](#)). Whatever Mary Magdalene's demons were, Jesus delivered her, and she owed everything to Christ. Her love and devotion for him reflected her profound gratitude. Isn't that how it should be for all who have come to the true saving knowledge of Jesus Christ?

Although Mary Magdalene appears to have been a critical part of Jesus' early ministry, her "extraordinary faithfulness shines most brightly in the story of Jesus' passion" (Held Evans). Immediately following Jesus' arrest, his male disciples abandoned him. Judas betrayed him for a bribe. Peter denied he knew Jesus, not once but three times. Only John, who is

described as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” was with him at the crucifixion. Yet, “The way German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer told it, Jesus’ disciple deserted him when he was crucified; he died alone and friendless. This isn’t accurate! According to the scriptures, faithful women, more than likely led by Mary Magdalene, were present when Jesus was crucified, and they remained to take care of his body in the tomb. The women were the ones Jesus chose to announce his resurrection. They were the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, and they, especially Mary Magdalene, were the first preachers of this good news! “Gospel accounts vary, but all four identify her as among the first witnesses of the empty tomb” (Held Evans). Isn’t it interesting where our assumptions take us? In a minute, Riley Green’s song, *Jesus Saves*, will be sung. It’s a reminder that we don’t know people’s stories- what’s true and what isn’t and one can’t fit everything about themselves on a cardboard sign when you’re driving by. So instead, this guy chose to put his faith on the sign and wrote, “Jesus saves.”

It was only in my mid-adulthood when I discovered that not only did the Catholic Church restore Mary Magdalene to her rightful identity as one of Jesus’ disciples, but they also made her a saint and in 2016 officially raised her celebration day to the level of a feast day, celebrated on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. Yes, Mary Magdalene is recognized as a saint among the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches (Sarah Pruitt, [link](#)). One of my favorite Lutheran preachers, Nadia Bolz Weber, has a tattoo of Mary Magdalene on her forearm. She got it when she knew that she, as unlikely a

woman as any, was being called to be a preacher of the Gospel and the tattoo is how she told her parents about her call. Nadia felt that when she needed to she could borrow Mary Magdalene's faith and strength. Nadia dives a little deeper into Mary Magdalene's sainthood sharing that as a woman preacher, she can't help but to love St. Mary Magdalene. Nadia's bishop once said that "the greatest spiritual practice isn't yoga or praying the hours or living in intentional poverty although these are all beautiful in their own way. The greatest spiritual practice is just showing up. And in some ways, Mary Magdalene, is like the patron saint of just showing up. Because showing up means being present to what is real, what is actually happening. Mary Magdalene didn't necessarily know what to say or what to do or even what to think...but none of that is nearly as important as the fact that she just showed up. She showed up at the cross where her teacher and Lord, Jesus, because a victim of our violence and terror. She looked on the man who had set her free from her own darkness bore the evil and violence of the whole world upon himself and yet she still showed up. She proclaimed to the disciples that death is simply not the final word- that light shines in the darkness and the shadows cannot, will not, shall not overcome it" (Nadia Bolz Weber, [link](#)).

"We have seen it in so many places: When things get rough, when things are at their worst, when everyone else flees or is in hiding, and only the women are left. And they come not without fear, the gospel story tells us; they come out of faith and love. They were faithful to Jesus in all of his life and in his death. For their loving perseverance and courage, these women

are rewarded with the honor of being entrusted with the most important news in the history of the world. These women, and many women who have come after them, can rightly be called history's midwives of hope. And they become for us, on the resurrection morning of Easter, the primary example in the story of what we too are called to be- midwives of hope" (Jim Wallis, [link](#)). We, like Mary Magdalene, are bearers of resurrection. You see, "hope is not simply a feeling, or a mood, or a rhetorical flourish. It is a choice, a decision, an action based upon faith. As followers of Jesus we stand on the knowledge of the resurrection. We stand on the faith of those who have been given the news of the resurrection before us" (Wallis). Mary Magdalene. Let us give her the titles she deserves, not the ones that aren't true. Mary Magdalene. Apostle and saint. Midwife of hope. A face of faith. And like Mary Magdalene, let us be disciples who show up for God and for one another. Amen.