



Transcript of  
“ Mary Magdalene and the Women Disciples in the Gospel of Luke ”

presented on July 21, 2017 by  
Barbara Reid, O.P.

STM Dean Thomas Stegman, S.J.:

Good afternoon. Everyone get enough to eat? Good. It's my pleasure to introduce Sister Barbara Reid, who is a Dominican Sister of Grand Rapids, Michigan. She says that she heard the vocational call very early in life. She knew from age six that she wanted to be a Dominican Sister, like the intelligent, joyful, kind, and caring women who were her teachers throughout elementary and high school. Sister Barbara has very capably followed in the footsteps of these role models.

She holds a Ph. D. in biblical studies from the Catholic University of America and currently serves as

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Sister Barbara Reid:

Thank you, Father Tom. That was quite some introduction. I hope I can live up to even half of it. I'm very, very grateful to be with you this afternoon, to return again to Boston College, where I did teach for several summers, and I'm just so pleased for the occasion for which we gather this afternoon.

As we reflect together on Mary Magdalene, and then I'm going to focus in precisely on what it says about her and about the women disciples in the Gospel of Luke. If you want a little roadmap to follow along, there's handouts in the center of your table. Don't worry, there will not be an exam. Mostly it's in case you didn't catch the Scripture reference and want to go back and find out where that is. So I'm very, very happy to share these reflections with you.

Two years ago, at Catholic Theological Union, where I minister, we received a gift of five paintings from the renowned artist Janet McKenzie. Most people know her portrait Jesus of the People that you see here. You've seen this before, yeah? She won the first prize back at the turn of the millennium for National Catholic Reporter's Jesus of the Millennium contest.

The three paintings that we received, though, at Catholic Theological Union were her Triptych on Mary Magdalene. We had a celebration for the unveiling of these paintings. Our president, Mark Francis, asked me if I would make a more formal presentation to the group gathered about Mary Magdalene. He suggested teasingly that I tell the story of Mary Magdalene's arduous journey from Palestinian prostitute to a life of luxury on the French Riviera. [laughter]

It's good that you're laughing at that. Some people think that's true. Mark and I had a hearty laugh over it, too. But the fact that such myths about Mary Magdalene still persist, for which there is no biblical basis, it's true this still prevails in the minds of many believers. But that's changing, however, as gatherings like this one help to bring forward Mary Magdalene as Apostle to the Apostles, as she became known in the early Church.

What the Gospels actually say about Mary Magdalene is finally starting to become better known. But if you ask most Christians, "Who was Mary Magdalene," what are they going to tell you? Yeah, that she was a repentant prostitute, or maybe they'll tell you she was the one who wept over Jesus's feet and dried them with her hair, or maybe they'll tell you that she was the woman who was caught in adultery and was about to be stoned before Jesus intervened. But in the Gospels, none of those things are said of Mary Magdalene. Nowhere is there even a reference to her having been a sinner, much less a prostitute. The confusion between these other women and Mary of Magdala was

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of feminism, which emerged in the late 1980s, saw women biblical scholars turning a more critical eye to how women are portrayed in Luke and Acts. Scholars like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her book *In Memory of Her* in 1983 and Mary Rose D'Angelo in an important article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* in 1990 and Jane Schaberg in the first edition of the *Women's Bible Commentary* in 1992 were among the first to show that although Luke knew of women prophets, leaders, and missionaries, he does not portray them as such. These scholars noted that no woman outside the Infancy Narratives speaks except to be corrected by Jesus or to be disbelieved. For Luke, women have chosen the better part when they remain silent and receptive.

Building on the work of these scholars, I showed in my book, *Choosing the Better Part: Women in the Gospel of Luke*, which I wrote in 1996, that there are women who receive the Word, believe, are baptized, follow Jesus, and host house churches, but there are no narratives showing individual

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I concluded, “A woman reader of this Gospel internalizes the message that if she dares to speak, she will never be believed, nor be credited with faithful and true witness. This final episode,” I continued to say, “causes women to doubt the authenticity of their own experience and their ability to interpret God’s ways accurately to others. They can remember what they have heard, but it is for the men to interpret and proclaim.”

I proposed, then, that “Today our proclamation of Luke’s version of the empty tomb story can serve to ritualize the grief that women have experienced for 20 centuries when their faithful and true witness is dismissed as nonsense. It can remind us of the deprivation imposed on the whole Christian community when its female members are silenced. It can move believers to choose the better part by taking actions to ensure the faithful preaching of women be heard and accepted in our day.”

Twenty years later, I still think there is value in this approach that exposes the silencing of women in Luke and Acts and raises questions about how that portrayal is to be appropriated by women and men in the Church today. However, I also see the limitations of the approach that I took then. One limitation is that I examined only the texts in Luke with female characters. Another is that I sometimes read these episodes in isolation from one another. In particular, I separated out Luke 1 and 2, where the women do speak in powerful prophesies, from the rest of the Gospel. In addition, I did extensive word studies, but there are dynamics in the text that can be missed when one concentrates only on the use of particular words. And finally, in focusing primarily on the ways in which Luke restricts women, I overlooked positive portrayals.

Almost the same time that my book was published, Turid Karlsen Seim in 1994 published a book entitled *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts*. She argues that the Gospel of Luke is ambiguous, neither wholly affirmative nor totally restrictive toward women. She points out that the Gospel cannot be reduced to fixed scenes but must be read as a narrative with complex movement and process, with contrapuntal voices, not frozen images.

