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Transcript of:
The Mystery of Magdalene

presented by
Madeleine Boucher

I want to tell you Mary Magdalene's story to set the record straight. Mary Magdalene was the most prominent woman in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and in the early Church. Yet her story as handed down through the ages has been twisted beyond recognition. This popular version defames her. It is the real Mary Magdalene that I want to talk about this afternoon. I will base my account of Magdalene's life strictly on the Gospels. And I will use an English translation of the Bible that is officially approved by the Catholic Church. You have in hand all of the New Testament passages about Mary Magdalene in your handouts. I hope you all took the handouts, so you can check out the evidence for yourselves later on.

This is how we know whether a woman in a Gospel passage is Mary Magdalene: she is always identified as Mary of Magdala or Mary Magdalene. Unless the name Magdala or Magdalene accompanies the name Mary, the person in question is not Mary Magdalene. The one exception is in John's Resurrection story where Magdalene is twice called just Mary but the context makes perfectly clear who she is.

Why is Mary Magdalene's story important to us, to you and me? It is for two related reasons. First, biblical scholars, to correct the false image of Mary Magdalene, have engaged in the project of restoring her true image according to the Gospels. The distortion of Magdalene's image throughout Church history represents a wider distortion in the understanding of the Christian woman and man. The restoration of Magdalene's image, therefore, matters deeply to all Christians.

Secondly, as Rita told us so eloquently in her reflection on the Gospel reading, what we find in the New Testament is that Magdalene was the primary witness of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so she is an eminent model for us all, women and men, as we witness to our own Christian faith. For these reasons the recovery of Magdalene's authentic story from the Gospels has important consequences for the life of faith. In thinking about the subject of Mary Magdalene I engaged in dialogue with several scholars to whom I am indebted, notably Raymond Brown, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sandra Schneiders, and Jane Schaberg all, as it happens, Catholic scholars. I look forward also to engaging in a scholarly dialogue with all of you following my talk.

My remarks will be in three parts. I will talk first about who Mary Magdalene was not, then about who she was, and finally about her role in the Resurrection story of the Gospel of John. And much of what I'm going to say about Mary Magdalene, both the positive and the negative things, are illustrated in the artwork that is displayed. It was displayed in the chapel, and it is displayed around here. Our friend, Rita Houlihan, brought all this wonderful artwork here. So if you haven't had a chance to view the artwork, do look at it later this afternoon. There are both negative false images and positive true images, and they're... they are so labeled. So take a look at them.

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Part 1 – Who Mary Magdalene Was Not

From ancient times to the present, Mary Magdalene has been falsely depicted as a sinner who meets Jesus, repents, and turns her life around dramatically. One of the most blatant examples of this distorted portrait is the scene in the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, that places her in a brothel. This portrayal of her is nothing less than the politics of personal destruction. It has no basis in history or Scripture. Magdalene was never a prostitute, quite the contrary. She lived an ordinary, respectable life in the town of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee in ancient Palestine. Prostitution was never part of her world. She had other worries.

Perhaps you've heard that Jesus drove seven demons out of Mary Magdalene. Here's the story. Magdalene suffered from psychological problems. The number seven implies the severity of the illness. In her ancient culture a psychological disorder or a physical illness such as epilepsy were understood as possession by a demon or an unclean spirit. It had nothing to do with sin. There is no evidence whatever that Magdalene's possession was the result of sinfulness. Nowhere in the New Testament is spirit-possession in women or men attributed to sin. And in modern biblical scholarship, demon possession and sinfulness are carefully distinguished. We may suppose that one day Jesus came to Magdalene's town and preached and healed there. She believed that God was in this man. However it happened, he cured her of her mental illness. From that time on Magdalene became a follower or disciple of Jesus. She joined many women disciples who already followed him. So the story that Magdalene was a loose woman who radically changed her lifestyle after meeting Jesus is complete fabrication. It did not happen. It is the big lie.

Another lie would make Magdalene an adulterer. It is based on an old story of a woman caught in adultery. The film *The Last Temptation of Christ* makes Magdalene that woman and shows her being stoned. But here's the true story. Jesus was teaching near the Jerusalem Temple. The religious leaders brought this unknown woman to him. They wanted to stone her, citing the Mosaic law as their excuse. But Jesus said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." All the men walked away. Then Jesus told the woman to go her way and sin no more. I've often wondered where the man was who had committed adultery with her. But this woman Mary Magdalene was not.

