

**Art and reflection for Feast days of
St Mary Magdalene 22nd July /St James 25th July**

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All four Gospels mention a woman named Mary "of Magdala" (a little town on the Sea of Galilee) as a disciple and supporter of Jesus.

Luke 8

1 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2 as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Indeed, she is mentioned twelve times in the Gospels, and all four testify to her having been at Jesus' tomb (Mark 16 1-8, Matthew 28 1-10. Luke 24 1-12 – Luke does not name her, but simply mentions a group of women). In the much fuller account of John (Ch20) Mary comes to the tomb early in the morning, finds it empty and runs to tell Peter and John, who in turn go to the spot, but then depart. Mary, remaining in the garden, sees two angels

13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Thus Mary is the key witness who announces the Resurrection to others – hence she is sometimes called "The Apostle to the Apostles".

Dr Dorothy Lee writes

"the New Testament itself is quite clear about the priority and identity of Magdalene as a key disciple, witness and leader in the early church."

Unfortunately not only has this Mary been identified with two other women in the Gospels, Mary of Bethany the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the woman who anoints Jesus with perfume and wipes his feet with her hair, but from the time of a homily by Pope Gregory (591) this single "Mary" was tagged as a prostitute with the "seven demons" which Jesus had expelled from Mary of Magdala being identified with the "seven deadly sins" of the early medieval period. In turn this has led to innumerable images which more or less overtly depict this "Mary Magdalene" in a highly sexualized way.

In Latin Jesus' command to Mary rendered above as "Do not hold on to me" is "Noli me tangere", and this is the title often given to paintings of their encounter in the garden. The best known example is probably Titian's painting of about 1512, set in a northern Italian landscape suffused in golden light.



Recent scholarship has pointed to the depth of meaning in Fra Angelico's fresco in San Marco in Florence. Fra Giovanni di Fiesole (his name as a monk) was an outstanding artist, and a member of the Dominican order, who painted the walls of his fellow monks' cells in the monastery between 1436 and 1455. One writer has described these beautiful images as "like windows into a parallel world." In the *Noli me tangere* a close look shows flowers springing up where Christ's blood-stained feet touch the earth.



An extraordinary accretion of legend developed around Mary Magdalene, and continues to the present day. Many sites, particularly in France, to where she was allegedly miraculously conveyed, claimed to possess relics linked to her. One such was the central French town of Vezelay, where a Benedictine abbey, founded at the end of the 9th century, treasured bones of Mary said to have been brought from Provence, the site of Mary's landing. The possession of significant relics brought wealth to the foundation, and to the town itself, enabling – together with the imposition of heavy taxes - the building of a gem of Romanesque architecture, the Abbey Church. (Sainte Marie Madeleine)



The arch (called a tympanum) above the West (entry) door, typically bore a representation of the Last Judgement. That at Vezelay (completed 1130) is extraordinary in both artistic and iconographic terms. It has been interpreted as strongly linked to the Crusades, for which the church formed a rallying and starting point.

St James "The Greater" 25th July

James is the English version of the Hebrew Iacobi, which in Spain becomes Iago/Diego, and in French Jacques.

The Cathedral, on the Galician coast of Spain, is one of only three sites which were believed to have been built over the tomb of an Apostle, and as such became the most important pilgrimage site for hundreds of years.

James is described in the Gospels as the brother of John – together they were nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" (Boanerges), possibly because they were impetuous. Matthew and Mark record them as being among the earliest disciples, after Peter and his brother Andrew

Mark 1

19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

James, Peter and John were the three disciples to whom Jesus appeared at the Transfiguration, and also the three who were closest to him in Gethsemane before his arrest. However, James, like Peter, is also recorded as misunderstanding Jesus' mission, as evidenced in the passage in Mark Ch 10

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39 They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." 41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.



An elaborate account of how James' body came to be in Galicia – where it was claimed he had previously been a missionary - after his execution under Herod in 43/44AD is given in the Historia Composteliana, from the 12th century, although as noted pilgrimage to the site began much earlier. Scallop beds are common along the coast, and the scallop shell came to be a treasured souvenir initially given only to those who had completed the arduous pilgrimage, but later worn as a symbol of being on pilgrimage. Today the routes are marked out by stylized scallop shells.



Pilgrims on the way to Compostela – note the scallop shell on the hat.

After a decline in pilgrimage during the unrest of the 16th c by the mid 20th c the number of pilgrims annually had fallen to a few hundred. However, the publication of a book on the Camino (the Galician word for pilgrimage) began a revival of interest, and there are now around 500,000 arriving in the town each year, although many do not walk the entire route.

As the patron of Spain, St James was the subject of a number of paintings by El Greco. A beautiful example shows the saint as himself – like all of us – a pilgrim, with a walking staff and scallop badge on his shoulder.

