

Another Possible World: Imagining Mission for Transformation

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Abstract

This article looks at the four gospel accounts of the resurrection experiences of Mary Magdalene and sees in them stories of imaginative responses to the challenges of transformative mission. It shows how each story offers different emphases on relating to the other. It also argues that missionaries should not seek to stay in the centre of the story but be ready to disappear from the scene when their job is done.

Keywords

Mary Magdalene; resurrection; mission; transformation

Introduction

In 2005, the World Social Forum (WSF)¹ held a meeting in Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. This was the fifth such meeting, but for the first time there was also an organised theological component or sub-group, the World Forum on Theology and Liberation, which has been gathering ever since.² As a summary aspiration for both the WSF and

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¹ On the World Social Forum, see for a brief historical overview, 'World Social Forum', Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, last updated 5 February 2026, 01:10 UTC <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum> [accessed 17 April 2026]. The movement is still continuing, and a meeting will be held in Benin in August 2026, the twentieth such meeting. For some reservations about the way it has developed, see the reflections of one of its founders, the Italian Roberto Savio, 'Farewell to the World Social Forum?', Great Transition Initiative <<https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/wsf-savio>> [accessed 8 February 2026].

² The meetings mostly take place every two years.

the World Forum on Theology and Liberation, the phrase ‘for another possible world’³ has often been used. For all its good intentions, the expression may appear rather abstract. It posits a possibility without any indication of how it might be realised.

To help root it, we can consider the Septuagint text of Isaiah 52:7. Twice it uses the word εὐαγγελιζόμενος (*euangelitsomenos*) or, as we might say in English today, ‘evangeliser’. A moment’s reflection will suggest that the emphasis on the beauty of the feet is rather odd. Normally we would expect the face to be the recipient of praise and the possessor of beauty. But concentrating on the feet suggests both a rootedness, a literal sense of being down-to-earth,⁴ and the importance of movement, of going to where people are. The willingness to get one’s feet dirty is, in this context, held in higher regard than the sound of the voice.

Moreover, these feet are also engaged in bringing a message of peace and salvation, and this in itself is good news. It is not a message of violence against the other who refuses to conform to our view of the world, but already a transformative vision, an assertion and conviction that life can be other, that, indeed, another world is possible. A transformative vision will start with engaging with the world around us, bearing to it news of peace and salvation.

³ In Portuguese, ‘*um outro mundo possível*’. There is a book which uses the English version, originating from contributions to the conference in Porto Alegre: *Another Possible World*, ed. by Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid and Ivan Petrella (SCM, 2007). A Portuguese collection from the same meeting is *Teologia para outro mundo possível* [Theology for Another Possible World], ed. by Luis Susin (Paulinas, 2006). On the World Social Forum, see also *Another World Is Possible: World Social Forum Proposals for an Alternative Globalisation*, ed. by William Fisher and Thomas Ponniah, 2nd edn (Bloomsbury, 2015). For a reflection on the first two encounters, see also Agenor Brighenti, ‘Espiritualidade para outro mundo possível: II Forum Mundial de Teologia e Libertação, Nairobi/Quênia, 16–19 de Janeiro de 2007’ [Spirituality for another possible world. Second World Forum of Theology and Liberation, Nairobi/Kenya, 16–19 January 2007] *Perspectiva Teológica*, 39 (2007), pp. 247–256.

⁴ The Brazilian theologian Clodovis Boff published, many years ago, a book of theological reflections on his pastoral work in the northern Brazilian state of Acre, entitled *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey*, trans. by Philip Berryman (Orbis, 1987). Evangelising is at least, among other things, concerned with speaking about God (theology) and also must begin with the feet on the ground that carry the evangeliser to hill tops or valleys, to deserts or to public squares.

In this article I want to reflect more on the nature of transformative mission. I will do so by attending to what seems to me a rather undervalued area in mission, namely the resurrection appearances of Jesus.⁵ Especially, I will concentrate on the different ways in which the Gospels deal with the encounter between Mary Magdalene (alone or with other women) and Jesus. I suggest that already these encounters point to a form of mission that involves engagement in being bearers of good news (evangelisers), which is truly good, and that this comes about when those entrusted with bringing the good news are able to imagine another possible world.

