

THE MASTERS OF BEING

MARY MAGDALENE

SHE WHO REMAINED

A witness to grief, recognition, and the courage to speak



AARON GARRITY

Cover artwork: original interpretive portrait, not a historical likeness.

MARY MAGDALENE

SHE WHO REMAINED

We are witnesses long before anyone asks us to testify.

We witness the course of our decisions, though rarely with enough distance to understand them at first. We witness the people nearest us becoming themselves. Some lives unfold beside ours for years; others touch us briefly and leave a mark we recognize much later. We remember how a person looked when a possibility first opened before them, what frightened them, what made them laugh. Because we love, we begin to imagine what comes next.

We picture conversations yet to be had, work yet to be made, ordinary mornings that might one day feel like home. We may never say these hopes aloud, but a part of us begins to live within them. When that future disappears through death, separation, or another kind of ending, we grieve both what has happened and what will not happen now.

There is an interval when the world keeps its familiar shape but no longer feels familiar. We return to a place, a memory, the last words we heard. We look again, hoping to discover what we missed. Tears come before understanding, and sometimes they continue after understanding has gone as far as it can.

That is where I want to meet Mary Magdalene.

John places her outside the tomb, weeping. She has found it open and believes the body of Yeshua has been taken away. Other disciples have come to look and have gone home. Mary remains. Whatever this morning will come to mean, it begins for her with a loss she cannot understand. We know the next part of the story, and that knowledge can make us impatient with her tears. Mary has no such advantage.

A WOMAN WITHIN THE STORY

The Gospels tell us less about Mary's life than centuries of paintings, sermons, and speculation might lead us to expect. Luke names her among the women who accompanied Jesus and the Twelve and helped support the ministry. He says that seven demons had gone out from her, but he does not tell us how she understood that experience or what it cost her to live through it.

The accounts become more detailed when they place her near Yeshua's death. She is named among the women at the crucifixion. Mark places her among those who saw where he was laid and later came to the tomb. John brings her into close focus on the morning she finds it open. The Gospel writers tell these events differently; their accounts do not need to be made identical for us to see that Mary is consistently remembered as someone who was there.

There is a quiet dignity in that presence. The most important parts of a relationship may be the least visible to those outside it: the hours of attention, the ordinary days, the willingness to stay nearby when there is nothing useful to say. We do not know the private shape of Mary's relationship with Yeshua. I would rather leave that space open than fill it with certainty the texts cannot give us. What they preserve is already moving: she followed him, she was present through terrible events, and she came looking for him after his death.

THE WORK OF PRESENCE

There is another Mary in the Gospels whose story has often shaped how we think about being present. She is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She is not Mary Magdalene, and I do not want to borrow her story as though it were Magdalene's. Still, as I try to understand what it means to remain with someone, I find that the sisters in Bethany offer a companion scene.

Luke tells us that Martha welcomed Jesus into her home and became occupied with the work of serving. Mary sat at his feet and listened. Martha, carrying the demands of hospitality, asked Jesus to tell her sister to help. His response named Martha's worry and distraction, and affirmed that Mary had chosen something good that would not be taken from her. I hear tenderness in the way he addresses Martha by name, even as he asks her to look again at what the moment requires.

I have lived on both sides of that room.

There are times when love expresses itself through every detail attended to: the meal made ready, the person cared for, the promise kept. Martha's labor is real, and a household does not welcome anyone without it. Yet I know how easily the work of caring can become so consuming that I miss the person before me. I can arrange everything around an encounter and be scarcely present for it.

At other times, the most faithful act is to sit down and listen, even with tasks unfinished. That choice may look unproductive to someone carrying the weight of the day. It may even feel irresponsible to the part of us that believes love must always prove itself by doing more. But attention is also a gift. We cannot recover every hour later, once the dishes are cleared and the moment has passed.

Sometimes we are Martha; sometimes we are Mary of Bethany. Their scene does not ask us to divide humanity into those who serve and those who understand. It asks whether, in this particular hour, our activity is helping us love the person in front of us or keeping us from hearing them. That question brings me back to Magdalene. Her presence at the tomb was neither a household lesson nor a choice between chores and contemplation. It was grief. Yet her story, too, asks us to take seriously the human being who stayed long enough to attend to what was happening.

