



Follow Me

1 Jesus and Mary Magdalene

Today, we start a brand-new series called *Follow Me*. Today, we're going to look at the life and the story of Mary Magdalene. Next week, we're going to look at Simon and Andrew. The week after that, Matthew. And then we are going to look at the Sons of Thunder. We're going to look at their stories and we are going to take lessons for our own. For those of you who follow Jesus, I know there are some who have said, "I don't think I have much to offer the Kingdom. I don't think my story is all that significant. I don't think anyone is going to want to listen to what I have to say."

Maybe if you grew up in church, you've been in church for a while, you've been to services where there were testimonies given... For years, I struggled with this. I didn't think I really had a lot to share because I grew up in a Christian home, I never got into heavy drugs. I always love how people add the word *heavy* into that. "You know just light drugs on the weekend, but never did really heavy drugs."

We would have speakers come in and give these testimonies. I just didn't have that spectacular of a story. You might think, *I don't have anything important to say*. I just want you to know today, the fact is God wants to use each one of us to share the good news of Jesus.

As we talked last week in the Easter message, about praying bold prayers, that you will be bold in sharing your story, and how Christ has changed you.

As I think about Mary Magdalene, I keep going back to Luke 7: 47. It's an easy passage to look up. ⁴⁷ ***Those who are forgiven much, love much.*** And that is the story that we are going to see today to one who has been forgiven and knows all that they have been forgiven of, there is a loyal love that takes place.

What we want you to know throughout this whole series is you have a story. And everyone in here has a story. The great thing about having a story is no one can deny your story. It happened to you. What we want you to see, as we look at these characters throughout the New Testament and those who follow Jesus, we want you to know your story matters. You need to be bold in sharing it. You need more confidence. I've asked people over the years because I know. We're talking about something that can be very intimate and detailed that you don't feel comfortable sharing it.

I'm going to give you five quick reasons I feel I've heard from people over the years of why they don't share their story.

1. It's too fresh and they feel they need to prove something before they share something. They're like, "I just have to give this some time." No, if Jesus has saved you from whatever your past is, you have a story to tell. You're not under judgment or condemnation here and you don't have to wait until you've given so many years to the faith before you start telling people about what Jesus did for you.
2. I know there are many who feel shame and regret. They are embarrassed by their past, and they hold back in sharing.
3. Some feel they don't speak well. They're like, "I've tried telling stories, Ted, I'm just not a storyteller." I get that. I'm sometimes intimidated. I know a lot of my friends right now and their preaching is going to manuscript preaching where they write out every single word of their message and then preach it. You probably figured out I don't do that because things will pop into my brain. Amy says, "You might want to write some of that stuff down and edit it a little before." If you've been around this church, you know I stumble over my words. When you're sharing your story, if someone on the other end of your story sees you struggling, let me tell you what they are going to do. They are going to lean in. They are going to appreciate the effort.
4. Some of you think your story is boring. What we are going to see today in the life of Mary Magdalene is we don't have a lot of details from her past. But what we do know is that she loved Jesus, and she followed Jesus. She was at the crucifixion, she was at the resurrection, and the bottom line is this. Jesus is the most important part of her story. And Jesus is the most important part of your story, so your story can't be boring. Your story is full of life.
5. And then some of you don't feel equipped. You don't feel like you have the words to say. Maybe you've been in this situation. You fear rejection. You hold back in sharing in case there are follow-up questions from the other side. Do you know what it's okay to say, Follower of Jesus, "I don't know but let me get back to you." "I don't know but I'm going to get you an answer to that."

Amy and I, after 27 years of marriage, are still sharing our stories with one another. My wife has a story very different than mine, but she came to know the Lord after high school and went through a lot of difficult times in high school. She said something this week that I jumped on because I was like *I've never heard her say it like that*. She realizes she wasn't following things according to the school's plan and wasn't walking with the Lord, but she kept trying to take steps to do the right thing. She remembers going to her high school counselor and asking about college. The high school counselor just immediately said, "Oh, you're not going to college." Isn't that something? Boy, the weight of our words.