In the film *Jesus Christ Superstar* Mary Magdalene is shown anointing Jesus. Though Magdalene might have welcomed that opportunity, it never happened. Other women received that blessing. There are actually three stories of anointing. One in Mark and Matthew, and those two are almost identical. That's one version. One in Luke and one in John. In three Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and John—there is not the slightest suggestion that the woman was a sinner. She was a respected member of the community. The incident occurred in the town of Bethany near Jerusalem on the eve of Jesus's Passion. In Mark and Matthew the woman is anonymous. She pours ointment on Jesus's head. She anoints him as the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. This is the only anointing of Jesus as Messiah in all the Gospels. Jesus interprets the woman's act as a prophetic gesture anticipating his burial.

In John, the woman is named. She is Mary of Bethany. The end was approaching for Jesus. He was at supper in the home of the sisters and brother who were his close friends, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. The meal foreshadowed the Last Supper. While Martha served the meal, Mary took a jar of

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fragrant ointment and anointed Jesus's feet. Though some criticized her for wasting expensive ointment, Jesus praised her. He told us that Mary had performed a prophetic act. She had anointed his body as the last rite in preparation for his burial. Her lavish act of compassion stands in sharp contrast to Judas's act of betrayal for a few pieces of silver. Though the two Marys shared a name, they were two different women. One was Mary of Bethany and the other was Mary of Magdala. The privilege of anointing Jesus was never Mary Magdalene's. Jesus added in Mark and Matthew, "Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." Has his promise come true? I wonder.

Earlier this year on Palm Sunday we heard the Passion reading from Mark's Gospel which begins with the incident of the Anointing in Bethany. But Mark's anointing story is optional; it is enclosed in brackets. It may or may not have been read in your parish church. John's anointing story of Mary of Bethany is never read on any Sunday, and it is not part of the Passion reading from John on every Good Friday where it belongs. This is a story of deep meaning that few churchgoers ever hear. Luke tells a different story. In Luke alone is the anointing woman a sinner; she is not a prophet but a prostitute. One day Jesus was at table in the house of his host Simon in a town in Galilee. A woman came to Jesus, shed tears on his feet, wiped them with her hair, and anointed them with ointment. This beautiful gesture expressed her repentance for her sinful life. Jesus said that her sins were forgiven because she loved much. Luke did not tell us this wonderful woman's name. Later, her story got attached to Mary Magdalene. The only anointing story always read in a Sunday liturgy where churchgoers hear it is Luke's story of the prostitute.

Let me mention at this point that the technical term for merging different texts or different persons into one is conflation. As you can see, conflation has been a major factor in the misinterpretation of Mary Magdalene. We might ask how all this misrepresentation happened, not why, but how. I have talked about some factors in the Gospels. The multiplicity of women named Mary, the three different anointing stories, Magdalene's demon possession, and the fact which I have not yet noted that Luke's first mention of Mary Magdalene immediately follows his story of the anointing prostitute. All of these could create confusion.

We do not know how soon after the New Testament period the false legend about Magdalene began because of the scarcity of evidence. The theologians, Origen in the third century and John Chrysostom in the fourth, both remarked that Magdalene was unsuited to be the first witness of Jesus's resurrection, hinting that distortions may already have been around. Other theologians made similar comments.

A decisive point occurred when Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century gave a sermon in which he first made three women into one and then identified the demonic and the erotic. I quote from the sermon: "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark." That's in the Markan appendix. "And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the ointment to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts." End of quotation.

Gregory put the papal seal of approval upon both conflation and the association of demon possession in a female with sexual sin. Gregory was no doubt well-intentioned. He held up Magdalene as an example of conversion to the Roman people at a dark moment in their history. Legends of reformed

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harlots were then popular. Gregory's sermon reflected the surrounding culture. Nevertheless, he gave sanction and promulgation to the legend of Magdalene the penitent sinner.

