

Mary Magdalene

All the Gospels accord Mary Magdalene a unique place among Jesus's followers.

Her surname owes its origin to her birthplace, the small township of Magdala, near Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. Her name Mary – or Miriam – was a common girl's name at the time and she was one of the most devoted disciples.

As the Gospels put it, having been healed of a severe ailment – “she had seven devils cast out of her”, according to Luke – Mary followed the Lord ever after and was present with his mother by the cross on Calvary. She was also the first person he appeared to after his resurrection with the order to “go and tell my brothers!”

Even today, it is commonly believed that Mary was what they called a ‘great sinner’ in matters of sex. In fact, houses to rehabilitate sex workers used to be called ‘magdalene homes’. But there is little basis in the Gospels to support this view. The confusion arose because Mary Magdalene was often confused with Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus; as well as with the unknown penitent woman who burst into the dining room where Jesus sat and washed his feet with her tears. Scripture scholars today see three quite different women, none of whom is related to the others.

What we do know for sure is that the Risen Jesus appeared to Mary even before he showed himself to his other disciples, and gave her a unique mandate. So we can rightly honour Mary Magdalene as one of the first apostles, with Peter and the Twelve, chosen for mission by Jesus himself.