With her observations in mind, I revisited the question of the silencing of women in Luke, and in particular my reading of the last two chapters of Luke’s Gospel. That was the subject of my presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association two years ago. I’ll give you the Cliff Notes version. If you want all the gory details, you can read the published version in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* in the January 2016 issue. But here’s the Reader’s Digest version.

Let’s start first with the opening chapters, the opening two chapters of Luke. We find there a symphony of voices announcing theological and Christological themes that will resound throughout the whole of the Gospel. Significant proclamations are made by Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon with their canticles, as well as by Elizabeth, Anna, and John the Baptist. Startlingly enough, women speak as often as men, and what they say is



than the one I arrived at 20 years ago about Luke's depiction of women as regards their proclamation of the Word.

I had formerly separated the Infancy Narratives from the rest of the Gospel, instead of reading the beginning and the ending chapters in relation to one another. I thought that Luke's depiction of Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna in the mode of powerful prophets, in contrast to the silent women in the rest of the Gospel, could be explained by the Evangelist's understanding of salvation history divided into distinct eras, as Hans Conzelmann had proposed in 1961. He saw that there was the first period, the period of Israel, then the second was the period of Jesus's ministry, and then the third was the period since the Ascension, the period in which the disciples carried on Jesus's mission.

I saw the women in the first two chapters painted along the lines of the women prophets of the Old Testament, but these belonged to a former age. They were not disciples of Jesus, and they did not exemplify the role that Luke advocates for Christian women. However, I now see that there are strong verbal and thematic links between Luke 1 and 2 and Luke 23 and 24. The beginning and the ending must be read in tandem. By connecting the two, then we can see that the poor reception of the women's words at the tomb are not simply Luke's disregard for women's witness, but that's the typical response to the words of a prophet. Such a response is akin to the rejection Jesus



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That Jesus embodies this divine saving remembrance is evident in his actions throughout the whole Gospel and is made explicit in a detail unique to Luke in the Crucifixion scene, where one of the criminals hanging alongside him pleads, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." He doesn't just want Jesus to recall that he was next to Him. He wants Jesus to do something about bringing him along with him into the Kingdom.

In another saying unique to Luke among the Gospels, Jesus instructs the disciples at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me," asking the disciples not simply to bring him to mind as they break bread together but to make him present through their merciful actions. That the women at the tomb remember Jesus's words signifies not only that they were present when he spoke to the disciples in the Galilee but also that they faithfully continue his mission of enacting God's liberating mercy.

With regard to the lack of direct commission to the women to proclaim what they have heard, when read in the context of the whole Gospel with its emphasis on hearing and acting on the Word, the women's spontaneous proclamation is the proper response of faithful disciples. The imperfect tense of the verb, moreover, *ελεγον*, in 24:10, indicates that their "telling" is repeated. They continue to proclaim the Word as faithful witnesses. They are not one-time messengers to the other apostles.

Finally, placing the women's names at the close of the account in 24:10 can be read not as diminishing them but as following a protocol, whereby the names of witnesses are given at the conclusion of their testimony. The women's reliability as witnesses is affirmed in the next scene, where Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus repeat their message and assert that it has been verified. Moreover, placing the names of the women at verse 10 accentuates the contrast between the women as reliable and faithful witnesses and those who refuse to believe, in verse 11.

So here is my conclusion, which is not the last word. [laughter] Now, I probably am not going to change my mind again, but what I mean is that although Luke 23 and 24 can be read as affirming women's proclamation of the Word, this is not Luke's last word on the subject. In the Acts of the Apostles, his second volume, male disciples, primarily Peter and then Paul, take over the role of testifying to Jesus's R

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language, while women are not? The “Directory of Masses for Children” that was issued in 1973 is still in effect, and it says one of the adults may speak after the Gospel, especially if the priest finds it hard to adapt himself to the mentality of children, meaning that the preacher for children must be able to speak the language of children. So we should ask, do not women and laymen merit the same?

We also need to keep asking our bishops, who in the conclusion to their document “Preaching the Mystery of Faith” that they issued in 2013, held up Mary —this was in the conclusion to their document on preaching —they held up Mary, Jesus’s mother, as the exemplar. They said, “Mary, as hearer and bearer of the Word, Mary the Mother of God and Mother of the Word Incarnate, can serve as an example for those who preach the Sunday homily.” End quote. In it, though, they make no allowance for women preachers, who might most closely resemble Mary. They characterize the preacher of Sunday homilies as a man of holiness, a man of Scripture, a man of tradition, and a man of communion. Are not preachers also women of holiness, of Scripture, of tradition, and communion? We need to keep asking our bishops about this.

Pope Francis, in his wonderful section on preaching in “Evangelii Gaudium,” spoke of preaching as, quote, “a mother’s conversation.” The Church is a mother, and she preaches in the same way that a

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art on Mary Magdalene. So I'm hoping to get those visual images of the good art into your mind's eye and let go of some of those ugly ones that are false.

But my juxtaposition of the Visitation and then the Empty Tomb scene in the proclamation was . . . I was trying to say visually what I was doing literally as I was revisiting the first two chapters and seeing both the verbal and the thematic links between the first two chapters and the last two chapters, which made me then rethink the overall impact of the message in that Gospel about women's prophetic proclamation. That was my reason of putting those two together.

The response to, "So how do women continue to proclaim?" I gave a few suggestions at the end, of the kinds of things that we need to say and to whom. But the ways in which we continue to preach the Word are as many as the people in this room. So whatever your gift is, whatever your way of proclaiming the Word, take every opportunity to do so, whether that is in speech or in action.

You know, I'm a Dominican. Could you tell from my emphasis on preaching the Word, how that draws my attention? I wish it was Dominic, but they say it's Francis who said, "P

