

DISCOVERY SERIES

# DISCIPLED by JESUS

Mary Magdelene's Walk of Faith



**Alice Mathews**



*introduction*

# Discipled By Jesus

Mary Magdalene's  
Walk of Faith

**love the stories** of Bible characters, especially those people in the Gospels who interacted with Christ when He walked upon the earth. These accounts are rich expressions of grace and mercy, forgiveness and restoration, compassion and correction that have spoken deeply to the hearts of men and women for two millennia. Of all of those stories, however, arguably none tells a tale of such undeniable transformation, strong commitment, and deep

devotion as the story of Mary Magdalene. Her encounter with Jesus can be an example to men and women alike of what it looks like when we respond with our whole hearts to the love of Christ.

In this booklet, excerpted from her book *A Woman Jesus Can Teach* (Discovery House Publishers), Bible teacher Alice Mathews tells Mary Magdalene's story in a warm and personal way—as if she were speaking to a women's Bible conference. Yet it highlights principles vital for both men and women as we examine our own walk with Christ.

We relate to each other better than we relate to abstract concepts, and so the opportunity to see strong biblical values and concerns lived out in the life of a real person living in the real world can become most instructive to us. For that reason we recommend to you this booklet as a look into the heart of a hurting person who found hope and life and peace through the love of Jesus Christ.



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one

# Mary Magdalene:

## How To Walk by Faith and Not by Sight

**I**n *Women's Ways of Knowing*, an important study of the way women think about themselves and about life, Mary Belenky and her fellow researchers identified five ways women know things. One of them is called "received knowledge." We all know things because someone told them to us. Most women have a large fund of received knowledge, a stash of facts and opinions they didn't think up on their own, yet they accept. Women "know" how to use a washing machine and grow houseplants, and where to buy the freshest vegetables or find the best book bargains. They may also have learned to name some of the constellations and all the

books of the Bible. They've spent their lives acquiring this kind of knowledge.

Surprisingly, many women limit what they "know" to what they have received from someone else. They look to an authority outside themselves for instruction in every area of life. An interior decorator tells them which home furnishings to buy. A hair stylist decides how they should wear their hair. A personal shopper chooses their clothes after a color analyst has given them a swatch chart of colors to wear. These women know a great deal and know that they know a lot. But they trust only what comes from outside themselves as "real" knowledge.

Sometimes such a woman faces a crisis. Perhaps an authority falls from grace or disappoints her. Or two equal authorities disagree. Whom can she believe? At that point a woman may move to a different way of thinking about herself and about her world.

In most cases, it takes some kind of crisis, a confrontation, a disappointment, or a disaster to move a person from unquestioning reliance on outside human authorities to a different way of thinking and knowing. We must make room for new learning. All of us do.



two

## Back to School

**W**e **seldom move** from one comfortable level of learning and knowing to another unless we are forced in some way to move.

I benefited most from teachers who made me think instead of letting me parrot the textbook or my lecture notes.

We don't do ourselves a favor if we insist on staying at one learning level when we need to move to another one. We often don't like the circumstances that push us to change. We'd prefer to be left alone in our comfortable tranquility. But that is not the path to growth.

Nor is it the path to true discipleship. If we are to grow as Christians in our understanding of God, we have to expect the tough circumstances that confront and disappoint us. It takes grim life experiences to build muscle into our souls.



The process of following Jesus as His disciples is the process of making room for new ways of looking at life and at ourselves. Jesus was a master teacher. We might have expected Him to use only one method for getting His message across, but He taught different people in different ways.

We might have thought He would choose only the most promising pupils for His class. Instead, He included men and women other teachers would have ignored. One choice pupil of the Master Teacher was Mary Magdalene.



She possibly spent more time with Jesus than any other woman in the gospels.

Mary of Magdala found that her discipleship as a follower of Jesus Christ was a constant learning process. She had already learned much as one who traveled with Jesus. But in one of the final scenes in the Gospels, she was once again back in school, learning something new about being a disciple.