She said... and it's hit me all week. She said, "I just wanted someone to give me the benefit of the doubt."

I know some of you walk around with that and you hold back. I can tell you my wife would tell you that she's held back on sharing her story over the years. Of how God sent a pastor into a jail cell. My wife was saved in jail. You're like, "Tell me more."

She tells her story. She's very open about her story, but she doesn't share it a whole bunch. I know some of these fears and I just... She's got a story to tell, but she got a DUI out of high school. The judge said, "\$10,000.00 or a month in jail." Her parents said, "We'll see you in a month." I'm grateful because an Assembly of God preacher walked in, and Amy tried to ignore him for an hour. That night, she knelt down and asked Christ to be her savior. I'm telling you. I don't have that story. Her story is different than mine. Your story is different than mine. But what I know is your story matters. Your story matters. And I want you to never forget this. Your story is not over. Chapters are still to be written. So, please hear me. God wants to use your story to help others. So, I hope you begin sharing boldly after today as we see the life of Mary Magdalene.

God wants to use your story to share the good news of Jesus with a lost and dying world. When Jesus walked the earth, women were treated as second-class citizens. Jesus changed all of that. Jesus esteemed women as highly valuable. We're going to see that today as Mary Magdalene follows Jesus, cares for Jesus, and how Jesus completely changed her story.

When we do a study like this with a character, we have to be very careful. It's the two biggest mistakes we make when reading the Bible. We can read too much or not read enough. In the case of Mary Magdalene, many have read maybe a little too much. What we are going to stick with today is scripture. At woodland hills family church, scripture drives the bus, tradition is in the passenger seat.

Part of Western, Christian thought or Western Christian tradition is that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Scripture never says that. We don't have that declared in the bible. But we do know some things about her before she came to Christ, just not much. As we dig into this, you'll see more. Mary is only mentioned by name in the New Testament 12 times. I think this is an important detail for us to understand. She's mentioned 12 times and 11 of those 12 mentions are the accounts of her witnessing the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the most important part of the story.

John Bloom, a writer with *Desiring God*, says it this way: "The truth is that we have no historical reason to believe anything about Mary Magdalene besides the very limited yet very significant amount the scripture says about her." We're going to look at it today as we dig in.

First of all, we know that Mary is from Magdala. In that day they would attach where you were from or who your father was to your name. So, we have Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph, the son of Zebedee. So, Mary is from Magdala, a fishing town off the coast of Galilee. Most scholars do believe that it did have a reputation for prostitution. You go all the way back to the 6th Century when Pope Gregory gave a homily, declaring her to be the woman of ill repute. So that got carried on.

Sculptors and painters started taking off with this. But, again, we're sticking with what the scripture says about her. So, we know she is from Magdala. We know that about her. It still happens today. You tell someone where you're from... We're always doing this. We're trying to relate to people's stories. We're always trying to put ourselves into someone's story. So, they tell you where they're from, and if they are not from there, they tell you about the time they were last there or passing through there. Or, you tell them when your birthday is. This is still one of my favorites. You go, "I was born on January 29." "You're kidding! My birthday is in March." Have you ever had anybody do that to you? You know why people do that. It's because they are trying to connect with you.

Here's what I really want you to know. Your upbringing, your family of origin, and where you're from is part of your story, but I want you to see today that it is not the most important part of your story. It's woven into the fabric of your life, but it's not the most important part. And your past is part of your story. What you did in your high school years. What you did in college. Yeah, it's part of your story, but it's not the most important part of your story. We don't choose where or when we were born. We don't choose who we're born to. We don't choose our family. Some of you are like, "I needed to hear that today." You didn't choose the school you attended. You didn't choose the church you attended. You didn't choose the denomination you were brought up in. It was all chosen for you and it's part of your story, but it's not the most important part.