And so through the ages preachers, artists, writers, filmmakers, and others have made Mary Magdalene a composite of several different women unnamed and named. The prostitute, the adulterer, the penitent, Mary of Bethany, are melded into one. And that one becomes the sinner bearing the name Mary Magdalene. The defamation of Magdalene is complete. Magdalene is denied her power and authority as a major witness to the Christ event. It is important to note, however, that this defamation happened only in mainstream Western Christianity. This is a Western legend. The Greek Orthodox Church kept the different women distinct and never regarded Mary Magdalene as a sinner. I would add this. We can excuse the early and medieval theologians, including Gregory, who did not have at their disposal the tools of modern biblical scholarship. But the perpetuation of the distorted image of Magdalene in modern media presentations and in modern church art is absolutely indefensible and should be condemned by the Church.

I come now to [Part 2 – Who Mary Magdalene Was](#). I've talked about who Mary Magdalene was not. She was not a sinner of any sort. She was not the anointing woman. I will talk now about who she was. Magdalene exercised two very important roles as disciple and as apostle.

Let's look at the first passage in your handout, The Ministering Women in Luke 8:1-3. It is on page two of your handout, page two at the top. Luke 8:1-3, The Ministering Women:

Soon afterward... (Does... everyone have it? I'll give you a moment to find it.) Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages... (he, being Jesus) ... through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. And the Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Mag'dalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, (There's the reference to the seven demons.) and Jo-an'na the wife of Chu'za, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means.

And that verb, provided for, in the Greek is ministered to. These women were disciples and ministers. I'll point out a couple of things. As I said a moment ago, this is Luke's first mention of Mary Magdalene and it comes immediately after his story of the anointing prostitute. That's one of the things that led to the confusion. The women in this passage appear on the same level as the men. I think that's a significant point. This passage on women disciples is also made optional in the Sunday Scripture readings. And so the women named here may remain unknown to many churchgoers.

Nevertheless, what can we learn from this brief passage? Quite a lot. Let's begin with her name, Mary called the Magdalene. The name Mary in Hebrew is Miriam. Mary Magdalene has an illustrious predecessor in the Old Testament in the figure of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. The first Miriam was defamed in ancient Israel just as the second Miriam, Mary Magdalene, was defamed in the Christian tradition. The name Magdalene comes originally from the Hebrew word, *migdal*, which means high tower. Migdal became the name of a town, Magdala, on the Sea of Galilee. Mary of Magdala lived in that town. The name Mary of Magdala then became Mary Magdalene. The most important point to note is that Mary Magdalene is identified by her place, her home town. She is not

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identified by her relationship to a man, a husband, a father, or a son. This tells us that Magdalene was an independent woman. She probably lived on her own, a rare thing in ancient Jewish society.

The passage tells us another important fact. Mary Magdalene was a follower or disciple of Jesus. She was one of many women disciples. What exactly is a disciple? A disciple is one who follows. These women accompanied Jesus as he traveled around Galilee. That the women disciples were witnesses of Jesus's ministry from the beginning is historical. Luke notes that the women ministered to Jesus and the Twelve out of their means. This suggests that they were women of wealth. Yet, scholars agree that most of Jesus's earliest followers were poor. So this Lukan passage may not be giving us accurate information about Mary Magdalene's social status. Three women disciples are named. Lists of three names in the Gospel as both women and men indicate the leaders. Magdalene's name appears in every list of women in the Gospels, while the names of the other women vary. And with one exception Magdalene is always named first. This primacy tells us that Magdalene was recognized throughout the early Church as preeminent among the women disciples. Soon after the anointing in Bethany, Jesus was arrested, crucified, and buried. The women had gone up with Jesus to Jerusalem. The women had been disciples from the beginning and they remained faithful to the end. Mary Magdalene is the disciple whose role in the Paschal events is most consistently attested by all four Gospels.