Though she is mentioned by name fourteen times in the gospels, we actually know only four things about Mary Magdalene. The first two we see in Luke 8:1–3:

*Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others.*

*These women were helping to support them out of their own means.*

The first fact we know about Mary of Magdala is that Jesus cast seven devils out of her. We don't know when or where. Both Mark and Luke give us the fact,

***Though she is mentioned by name fourteen times in the gospels, we actually know only four things about Mary Magdalene.***

but neither gives us the story. We do know from her name that Mary came from Magdala, a town about three miles from Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was the territory that Jesus continually criss-crossed in His itinerant ministry in Galilee. At some point they met and the miracle of her deliverance took place.

Delivered from seven devils. What must that have meant for this woman? We do not know how long or in what way she was tormented by demon possession.

But we do know that any possessed person was an outcast from normal society. Some afflicted people were more animal than human, living in caves,



*The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ cast seven demons out of Mary of Magdalene (LUKE 8:2). What terrible mental suffering must have vanished when these tormenting demons left her! Like the derelict who was delivered from a legion of evil spirits, Mary's gratefulness motivated her to stay in close fellowship with Jesus (LUKE 8:1-3, 26-39).*

roving around the countryside terrifying people with their distorted faces and wild eyes. Created by God, they were being destroyed by Satan. What it meant for Mary to be possessed by seven demons we cannot guess. But for her, deliverance must have been a life-changing liberation. Her bound spirit was set free. Her cramped limbs relaxed. Her contorted face became serene.

The second thing we know about Mary is that she traveled all over Galilee and down into Judea with Jesus and the Twelve. If you suffered from a terrible affliction for years and then found a doctor who could release you from your suffering, you would probably want to stay as close to that doctor as possible. Mary Magdalene became a permanent itinerant with Jesus' band of followers.

Most of us probably assume that Jesus and His disciples traveled around strictly as a male group—the Savior and the twelve men whose names we may have memorized in Sunday school. There are a number of reasons we might assume this.

For one, during the first century in Israel, some rabbis taught that good religious men did not speak to women in public. A Pharisee would not speak even to his own mother if he met her on the street. The careful segregation of men and women in that culture would make anyone traveling with both male and female followers too countercultural to be listened to.



Furthermore, the Law declared that a woman during her menstrual period was ritually unclean. Everything she touched was defiled. At such a time she needed to be tucked away where she could not contaminate anyone else. How could Jesus and the Twelve risk contamination by these women traveling with them?

Public opinion about a mixed band of followers traveling around with Jesus might have raised moral questions. When we think about Jesus and His disciples in the Gospels, the people involved are the men we've come to know—Peter, James and John, Andrew, Nathanael, Bartholomew, Judas, and the others. How could this group of women travel as members of Jesus' band without raising eyebrows?

The gospel writers don't answer that



*Some have tried to link **"the sinful woman"** mentioned in Luke 7:37 with Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned in Luke 8:2. Although one passage follows the other, neither explicitly says that these two women were one and the same. What we can verify is that Mary Magdalene was delivered from demonic influence. She also may have been a woman of financial substance who was able to support our Lord's ministry (LUKE 8:1-3).*

***For Mary, deliverance must have been a life-changing liberation. Her bound spirit was set free.***

question for us. What we do know is that while Jesus' enemies accused Him of Sabbath-breaking, of drinking too much wine, and of associating too closely with

tax collectors and other disreputable types, at no time did they ever raise a question about sexual immorality. We must assume that these men and women traveled together in a way that avoided scandal.

First named among the women in that band was Mary Magdalene. We know nothing more about her background. Some commentators believe she came from a wealthy family and was thus able to help support Jesus and His other followers. That may or may not have been the case.

You may have heard of the musical stage show called "Jesus Christ Superstar." In it Mary Magdalene was portrayed as a woman who practiced the "oldest profession on earth," prostitution. Yet in the Scriptures we find no basis for that idea.