Although I engage with the biblical stories in what follows, I do not do so as a biblical scholar. I appreciate what biblical scholars can contribute to our understanding of the text, and I try to draw on some of their contributions in my article. But it is also true that at the heart of Christian faith and practice is the conviction that God continues to speak to us today through the Bible. So, transformative mission will also begin with a transformative listening to the words of the Scripture, and especially to what Chris Wright called its grand narrative, its story of God's mission and its call to Christians to participate in this mission.⁶

Imaginative Encounters

For the sake of clarity, it is worth stressing at the outset that when I use the word 'imagination' it is most definitely not in the sense of something untrue or fictional. Rather, to adopt a phrase of Martin Robinson, I am interested in a hermeneutic of imagination,⁷ a way of seeing the world

⁵ Of course, scholars of mission have attended to the resurrection accounts, as have biblical scholars. A notable example is Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (SPCK, 2011), who points to the missional implications here and now of belief in the resurrection. I will also return later to Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2002), especially chapter 8, 'The Women and the Resurrection: The Credibility of Their Stories', pp. 320–378.

⁶ See Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁷ Martin Robinson, 'Towards a Hermeneutic of Imagination', in *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination*, ed. by Colin Greene and Martin Robinson (Authentic, 2008), pp. 206–222.

anew that allows for constructive engagement with the world, by bringing the good news that God has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and that life in all its meanings can and will never be the same again. Robinson points to the importance of Christians as creative minorities, something that is of crucial importance to us in the Czech Republic, where Christians are in a small minority.⁸ But, as Robinson notes,⁹ being a minority is not necessarily bad news. There is always a tension in Christianity between the desire that everyone should believe and the clear indications in the Gospels that this is a) never going to happen and b) probably not a good idea.

Why it might not be a good idea can be understood if we consider the commands in Matthew 5:13 and 14 to be salt of the earth and light of the world, whilst remembering that in Matthew 28:18–20 the disciples are told to teach all that Jesus has commanded them. If everything was salt, food would be uneatable, and if there is no darkness, the light burning on the candle holder has no use. But without salt we would die and without light, for we do live in a world that is filled with both dark and light, the darkness would become overpowering and disabling. To be church is to be a creative, light-giving, flavour-enhancing minority. Among the imaginings that are necessary and to which Christian mission needs to contribute, several can be highlighted. What does it mean to be human in light of the encounter with the risen Christ? What does it mean to be community? What does it mean to be a community engaged as Christians in a society that is not Christian and, often for understandable reasons, rejects institutional forms of Christianity that have failed to be light and salt for the world?¹⁰

If these questions cannot be fully answered in an article, to at least attend to them and take them seriously, I will turn now to the four

⁸ The Czech Republic is often rather loosely labelled one of the most atheist countries in Europe. But as a whole raft of studies have shown, this is not the case. Nevertheless, it has a very low number (perhaps 15–20%) of the population who claim adherence to any form of religious institution. For more on this, see for example, Tim Noble, *Liberation against Entitlement: Conflicting Theologies of Grace and Clashing Populisms* (Wipf and Stock, 2022), pp. 46–48, and accompanying bibliography.

⁹ Robinson, ‘Towards a Hermeneutic of Imagination’, pp. 215–216.

¹⁰ I draw these from Robinson, ‘Towards a Hermeneutics of Imagination’, pp. 215–220, though I have slightly rephrased them and given slightly different emphases.

gospel accounts of the engagement between Jesus and Mary Magdalene after the resurrection. Most accounts of mission focus primarily on men, starting with the apostles, with Paul the last of the apostles, and then through much of the church's history with other men. But the Gospels insist that the story starts with the evangelising engagement of the women, the first bearers of the good news of the resurrection, the first to direct the other apostles (the men) towards the places of encounter with the risen Lord.¹¹ The subsequent history of mission, even in the Bible, is also full of women (in Acts and in Paul's letters especially) who are vital to the continuing mission of the church. And of course, throughout history, often shamefully neglected, women have continued to play a fundamental role in bearing the good news. Indeed, it has been suggested that Magdalene is one of Jesus's nicknames for his followers, such as Peter for Simon, or the Sons of Thunder for John and James. There is no record of a place called Magdala at the time of Jesus, so it may simply refer to the Hebrew *migdal*, or tower, seeing her as a tower of strength for the early community.¹²

In all four gospels, Mary Magdalene is named as one of those who go to the tomb of Jesus to prepare his body. In Matthew, Mark, and John it is recorded that she was also a witness to his death, and in Matthew and Mark she is among those who saw where he was laid in the tomb.¹³ Luke leaves it all more unspecific, merely recording, apparently with some embarrassment, the involvement of 'the women

¹¹ Carmen Bernabé Ubieta, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol' [Relevance of the memory of Mary Magdalene as witness and apostle], *Cuestiones Teológicas*, 41.96 (2014), pp. 279–306 (p. 285), points out that the New Testament is written from an androcentric position, so that the survival of the stories of Mary Magdalene becomes even more important and impressive.