Let's look at the passage, Witnesses of the Crucifixion, in Mark 15:40-41 on your handout. And that is still on page two. It's on the bottom of page two, the Passion narrative, Witnesses of the Crucifixion. Let's look at the Marcan version:

There were also women looking on from afar; among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome who, when he was in Galilee, followed him and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

And Matthew's version is almost identical to Mark's. In Mark, our earliest Gospel, only women were present at the Crucifixion. Mary Magdalene was one of them. The men had fled the night before. The presence of women disciples at the Crucifixion is recorded in all four Gospels and is certainly historical. This scene of the women witnesses is also made optional at the end of the Passion reading on Palm Sunday. The Passion narrative is framed by two scenes of women. It begins with the anointing woman in Bethany and ends with the women witnesses at the Crucifixion and burial. Yet these stories are either optional or omitted from the Passion reading. The women witnesses, including Mary Magdalene, are made nearly invisible. Both Luke and John broadened the group of onlookers to include men. Luke took this scene from Mark and added all Jesus's acquaintances to the group. He left the women unnamed and had them disappear into the crowd. John narrated the scene in which Jesus gives his mother and the Beloved Disciple to each other. This, by the way, is the only place where Magdalene is not first in a list of women. The mother of Jesus is named first and Magdalene last. Luke and John raise the question whether men disciples also were present at the Crucifixion. On this question scholars are divided. So I will leave it an open question.

Just as the women disciples were the last to stand at the foot of the cross on that Good Friday, so they were the first to arrive at the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. The women were the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. Then Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom the Risen

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Jesus appeared. The Risen Jesus commanded her to announce the Resurrection to the other disciples. She carried out this command. Thus, she became an apostle, one who is commissioned by the Risen Jesus to witness to the Resurrection. Magdalene's claim to apostleship was equal to that of Peter and Paul. Magdalene was not only an apostle but the first apostle, the premiere apostle. And so the Christian tradition has honored Magdalene with a unique title, Apostle to the Apostles. And in Latin that's *apostola apostolorum*. Let me make clear what the word apostle means. An apostle is one who is sent on a mission. There were two requirements of an apostle: to have seen the Risen Jesus, and to have been sent or commissioned by him to proclaim the Resurrection.

To expand briefly on the preceding remarks, we actually find two competing traditions in the New Testament as to who received the first Resurrection appearance and apostolic commission. According to Matthew, John, and the Marcan appendix, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene. In Matthew she is accompanied by another woman. The historical value of the Marcan appendix is disputed so I will just leave it aside. According to Paul and Luke, Jesus appeared first to Peter. But it is interesting to note that Paul and Luke simply state this point. There is no narrative in any Gospel of a resurrection appearance to Peter alone. It is reasonable to conclude that the Magdalene tradition is primitive and authentic. Since the Magdalene tradition challenged the Peter tradition, it would probably have been suppressed if it had not been based on accurate historical memory. But the tradition of the first appearance to Magdalene was preserved in the early Church, and it survived in two independent Gospels, Matthew and John, because it was ancient and primary. Further, all the Gospels gave Magdalene the primacy in lists of the women followers because she was the first disciple to receive an appearance of the Risen Jesus and the apostolic commission. Paul and Luke departed from this tradition.

I come now to Part 3 – The Resurrection Narrative in John. I would like now to focus on the Resurrection story in the Gospel of John. I've given you two different versions of John's Resurrection story. The easier one to follow is on page seven of your handouts, the last page of the handout, page seven. So you can follow there if you want to follow my remarks.

Let me note that all the Resurrection stories are composed of three parts: the discovery of the empty tomb, the first appearance of the Risen Jesus, and the Risen Jesus's commission of the disciple to proclaim the Resurrection. So, the empty tomb, the first appearance, and the commission.

John's Resurrection story is the longest and theologically richest of the four. It is a recognition scene, one of the most memorable recognition scenes in the history of art and literature. One writer, Joan Acocella, says that in John's Resurrection account (I quote), "The faceless Magdalene is given not just a face but a great flaming personal drama." End of quotation. I think there are actually two dramas interwoven in this story: on the human level, the personal drama of Mary Magdalene, her grief and her joy; and on the spiritual level, the great drama of our salvation. The intimate and the cosmic meet.