This myth about Mary Magdalene started in the sixth century when a pope named Gregory linked her with the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfumed oil. Ever since, throughout the past fourteen centuries various artists have portrayed Mary Magdalene as a voluptuous hooker. Churches have named homes for rescued prostitutes Magdalene houses. Despite the myth, Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute. Furthermore, we have no evidence that demon possession led to immorality in anyone's life.

The first two facts we know about Mary are that Jesus cast seven demons out of her and that she was a permanent part of the group that traveled with Him.



*three*

## Desolation

**T**he third thing the Bible tells us about Mary is that on a bad Friday called Good Friday she stayed at the cross long after the disciples had fled. From Mark we learn that “some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed Him and cared for His needs. Many other women who had come up with Him to Jerusalem were also there” (MARK 15:40–41).

After agonizing hours, Jesus died. Joseph of Arimathea, along with Nicodemus, came to take the body of Jesus off the cross and place it in a tomb.

Matthew tells us that “Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in

front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting across from the tomb" (MATTHEW 27:59–61).



All four Gospel writers take pains to tell us that Mary and the other women not only stayed through the awful hours of crucifixion but made sure they knew where Jesus had been buried so they could come after the Sabbath and finish anointing the body. When we look at Mary Magdalene and the others, we see women who were completely committed to Jesus Christ even in the midst of their bitter grief.

It comes as no surprise that we find these same women, with Mary Magdalene apparently leading them, up before dawn on Sunday morning, hurrying to the garden tomb. Here were women carrying out their normal role in Jewish society, preparing a dead body for proper burial. As they went, they fretted about a very real problem they faced: who would roll away the large stone at the entrance to the tomb?

They knew the size of the stone. They had watched as Joseph and Nicodemus hastily laid Jesus' body in the tomb and rolled the heavy cartwheel across the opening. They also knew that the stone was sealed by the Roman government. That seal could not be broken. Yet they were determined to do the right thing for Jesus. They had cared for His needs for three years as He traveled around Galilee and back

***We see women who were completely committed to Jesus Christ even in the midst of their bitter grief.***

and forth to Judea. They had taken His physical well-being as their responsibility. So in His death they could not shrink from giving Him a correct burial. Despite the obstacles—a huge stone and a Roman seal—they seized the first opportunity to come to the tomb.



*Dan Brown's bestseller **The Da Vinci Code** is fiction. But many accept it as legitimate history. In it we are told Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had children with her (THE DA VINCI CODE, pp. 235-252). What is the biblical response? The Scriptures record a chaste ministry relationship between Jesus and Mary and tell of her witness to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (MATTHEW 27:54-56; JOHN 20:11-18).*







*four*

## Exaltation

**W**hen the women arrived, what did they find? Mark tells us that “they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away” (MARK 16:4). In that moment began Mary’s next lesson in discipleship. She had set out that morning with one set of expectations and quickly found them turned upside down. John reports the incident this way:

*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 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 Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and*

*reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)*



*Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. (20:1–11)*

Mary, seeing the stone rolled away, made an assumption. She concluded that Jesus' body had been taken away and laid elsewhere. In that moment she could not think of Jesus as anything but dead. She had watched Him die. She had seen Him placed in this tomb.

Running to Peter and John, she followed them back to the tomb but stood outside weeping. This was the final blow. Enormous emotional tension had built up over the preceding weeks. Standing there, she may have remembered that last trip from Galilee to Judea, that seventy-mile walk to Jerusalem. Among other things had been Jesus' ominous prediction of His coming death. But overshadowing that had been the thrill of

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. She had heard the adulation of the crowds crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes

***Mary concluded that Jesus' body had been taken away . . . . She could not think of Jesus as anything but dead.***

in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

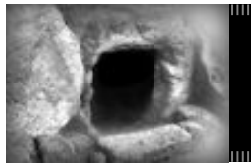
She had stood in the Court of the Women and watched as Jesus entered the temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers. She swelled with pride as He drove out evil men who were fleecing the poor pilgrims coming to the Holy City to celebrate the Passover. She held her breath, seeing the fury of the chief priests and Pharisees as Jesus taught for the last time in the temple courtyard.