¹² See Dorothy Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership* (Baker Academic, 2021), p. 70: 'According to Joan Taylor, however, there is no reference to "Magdala" as the name of a town in the literature of the period. It is more likely, she suggests, that "Magdalene" is a nickname given to Mary by Jesus, indicating something in her appearance or character as a "tower of strength".' The reference is to Joan Taylor, 'Missing Magdala and the Name of Mary "Magdalene"', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 146 (2014), pp. 205–223.

¹³ See Bernabé, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol', p. 287.

[...] from Galilee' (Luke 23:49 and 55).¹⁴ Despite these differences, the fact that this is one of the few events that is found, admittedly as we will see in very different ways, in all four of the gospels, suggests at the very least that it was considered of some importance by the early church communities. The accounts differ also in the groups of people involved. In Mark, Mary Magdalene is accompanied by Mary, the mother of James, and by Salome (Mark 16:1) and in Matthew by someone called 'the other Mary' (Matt 28:1). Luke begins with the generic 'women', and only specifies later that 'it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women with them' (Luke 24:10). In John, Mary Magdalene is said to have gone alone¹⁵ (John 20:1).

Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Although the four stories undoubtedly share common elements, I want to look at how they offer different ways of imagining and thus different responses to the call to mission. Let us start with the Gospel of Mark. As they head to the tomb, the women are principally preoccupied with practical matters, especially as to how they will gain access to the tomb to finish the preparation of the body. When they arrive, they see that this problem has already been solved for them. Inside the tomb they encounter 'a young man' (Mark 16:5). His first command to them is not to be amazed or alarmed (ἐκθαμβεῖσθε). Jesus, the crucified one, has been raised, he says, and he is no longer present in the tomb.

As in many other things, Mark's Gospel is the starkest and the most direct. There is no talk here of angels, but of an encounter with a strange young man dressed in a white robe. It is, let us remember, early

¹⁴ See for example, Bernabé, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol', p. 288. She points out that for Luke the primary authority is Peter, so he does not want to emphasise the role of the women more than necessary. See also on Luke's re-working and diminishing of the role of women, Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 199–200.

¹⁵ In v. 2, when reporting to Simon Peter and the other disciple, she uses the plural 'We do not know where they have laid him'. Although John may be using the synoptic tradition here and conflating his accounts, it is also true that a plural is used in his gospel to indicate what Craig Koester calls 'representative significance'. Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003), p. 68.

in the morning, in a place that is outside of the town. The presence of a young man and the absence of the body are enough to alarm anyone, and the words of this young man are not guaranteed to placate them, despite his urging them not to be alarmed. He then instructs — we could say ‘missions’ — them to go to the other disciples and Peter and tell them that Jesus ‘is going ahead of you to Galilee: there you will see him, just as he told you’ (Mark 16:7). There then follows the rather strange and abrupt ending in Mark 16:8, to which the embarrassed later community added extra verses to make it appear more fitting. The women, it tells us, were terrified, and despite the mission they received from the young man, they told no one because they were afraid.

Although there is almost universal agreement among scholars that the long ending of Mark is a later addition,¹⁶ there is still some debate as to whether Mark actually intended to end his gospel with verse 8 or whether there is somewhere a lost ending. Although it is not decisive for my argument, I am assuming that the writer of Mark’s Gospel did indeed end his work in this way.¹⁷ But why? First, it needs to be remembered that fear is also accompanied by trembling and *ekstasis*, so being afraid is not the only reaction. Nevertheless, it is odd. Whether or not they recognise the young man as an angel,¹⁸ clearly his words of reassurance do not work. The fear is understandable, but the silence is less clear. Joel Marcus, in his commentary on Mark, suggests,

Since there is no clear narrative reason for this silence, since the sentence in which it occurs seems to be redactional, and since the women’s secrecy concerns the resurrection kerygma, which Mark believes must now be proclaimed to the whole world (13:10), perhaps the explanation for the motif is to be sought on the level of the Markan community, where fear of persecution is creating a temptation to squelch the gospel message (cf. 13:9, 11–13).¹⁹

¹⁶ Among the myriad commentaries, see for example, Mark Strauss, *Mark* (HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2014), pp. 1091–1094.

¹⁷ For a good summary, see Strauss, *Mark*, pp. 1080–1084. Strauss comes down slightly in favour of v. 8 being the intended ending, for reasons that seem to me cogent.

¹⁸ On this, see Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 27A (Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 1080 and 1085.

¹⁹ Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, p. 1087.

This then makes the comment a missional one, an implicit condemnation of the community/communities whom Mark addresses for not being more missionally active.

