

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

As many of you know, the Anglican Church follows a calendar of saints each year that was begun by the early Christian Church. As people were largely illiterate in ancient times, there were no calendars as we know them today. Rather than marking time by months and dates, people tracked time by the feast days of the saints. These days were originally assigned to match up with the time period in which the saint was thought to have died. Over time, so many saints were identified that they could not all have their own appointed days. Therefore, All Saints' Day, November 1 every year, was designed to honour the full Communion of Saints – including all those who did not have a particular date assigned to them. This week, July 22, we celebrate the feast day of St. Mary of Magdala; also known to us as Mary Magdalene.

When we hear this saint's name, we most often think of her as a prostitute. But that characterization does not come from the Gospels. Rather, it was Pope Gregory I who gave her that description in the year 591; some 5 centuries after her death. It was during his Easter sermon that he stated that Mary of Bethany and Mary of Magdala were the same woman, and that Mary of Magdala was also the unnamed, repentant woman in Luke 7 who anointed Christ's feet. This gave rise to the belief that Mary of Magdala was a lady of the evening. This idea was formally rejected by Pope Paul VI in 1969, but the misinformation stuck. It was Pope Francis who further elevated Mary of Magdala's status as a major saint in 2016 when he also called her "the apostle of the apostles". And I think it is interesting to note that the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu named St. Mary Magdalene as one of his favourite saints

The name "Mary" was the most common female name in the Jewish world during Christ's lifetime. And so, it is understandable that there could be some confusion. It is believed that she was originally from the fishing village of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee, which was why she was referred to as Mary Magdalene in order to identify her as a different Mary than the other Marys noted in the various writings from that time. But if take away the misinformation about being a prostitute when we read the 4 Gospels of the New Testament

as well as the Apocrypha, we get a portrait of a woman who was a leader; a highly intelligent and devoted disciple who often seemed to have a better understanding of Jesus and his teachings than did the 12 male apostles. There is reference to her supporting Christ's ministry from her own financial resources which leads us to think that she was wealthy in her own right. It is quite possible that she suffered from epilepsy, which was considered at that time to be a form of possession. Luke tells us that Jesus healed her from "seven demons", but we know now that the number 7 was not always meant literally. Rather, it was the number for completion, meaning that Mary had been completely healed from her epilepsy. The Gospel of Thomas, which was discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, details conversations between Mary of Magdala and Jesus, and between Mary and the other disciples. It appears that Simon Peter resented and was jealous of the position that Mary held with Jesus, and it is within Thomas' writings that we can read the dialogue in which Jesus affirms Mary's leadership, loyalty, and wisdom to Simon Peter.

The Gospel of Philip, also discovered in 1945, describes the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus as one of a partnership; one in which he often confides in Mary and asks her opinion. There are references within Philip's writing to Jesus kissing Mary, but we need to remember that in Jewish culture that kissing was not a romantic gesture but a way of passing peace. But it was from this description that fictional novels such as "The DaVinci Code" by Dan Brown in 2003 that we get the contemporary notion that Jesus and Mary had a romantic relationship; that they may even have married. "The DaVinci Code" novel speculates that Mary Magdalene was pregnant at the time of the crucifixion and that she subsequently went into hiding and gave birth to a child. Dan Brown goes on to theorize that, if Jesus had fathered a human child, this would prove that he was not divine. This kind of thinking only serves to show that Dan Brown may be a great novelist, but he is a lousy theologian. It would have been perfectly in keeping with Jewish culture of that time for a man of Jesus' age to have taken a wife. Being that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, it is theoretically possible that he could have fathered a child. None of that proves that Christ was not divine. But the fact is that we have no gospel evidence that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were romantically linked, nor do we have any evidence that they married.

and had a child. In keeping with Jewish tradition, it would be more likely that Jesus would have married Lazarus' sister Mary because of the close and longstanding relationship between the two families. But again, there is no evidence of this and a marriage would have been a very important fact that would have been recorded because of its significance if it were true. Dan Brown is also not the best historian because he cites the Knights of the Templar as being the guardians of Mary and her offspring. I am a member of the modern day order of the Knights of the Templar and we are simply an organization that supports charitable causes and discusses theological issues. I had to study the history of the Knights before I was inducted, and I can promise you that there was nothing of Dan Brown's novel in that – although they do still touch you on the shoulders with a sword when you are inducted so you have to be very still.

The Gospel of Mary, discovered in Cairo in 1896 but not published until 1955, was not written by Mary of Magdala, but it is about her. It is believed to have been written by an anonymous author about a century after her death. Again, it describes conversations between Mary and the disciples and gives us insight into a remarkably wise and intelligent woman who challenges the Jewish thinking that women should remain subservient to men and are people without credibility. It is only in John's Gospel that Mary is named as the one who first saw Jesus on Easter morning as she visited the tomb. Finding it empty, she addressed a man whom she believed to be a gardener, asking him for the whereabouts of the body of Christ. Realizing that she is actually seeing Jesus, she speaks to him and then rushes back to share the story with the disciples. Some theologians have speculated that the other 3 gospels cite male disciples as being first to see Jesus because a woman's testimony in a Jewish court of law would have been disregarded and Mary's story would not have been taken seriously as evidence of the resurrection.

Needless to say, it was for her presence at the tomb on Easter morning and for her being chosen as the first to see and speak with the risen Christ that she is remembered as a saint. Mary has been designated the patron saint of women, but also the patron saint of hairdressers and perfume makers because of her association with anointing. There are a number of symbols linked to Mary, including the rose, the alabaster jar, and the red egg

which is linked to her proclamation of the resurrection and the new life in Christ (show icon). It is believed that she left the region of Jerusalem after Pentecost, and may have lived for a time in areas now known as France and Great Britain. It is also believed that she simply died of old age because there is no mention or evidence of her having been martyred for her faith. Because the original saints were all martyrs, there was a long delay in the Church naming her as a saint, and Pope Gregory's assertion of prostitution didn't help in her becoming recognized as a saint. But I do hope that you will take a moment to think of Mary this coming Tuesday and to think about her important role at the tomb as well as her role as an early advocate for women. Amen.