She may have watched at the house of Simon the Leper as Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus. If so, she heard Him again predict His own death. She may have been present at Jesus' trial. We know she was there as He was led away to



*Jesus chose 12 men as His disciples. But of them, only **John** is recorded to have stayed with Jesus at the cross. In contrast, at least three women were there, including **Mary** of Magdala.*

execution. She was there as the nails were driven into His hands and feet. She was there when the spear split open His side. She was there as the sky darkened at midday and a strong earthquake broke open rocks and graves. She had stood with the other women at the foot of the cross watching the One who had delivered her from seven demons now seemingly unable to deliver Himself. She watched Him die.



The highs and lows of that week all flowed together. She felt again the sting of contradiction as she remembered hearing crowds chant "Hosanna" one day and "Away with Him! Crucify Him!" only a few days later. Mary who had experienced that emotional rollercoaster now stood at the tomb, wrung out, devastated by the thought that, even in death, Jesus was violated. His body had been taken. Her wrenching sobs expressed all the dashed hopes and desperation she felt.

Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

*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." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. (JOHN 20:10-14)*

When Mary and the other women had arrived at the tomb earlier that morning, she had sped off to find Peter

and John. Meanwhile the others entered the tomb and met the angels who said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen! Remember how He told you, while He

***The highs and lows of that week all flowed together. Her wrenching sobs expressed all the dashed hopes and desperation she felt.***

was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " (LUKE 24:5-8)

But now the weeping Mary, who had missed those words the first time, did not wait for those words of hope when she saw the angels. Blinded by her grief, she turned away from them. As she turned, she saw a man standing nearby. He spoke exactly the same words she had just heard from the angels in John 20:15-18: "Woman . . . why are you crying? Who is it you are 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."*  
*Jesus said to her, "Mary."*



*The word **hosanna** was used as a shout of praise and adoration. At its heart, it is a cry for salvation. The word means "save" or "help."*

*She turned toward Him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).*

*Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "*

*Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that He had said these things to her.*

What did it take to move Mary from desolation to exaltation and to galvanize her for witness? Only one thing. Jesus spoke her name in a voice she knew, and it was enough.



The Good Shepherd called the name of this weeping sheep, Mary, and she knew His voice. Suddenly everything that had been all wrong was now all right.

The one who had been dead was now alive. The one who had delivered her from seven demons was once again with her. In her ecstatic joy she flung her arms around Him.

Jesus gently disengaged her clinging hold on His body and gave her a task: Go and tell my brothers. In a split second this disciple had moved from abject sorrow to euphoria: The Teacher was alive! Now she had work to do.

The fourth thing we know about Mary Magdalene is that she was sent by Jesus as the first witness to the resurrection. He commissioned her to tell His brothers

the good news. She became, as Augustine called her, "an apostle to the apostles."

Mary's mental horizon had been fixed in the past. Her thoughts had been riveted on a dead body. Only the living Christ Himself could move her out of her focus on the past and into the future. In the future she was to go and tell.

***What did it take to move Mary from desolation to exaltation? Only one thing. Jesus spoke her name in a voice she knew.***







five

## Meeting Us Where We Are

**M**ary Magdalene was not the only follower of Jesus who needed a changed focus. In the same chapter John recounts Jesus' encounter with another of His followers:

*Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came [on Easter evening]. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"*

*But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it."*

*A week later His disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"*

*Then He said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe.”*

*Thomas said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”*

*Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (JOHN 20:24–29)*

In both cases Jesus made a special appearance to one of His followers—to Mary in the garden and to Thomas in the upper room with the locked door. Both Mary and Thomas had thought Jesus was dead. They were preoccupied with the Jesus of the past. Only the physical presence of Jesus would convince them otherwise.



These who had set their minds on what they could see or touch had to learn to worship and love by faith. They could not cling to Jesus' physical presence. They had to learn to relate to the Savior in a different way.