Mary Magdalene comes alone to the tomb in the pre-dawn darkness of Easter Sunday. She runs back to get two other disciples, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, lamenting, *they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him*. The two men disciples race to see who can arrive at the tomb first, confirm that it is empty, and leave. Magdalene stays in the garden outside the tomb. She sees two angels and repeats her lament. Then Magdalene sees a figure she supposes

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to be the gardener and repeats her lament a third time like a chorus. The figure is not the gardener but Jesus. He calls her by name, Mary. Mary Magdalene recognizes his voice and replies, *my teacher*. This moment of recognition recalls the metaphor of the good shepherd earlier in the Gospel. The shepherd calls his own sheep by name, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me." This description is fulfilled in the Risen Jesus's appearance to Magdalene. She knows him when he speaks her name. In John's Gospel, Jesus calls his disciples *my own*. Magdalene thus had the same relationship to Jesus as the Twelve and all the other disciples. Women were intimate disciples of Jesus. It is to a woman that Jesus first appeared. Jesus remembered first this representative of the women who had not abandoned him during the Passion. I want to point out the contrast here. Peter and the Beloved Disciple went to the empty tomb and did not see the Risen Jesus.

We come now to the commission that Jesus gives to Magdalene in verse 20:17. Verse 17 is in two parts. In the first part Jesus says, "Do not hold me because I have not yet ascended to the Father." You may know the famous Latin translation of these words, *noli me tangere*. This is a difficult saying and it requires explanation. On the human level, the personal drama, Magdalene has apparently reached out to Jesus. She thinks that he has returned as he had promised at the Last Supper and now he will stay with her and his other followers. She wants to hold on to the source of her joy but Jesus responds, *do not hold me*. In the words of Joan Acocella, I quote, "This scene is the New Testament's most powerful statement about the confrontation with death, about losing forever the thing you love. Now Magdalene must stand back, let him go, and make her way alone." End of quotation. On the spiritual level, the drama of salvation, the meaning of Jesus's saying is that he cannot be held because his resurrection appearance cannot be his permanent presence with his disciples. His permanent presence is not in the form of an appearance but in the form of the gift of the Spirit. Jesus must return to God so that he can give the Spirit to his followers. The Spirit will be his permanent dwelling among us.

This brings us to the second part of verse 20:17, the commission itself. Instead of holding on to Jesus, Magdalene is commanded to go and tell the other disciples of his resurrection. "Go to my brethren." And the word brethren here is a generic. It means my sisters and brothers, the disciples. "And say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." This is the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus calls his disciples his sisters and brothers because only by his exaltation can he empower those who believe in him to become children of God. The brief message that Jesus entrusts to Magdalene contains the whole Gospel. With Jesus's exaltation, all is accomplished. The good news of salvation is fulfilled. Jesus is going to God with a saving purpose. He will return from God to his disciples to make them children of God, his sisters and brothers, by giving them the Spirit. Mary Magdalene hastens to fulfill Jesus's commission. She announces the Gospel to her co-disciples, and what she proclaims is the standard apostolic announcement, "I have seen the Lord."

The question of who first saw the Risen Jesus and proclaimed him is of great theological significance. It identifies the first apostolic witness. It identifies the Apostle to the Apostles. Mary Magdalene's testimony is the, or at least a, primary source of the Church's faith. Magdalene is truly a towering figure. Few New Testament passages are more important than John's story of the Risen Jesus's first appearance and commission to Magdalene. Yet this story is not read in the liturgy of Easter Sunday. The Easter reading recounts only Peter's and the Beloved disciple's race to the empty tomb, and it

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stops there. Most Catholics, therefore, never hear Mary Magdalene's magnificent story. The entire Resurrection story is read on Mary Magdalene's Feast Day, but her Feast Day is always celebrated on a week day as it is today. We were fortunate to hear the full Resurrection narrative from Father Mongelluzzo today.

And now I conclude. For two millennia, tradition has degraded Mary Magdalene from disciple and apostle to prostitute. How do we account for this astonishing process? This is the question. Why? I'm not sure, but perhaps it's a combination of things. It may be the painting of a colorful legend full of romantic and seductive overtones. And I sometimes wonder if the treatment of Mary Magdalene in the Christian tradition that was foreshadowed by the treatment of Miriam in ancient Israel continues down to this present day. But our gathering here today and the warm welcome from Boston College and the Summer Institute of the School of Theology and Ministry and the Council for Women of Boston College signal an historic moment of change.

Thank you.