So, what do we know about Mary Magdalene? She's from Magdala and we also, in this very short account of her life, know she was delivered from seven demons, and she loved Jesus, followed Jesus, and supported the ministry of Jesus.

So, let's look at this before we get to the empty tomb. Luke 8: 1-3 – ***After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out...*** Some say this could have been from prostitution, we just don't know because the scripture doesn't say. It could have been from a trauma or abuse. We don't know and it's a detail we don't have to know, but we do know this. She had a very, very difficult past. Seven demons were cast out. It goes on to say... ***3 Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.***

She's delivered from seven demons; she follows Jesus, and she is supporting the ministry of Jesus and his followers. So, we know that. She was grateful and devoted her life to Jesus.

One article I read this week by Jennifer Herron said this> *"Gratitude kept Mary Loyal to her Lord and serving him until the end. It was absolutely unheard of in that time for a woman to be a disciple of a Rabbi. She followed Jesus, learned from him, served his physical needs, and set a groundbreaking example for other women everywhere all because of gratitude."*

If you have your Bible and you want to turn to John 20... We were there last week for Easter, and we didn't get to this part, but we are going to get there today. Before we do, we'll start making it very clear Mary Magdalene was at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. This is important to even understand her grief. And when we see her at the empty tomb, mourning, weeping, that we understand she had just seen, days earlier, her Lord, the one she loved, the one who delivered her, the one who saved her, saw him brutally crucified before her very eyes.

John 19 - ***25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.***

She was there when he was crucified. And Jesus appears to her. We're going to see this today. We're going to pick up where we started last week. Mary Magdalene was the first to proclaim the empty tomb to Simon Peter and John.

This is important. I want you to keep track before Jesus appears to Mary and Mary has this encounter with him. I just want you to see for a second all of the evidence, all of the proof, everything she sees at this moment.

It starts here at the beginning of John 20, **Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.** So, let's start right there. Stone, Rolled away. **2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"** So, understand the confusion and they are not understanding it. They are not getting it.

Then you go down a little bit. We'll skip past the part we read last week. But Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb. So, let's continue to count up the evidence in John 20: 10- 18

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. I just want to stop there for a second because I live on the other side of Tanney Como, and I drive by Snapp Bearden cemetery multiple times a day. You have to drive by it slowly because it's a sharp, 90-degree turn. I always peer into the cemetery and almost every time I drive by, there is someone there visiting a grave. Over the last several years, I have seen some of you. I've done many graveside services at Snapp Bearden. And then I always pay attention as I drive by a day or two later after a ceremony. One friend in here, after we buried someone he loved dearly just sitting there on one of those gravel roads with his truck bed down and just sitting there. And the mourning and the grief...

I need us to really understand at this moment... added to the Mary not understanding, she's grieving, she's mourning. Scripture is very clear in 1 Thessalonians 4. All humans mourn, it's part of the human condition. But there are only two ways to mourn. You either mourn with hope or without hope. Without hope is how the rest of men mourn, but you and I, we mourn with hope because Paul said "because we believe Jesus died and rose again." And that is the gospel. And that is the good news. But she is weeping, she is mourning.

You and I have all experienced deep grief. For some of you, you entered into shock because of the sudden death of a family member or friend. For others of you, it may have been an illness in a family member or friend and so the mourning started even before you lost your loved one, but you were there at the bedside when they went to be with the Lord. Mary is there now weeping, crying outside of an empty tomb.

So, we have this evidence – the stone rolled away, the tomb is empty.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels... We know angels mean messengers. The angels are there. They are bringing a message. **in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.**

13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"
"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." **14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus...** Now, before we get to that, if I saw two angels, I'd be asking some questions. I'd have some things I'd need to get figured out. So, now she's seen a stone rolled away, she sees an empty tomb, there's the cloth, the linens. She sees angels and now she's going to see Jesus, and

still not know. Have you ever experienced that type of grief? And been to that level of emotions in your mourning? She turns around and sees Jesus...***standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.*** **15 He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”** This is such an amazing scene to me. It’s like “Who are you looking for?” ***Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”*** This is not how this is going to end.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).