Mary knew Jesus' voice when He spoke her name. To her Jesus gave a commission: Go and tell. To Thomas, who had refused to believe the testimony of the other disciples, He gave a gentle rebuke: You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

When I was a child, my parents took me to church almost every time the doors were open. Our church had a strong evangelistic outreach. Every service closed with a public invitation to non-Christians to come to Christ.

Each summer the church sponsored six weeks of tent meetings at which various evangelists preached every night. Over the years our family never missed a service. It was not surprising that at the age of eight I went forward in a tent meeting to ask Jesus to come into my life.

What was supposed to be a source of great peace, however, was for me a source

***These who had set their minds on what they could see or touch had to learn to worship and love by faith.***

of great torment. During the next ten years I was wretched. I was sure God had not heard my prayers and made me a part of His family.

In listening to all the visiting preachers at our church, I had gotten the idea that I'd feel cleansed from sin if God had truly forgiven me. I didn't have any earth-shaking, shivery experiences like the ones the evangelists described as part of other people's conversions. For me that meant I was not yet a Christian.

As a child and then as a teenager, I agonized and prayed. I wanted the



**Thomas** is remembered for his doubt. But in John 11:16, just days before the crucifixion, Thomas courageously declared his readiness to die for his Lord.

experience that would confirm for me that God had, indeed, forgiven me and made me His child. I didn't understand that there are "diff'rent strokes for diff'rent folks."

To some people come experiences like Mary's in the garden or like Thomas's in the upper room. To others of us comes the word Jesus spoke to Thomas: Blessed are they who have not seen anything spectacular and yet have believed. I began to understand this only dimly after my first year in college. Later experiences as a pastor's wife and as a missionary helped me see more clearly that God deals with each of us as individuals. He calls each of His sheep by name. He knows exactly what we need as we walk with Him.

That is what our discipleship is about. It means learning to believe whether or not we have tangible evidence to go on. It means learning to trust our sovereign, loving God to do what is best for us, whether He does it with some dramatic experience or with silence.

How has God worked in your life? What have you learned about Him that makes a difference in your life? Where have you moved in your understanding of who God is and what He is doing in and through you? Your answers to such questions will tell you the shape of your discipleship.

Women as well as men were disciples of the Savior in Israel two thousand years ago. They followed Him, lis-



tened to Him, learned from Him, ministered to Him.

We don't have Jesus' physical presence among us to see and touch and help as they did. We have been asked to "walk by faith and not by sight." But our discipleship can be just as real as theirs. We have the Bible to guide us and the fellowship of other Christians to sustain us and correct us.

In school we moved along from learning addition to subtraction to the multiplication tables, then on to fractions, percentages, equations, and theorems. We learned these things so we can now balance a checkbook, work in a bank, or become an astrophysicist. All of that learning was to good purpose.



*We are often hard on **Thomas** the "doubter," but who among us wouldn't doubt a resurrection? Intriguingly, Jesus was not angry with him. Thomas's true legacy is not one of doubt, but of great faith. Tradition has it that he went on to be an apostle in the east.*

***Jesus, the Master Teacher, guides each of us in different ways to learn what we need to know. No two of us have the same life experience.***

Jesus, the Master Teacher, guides each of us in different ways to learn what we need to know. No two of us have the same life experience. He takes us where we are and works with us there, but always to the same purpose. He wants to move us from

ignorance of God to acquaintance to a deep relationship as His daughters and sons. He moves us from no faith to faith to an unshakable confidence in the living God. He teaches us to see tough times as God's way of moving us to new ways of thinking about ourselves and our purpose in life.

We walk with God each day as learners so that we can distinguish good from evil. We go on to maturity.



# Questions

For Personal Reflection  
or Group Discussion:

**1.** Mary Magdalene saw Jesus and heard Him call her name before she recognized Him. How can you recognize the living Christ today?

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**2.** What does it mean to "walk by faith and not by sight"?

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**3.** As you look at yourself as a learner in the hands of the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, what experiences has He used to encourage you and teach you to keep on following Him?

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**4.** What goals would you like to set for yourself as a disciple in the 21st century?

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