THE MORNING SHE COULD NOT UNDERSTAND

John tells us that Mary saw the stone removed and ran to tell Peter and another disciple. They came to the tomb, looked inside, and returned home. Mary stood outside crying. When asked why, she said that her Lord had been taken and she did not know where he had been placed. She turned and saw a man nearby but did not recognize him. Thinking he was the gardener, she asked where the body was. She would go and get him.

That offer touches me. She cannot undo his death or explain the empty tomb. She reaches for the one thing she can imagine doing. When a life we hoped for begins to come apart, many of us do the same. We make the call, take the journey, try another conversation, put our hands to the work still in front of us. Sometimes those actions matter deeply. They cannot always restore the future we wanted.

I cannot place my thoughts in Mary's mind. Her grief belongs to her. Yet John allows us to see that she does not approach the tomb with an easy certainty. She looks for a body. She asks a question. She mistakes the person before her for someone else. Then he speaks her name.

There is no long explanation in the account between her failure to recognize him and her recognition. She hears 'Mary,' turns toward him, and calls him teacher. She is met in the condition she is actually in. Her tears are still part of the morning, and she has misunderstood what she has seen. She is called by name before she is asked to carry anything to anyone else.

Soon she is given a message for the disciples, and she goes to tell them that she has seen the Lord. This encounter does not give Mary the old morning back. It asks her to leave the place where she came to mourn and carry news of a future she cannot yet see in full. Their response is beyond her control. She can speak carefully; she cannot give them her eyes.

“I have seen the Lord.”

WHEN A WITNESS IS NOT BELIEVED

Luke tells the morning differently from John. In Luke's account, Mary Magdalene is named with Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women who return from the tomb and tell the apostles what has happened. The men do not believe them. Their words seem to the listeners like an idle tale. I do not want to merge this group scene with John's intimate account of Mary hearing her name. I want to let both accounts ask what it means to carry news that another person is not yet able to receive.

More than thirty years ago, I sat in a meeting listening to people describe illnesses and the relief they believed they had found through herbs and combinations of herbs. My first thought was almost innocent in its simplicity: we ought to tell the pharmaceutical companies. I assumed that useful information, once shared, would naturally find its way to those who could help more people. In time I began to see that knowledge moves through a world of established beliefs, institutions, and financial interests. I cannot verify every account I heard that day, or claim that it proved a cure had been kept secret. What I remember is the change in my own perception. I had encountered a possibility that my old picture of the world did not know where to put.

That experience helps me approach Mary's witness, though what she reported belongs to a different order of life. She could speak of what she had encountered; she could not make the listeners inhabit her encounter. Nor can I say that the apostles' disbelief came from one motive alone. Grief, fear, the strangeness of the news, and assumptions about the women speaking may all come to a reader's mind. Luke gives us their response, not a private account of every heart in the room. What remains is that the women spoke, and at first they were not believed.

John later tells us that when the other disciples said they had seen the Lord, Thomas also insisted that he needed to see for himself. The Gospel does not present that as Thomas replying directly to Mary. It gives us another person standing at the distance between hearing and knowing. I feel tenderness for that distance. Some truths are offered to us by another's voice; the recognition that changes our life still has to take place within us. It may begin in trust, arrive through a question, or wait for an experience we could never have been argued into.

This is part of my spiritual reading of Mary: she could share her witness, but she could not force an awakening. I read her beside Yeshua's teaching of a kingdom already near, asking what has to change in our sight before we can recognize what is present. I cannot claim to know precisely how Mary herself described that kingdom. I can say what her story asks of me. To speak honestly when I have seen something, to listen when another person speaks, and to leave room for the moment when their truth becomes visible to me with my own eyes.

**Humanity learns to see
one person at a time.**

LOOKING AGAIN AT MARY

Mary has herself been seen through a story the canonical Gospels do not tell about her. In a sixth-century homily, Pope Gregory the Great identified Mary Magdalene with Luke's unnamed sinful woman and with Mary of Bethany. He interpreted the seven demons associated with Magdalene as a fullness of vices. His reading helped shape the long Western portrait of her as a sexually sinful penitent. The Gospel passages neither call Mary Magdalene a prostitute nor identify her with those other women.