17 Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. This is important. So, we know there was this embrace. I can only imagine once she knew it was Jesus... Let me ask you. Are you going to let go of him? After what you saw on Friday and after you’re fearful somebody just now stole his body. Somebody took it somewhere and you want to now go get it and bring it back.

One scholar I read this week said it would be more like our word pinch. That’s how uncomfortable of an embrace it was. This isn’t Jesus stiff-arming Mary. Remember where they are standing. They are standing outside of the tomb. They are outside the empty tomb and it’s almost like Mary, look. Yes, all roads lead... That changes everything but we’re not done.” The story is not over. “Mary, don’t hold onto me. I have not yet ascended to the Father.

Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father... Not just mine. We are family. “Mary, you’re not losing me, but you need to know what’s happening. Go tell them my Father and Your Father. *my God and your God.*

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: I think this is a completely different tone. I’ve never experienced this, and you’ve probably never experienced this – deep, deep grief immediately ended. How does that work? He’s alive. I don’t have to grieve; he’s here. ***“I have seen the Lord!”*** I don’t know if you play songs on repeat, but I’m going to give you one. Amy says I do this way too much. She’ll ask me, “Maybe we just listen to this song three or four more times and then we find a new one on this trip?” This song... I want to give you some homework for this afternoon for your trip down to Arkansas. As you are going on down to the eclipse, get on iTunes and look up Larnelle Harris, Sandi Patty “I’ve just seen Jesus.” Let me tell you there has never been a voice like Larnelle Harris. But it’s this story we just read. It’s everything about this story. Sandi Patty plays Mary Magdalene in the song. Larnell Harris is Jesus.

I just kept praying all week, “Lord, call people by name. I want to go back to what we talked about last week – the skeptic in the room. I hope you came back. I hope you’re here. I just want to say this to you. From the story. I want to talk to you before I talk to our church family. If you are skeptical and still trying to figure out what faith in Christ is all about, stick around and keep asking questions. You saw a lot of evidence last week and you’re seeing it again today. I just want to encourage you to stick around the empty tomb. And we are going to continue to pray that the Lord calls you by name and calls you out and that you would know that he shed his blood and died for you, that you would repent of your sins and turn to him and place your faith and life in Christ. I need you to know when Christ saves you, he becomes the most important part of your story. That’s why everybody in here has a story, and your story has power and impact.

If you're a follower of Jesus and he's the main character, you should never again in your mind think you have a boring story.

We love to label things today. We're doing this all time with bios – we all have bios on our social media. Your most important label is Christian. I'm a father, I'm a husband, I'm an American, I'm a pastor. These aren't my most important labels. My most important label is I am a follower of Jesus, and I follow Christ.

I think it's one of the greatest schemes of Satan today. We are supposed to take our stand against the Devil's evil schemes. I call it the great silencing of American pulpits. What's happening today is the world wants to label everything we're talking about as political, everything – marriage, parenting, sex, gender, sexuality, money, immigration... Just name the issue and it's labeled political. And now what's happened is the church comes along, church people, followers of Jesus come along... many of you have said it to me. They tell their pastor, "We don't want you talking about political things. Well, that's a pretty good... We've always said Satan is brilliant. That's a pretty good scheme. And I think he also has a scheme to help you get a label. We live in a day where everybody wants their very first, most important identity to be their gender, sexuality, or sexual orientation. Listen, I'm heterosexual. I don't lead out with that. I lead out with, "I am a follower of Christ. I've made the decision to follow Jesus." So, what does Mary Magdalene remind us of? She reminds us that we have a savior who rescues us from sin and shame. She was redeemed, she was delivered from seven demons, she followed the Lord, she loved the Lord, she was there at his death, she experienced, spent time with, embraced the resurrected Jesus.