I think about how much care it takes to see a person again after an inherited story has taught us what to expect. Defending Mary does not require us to deny the beauty people have found in stories of repentance. It asks us to stop assigning her a past the texts do not give her. It asks us to look at the woman who is named: a follower, a presence at the death and tomb, a person who weeps, recognizes, and speaks.

I also want to be careful about the portrait we create in her defense. If we make Mary perfectly fearless, always certain, and untouched by the judgments of others, we lose the humanity that drew us to her. The Mary I encounter in these texts is more compelling. She can bear witness while grieving. In another early Christian work, she can speak and still be hurt when her words are challenged.

A VOICE AMONG THE DISCIPLES

There are other voices in the early Christian world. Writings outside the New Testament, sometimes gathered under the broad name 'Gnostic gospels,' preserve different ways communities spoke of Yeshua and his followers. The Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and the surviving Gospel of Mary are among the works that have reopened Mary's place in our imagination. They were composed and received in different settings; the name Gnostic cannot explain them all. Their value here is that they show how seriously some early Christians took a woman's spiritual understanding, and how contested that understanding could be.

Elaine Pagels has helped me see that these texts are also a record of arguments over who may speak with authority. In her introduction to *Secrets of Mary Magdalene*, she follows the many portraits of Mary across canonical and other early writings, including the conflict over her voice in the Gospel of Mary. She does not hand us a simple, recovered biography. She opens a wider room in which to ask what was heard, what was resisted, and why. I am grateful for the patience of researchers who have made that room possible.

In the Gospel of Mary, the disciples are distressed after the Savior's departure. Mary encourages them. Peter asks her to share words she knows that they have not heard. She answers:

**“What is hidden from you,
I will proclaim to you.”**

There is generosity in her answer: the knowledge she claims is something she intends to give. She begins to recount a vision in which the Savior says, 'where the mind is, there is the treasure.' The language of mind draws our attention inward, toward the place from which we perceive and understand. For me, it also raises a question: where have I placed the attention by which I hope to see?

Then the surviving manuscript breaks off. Four pages from the middle, and six from its beginning, are lost. When the account resumes, a soul passes powers that seek to bind it, among them desire and ignorance. Jean-Yves Leloup, in his translation and commentary, approaches this movement as a contemplative journey of the human spirit. I value the spaciousness of his reading, even where it reaches beyond what the damaged pages can settle. His gift is to invite us to inhabit the text as a question addressed to our lives.

When Mary finishes speaking, Andrew questions the teaching she has reported. Peter raises another challenge: would the Savior have spoken privately with a woman, without the others knowing? Are they now to listen to her? Mary weeps and asks whether Peter thinks she invented what she has said. Levi answers in her defense. Even the surviving ending resists a tidy resolution: the Greek and Coptic witnesses differ over whether one person or several go out to preach.

The writer places a painful human question beside the vision. Andrew doubts the teaching. Peter questions how she could have received it. Mary is wounded by the suggestion that she lied. Levi's defense matters, but the text does not assure us that every heart in the room was changed at once. This is a later work bearing Mary's name, not a record of words we can assign to the historical Mary with certainty. Its picture of a woman asked to defend the very possibility of her knowing still deserves a hearing.

I would not take her tears away to make her seem brave. It is possible to welcome honest questions and still ache when someone questions your honesty. It is possible to have something true to say and to tremble as you say it. Courage does not always arrive with a steady voice. Sometimes a person speaks through tears, and what they have to say deserves to be heard.

THE CARE A WITNESS OWES

Mary brings me toward the question of inner knowing, and toward the care such knowing asks of us. As CEO of a multibillion-dollar brand, I learned that a room can be full of people speaking sincerely and still leave a leader with an incomplete account of what is happening. People may soften a hard fact, anticipate what I want to hear, or fear the consequence of saying something plainly. Their intentions cannot always be read from the shape of a sentence. I had to make space for questions that did not flatter me, and for evidence that might change my mind.

The same care matters in spiritual life. There is so much being said about our humanity, and so much of it arrives with confidence. I have felt certain about things I later understood only in part. An inward experience may deserve our attention without making our first interpretation complete. We need room to listen, to test what we believe, and to learn from those who see what we have missed. That humility gives witness its integrity.

The listener has a responsibility, too. To ask a sincere question is one thing. To decide beforehand that insight could not have come through a particular person closes the door before she has spoken. When I think of holding space, I mean allowing a difficult account to be heard without demanding immediate agreement or immediate dismissal. Sometimes truth needs time to be digested. Sometimes it needs a further question. Sometimes the person who brings it is the one from whom we least expected to learn. When others objected to the children's praise, Yeshua asked them to listen to those young voices.

I cannot say that Mary used our modern language of holding space, or tell you how she responded to every person who doubted her. John shows her failing to recognize the figure outside the tomb until he calls her by name. Then she goes to the others with what she has seen. Luke shows a group of women speaking and meeting disbelief. In the later Gospel of Mary, she speaks and is hurt by a challenge to her honesty. Together, these scenes give me a practice to carry into my own life: speak what I have seen, keep listening, and leave others the freedom and time to see for themselves.

Perhaps the scales fall from our eyes slowly. We return to a story we thought we knew and notice the person standing within it. We hear the grief in a voice we had treated as an argument. We discover how an inherited portrait narrowed our sight, then realize that our own preferred portrait may do the same. Looking again is a form of care.

Each of us has witnessed more than we can fully explain. We have seen goodness in people others dismissed. We have watched our choices take courses we did not intend. We have stood before an ending and felt how much of our imagined future rested upon someone else's presence. The work of witness is to remember honestly and speak with care: to say what we know without claiming what we do not. Sometimes it means remaining near a difficult truth until we can bear to look at it. Sometimes it means carrying what we have seen back into life, though no one can promise how it will be received.

EPILOGUE | SHE WHO REMAINED

There is a temptation, when telling Mary's story, to make the final sentence larger than her life. She has carried enough of what others needed her to represent. I would rather leave her close to the account: outside a tomb, asking after someone she cannot find, then hearing her name.

She did not need to understand the whole future before she could take the next step into it. She could tell the disciples what she had seen. The rest would unfold beyond her sight, as so much of what we love always does.

I think of the people whose lives we have been privileged to witness, and of those who have witnessed ours with patience when we could not yet see clearly. I think of futures that ended and of the tenderness that survived them. There are moments when remaining is all we know how to do. There may come a moment when love asks us to turn toward the living again, not because what we lost has ceased to matter, but because it still does.

Mary's tears have a place in the story. So does her turning. She went to the others carrying what she had seen, with no power to make them see it too. In that small distance between the truth we have lived and the words we can offer for it, I find her courage. We can point toward what opened our eyes. Then love asks us to make room for another person's sight to arrive in its own time.

She remained long enough to recognize him. Then she carried her witness into a world that would have to learn to recognize her.

SOURCE NOTE

The canonical portrait draws chiefly on Luke 8:1-3 and 24:9-11; Mark 15:40-16:8; and John 20:1-29. Mary of Bethany and Martha appear as a distinct companion story in Luke 10:38-42 (see also John 11:1-2). The brief passages from the later, fragmentary Gospel of Mary use Christopher Tuckett's translation in *The Gospel of Mary* (Oxford University Press, 2007), page 112. Jean-Yves Leloup's *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (Inner Traditions, 2002) is engaged as contemplative interpretation; Elaine Pagels's introduction to *Secrets of Mary Magdalene* (2006) illuminates the debate over Mary's authority. Gregory the Great's Homily 33 belongs to later tradition. Yeshua's reference to children is Matthew 21:16. Cover and end cap artwork are original interpretive images, not historical reconstructions.



Copyright © 2026 Aaron Garrity. All rights reserved.

THE MASTERS OF BEING

SHE REMAINED. THEN SHE SPOKE.

Continue into The Masters of Being

AARONGARRITY.COM