This is the plotline of your story and mine. Mary Magdalene also reminds us that our past will not keep God from using us in the future. Shame, regret, and embarrassment over your story, put that away. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Share your story boldly. You don't need to make stuff up. You don't need to add gratuitous details to try to make a better story. Jesus made it the best story. Mary Magdalene also reminds us that our story matters no matter how insignificant we may feel about it.

John Bloom puts it this way in his article. *"Mary Magdalene is a beautiful picture of the overwhelming grace of God being extended to unworthy people like us in Jesus."*

Going back to his other quote which I think is powerful. *"Your story may be very limited yet very significant in telling others of the good news of Jesus."* So, church, share bold stories of what Christ did for you. I wish we could have included this in last week's message, but obviously, we only have so much time.

Last week, I asked you to pray bold prayers because of an empty tomb. Yesterday morning, around 9:30, two people precious to me, and I know they're probably watching... They live in Florida now, but they met at College of the Ozarks. I performed their wedding years ago – Josh and Leann. They asked me this week if I would do a Baby Dedication over Zoom, as their six-month-old baby girl, Aurora, is in the NICU in Houston. I got on the phone at 9:30. I had prepared my thoughts and what I was going to say for the dedication much like we do here, but then the prayer. I'm asking the Lord for wisdom. I don't even know what to pray and how to pray for this baby, and for Josh and Leann. The Lord used Leann and their story and her faith. I had written it out. She said, "First of all, infection. Pray that the Lord keeps her free from infection. Aurora had been placed on the transplant list for a heart transplant

at six months old. They told me that and I had written down that she would be moved to the top of the transplant list. I said, "I'll pray for no infection and I'll also pray that she be moved to the top and a heart is provided on that transplant list." Leann... talk about praying bold prayers... she set me straight. She said, "No, we want to pray that she's taken off the transplant list. There was a moment where I thought *Why wouldn't that have been my first thought?*"

If we declared it last week that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power available to us today, why aren't we praying bolder prayers? You know me, I thought I held it together, but I didn't. We prayed a bold prayer, "Lord, remove Aurora from that." I said, "Lord, I can't wait for a toddler named Aurora to step on stage at woodland hills and meet this church family. If the tomb is empty and we know that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that is available to us today, of course, we should be praying bold prayers, but let me ask you church, why aren't we sharing bold stories?"

Share your love for Jesus and be clear about it. And don't just share your story, ask someone to share theirs with you. This is how we spur one another on in the church. Then I want to encourage you. If someone is sharing their story, try your hardest not to interrupt them, Hijacking their story, and making it about you. If their birthday is in March, they don't need to know when yours is. Just let them share their story. Because you and I both have a Savior to proclaim, and we will declare the resurrected Jesus.

I sang a hymn growing up in church and this was the chorus – "I love to tell the story twill be my theme in glory. To tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love."

Father, for Baby Aurora, we ask, and thousands are going to gather today on this campus. We boldly ask for you to take her off the transplant list and heal her heart. That this is the last surgery and stint and all that they did to begin to bring a heart to strength to pump that blood and that oxygen to her organs and to her body. We know. We are proclaiming that power that raised Jesus from the dead, so we don't use terms like *impossible situation*. Heal her, please.

For the skeptic in the room, they've seen the evidence. They heard it last week, they heard it today that the stone rolled away, empty tomb, body gone, angels, Jesus. Yet they still are questioning. I pray today that they will stick around until you call them by name. We ask the Holy Spirit today to call them by name.

For the followers of Jesus across this campus and online, I just pray that they begin not only praying bold prayers but sharing their story boldly about the salvation they have in you. Yes, we can talk about our past, but it's not the most important part of our story. You are the most important part of our story and we say thank you.

We pray all of this in the authority of the name of Jesus... and everyone agreed and said... Amen