But it still raises the question of what the women are actually meant to do in the particular circumstances of their encounter. What are they meant to tell the disciples? And how can they fulfil the mission given them? It would be easy enough to dismiss the women as being like the men in Mark's Gospel, always getting it wrong. In her work on women in Mark, Michelle Connolly points out how for most of the second half of the gospel, the women are ignored, even if suddenly at the crucifixion, it is claimed that they had served and followed Jesus.²⁰ They are, apparently reluctantly, re-introduced at this point, because they are clearly part of the tradition related to the resurrection accounts. But the very downplaying of their role that Connolly highlights as characteristic of Mark is also a reason for their silence. Even if they speak, having been ignored and excluded for almost the whole story, why would they expect to be believed if they bring such improbable news, based at the moment only on an empty tomb and the words of a young man?

For Christians today, the resurrection comes as no surprise at all. We have heard the story so often that it runs the risk of becoming almost commonplace for us. But, of course, the whole point of the resurrection is that it is not expected, or at least the prophecies of Jesus that he would die on the cross and be raised had literally no counterpoint, nothing to which the hearers could relate so that such a statement would make sense. To understand such an event requires accepting wholeheartedly that another world is possible, that things really could be otherwise, that death is not final.

²⁰ The text in Mark is the following: 'There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem' (Mark 15:40–41). See on this Michelle Connolly, *Disorderly Women and the Order of God: An Australian Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (T&T Clark, 2018), p. 175.

Anyone who has experienced bereavement and the loss of someone close will know just how hard that is. A rational part of the brain may be able to understand, but the weight of grief and pain makes it seem that such thoughts or hopes are somehow exterior. How is it possible in these circumstances to engage a hermeneutics of imagination? They are required to proclaim, on hearsay, for they have not encountered the risen Lord themselves, that the absence of a body means that the Crucified One has now been raised. This demands a new way of seeing the world, an engagement with imagining another possible world, in which not death but life is the final word.

Moreover, to fulfil the young man's command, to carry out the mission entrusted to them, requires not just that they believe, but that their hearers are also capable of making this leap of imagination. And, to be fair to the women, the Gospel of Mark really does not offer any great hope for the disciples in this respect. They are men who 'have no faith' (cf. Mark 4:40), Peter is described as 'Satan' (Mark 8:33), they desert him when he is arrested (Mark 14:50). They do not strike the reader as filled with the imagination to believe in this new world. Richard Bauckham quotes from the second-century apocryphal work *The Epistle of the Apostles* that when two women were sent successively to tell the apostles what they had encountered, the reply to each was, 'What have we to do with you, O woman? He that is dead and buried, can he then live?'²¹ Such a reply would seem par for the course for the Markan apostles.

So, what kind of proclamation, what kind of sharing of the message is possible? The use of the word *ekstasis* in verse 8 reminds us that the women are almost literally 'besides themselves' with fear, a kind of out of body experience that reshapes one's entire perception of what is going on. And it may be most of all, the fear that what they hear is true, and all that that will entail for them in re-imagining life and the God who is at the source of all life.²²

²¹ *Ep. Ap.* 10, cited in Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, p. 327 (e-book edition).

²² For a very helpful and much fuller discussion of possible interpretations of the women's silence, see Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, pp. 341–348 (e-book edition).

It is also worth recalling that this fear is a feature of a number of the callings to mission in the Old Testament. We could mention Jeremiah, whose response to the call to prophesy is precisely concerned with an inability to speak: “Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”” (Jer 1:6). Or there is Isaiah, whose unclean lips have to be cleansed by the touch of the angel (Isa 6:7) in order for him to respond to the call of the Lord. But perhaps the best example is the comic masterpiece²³ which is the story of Jonah, where the trope that the prophet flees is taken to excess. And even when, reluctantly, Jonah does pass on the message, he finds that being heard is as bad, or at least as difficult, as not being heard. And yet, in all cases, the prophets do prophesy. But in a rather obvious way, it is clearly also true that women do too. For the existence of the Gospel of Mark depends ultimately on the transmission of the news of the resurrection. There is no other indication of any kind of appearance in the genuine Markan text, so the very fact that the gospel exists means that somehow the fear was overcome. How is perhaps a question left to the followers of the Way to determine themselves.

The lasting challenge to mission here is that, even if we are aware of the task we have been given, at least in our context we need to imagine new ways of engaging the imaginations of those among whom we live. If we simply proclaim to them the empty tomb, that God has raised Jesus the crucified one from the dead, we are of course doing mission, but are we doing it in a way that our contemporaries can hear? It is not that the transformative event of the death and resurrection of Jesus is unimaginable or that people today cannot hear and come to believe in it. They can and they do. But they need to hear it in ways that speak to them, or perhaps not so much to hear it, as to see it in action. What difference does it make to the lives of Jesus’s followers, what kind of community can they form, how do they engage in the world around them so it too may be a setting for good news? In a sense, simply to ask

²³ On the humour of Jonah, see for example, Benjamin Lazarus, *Humanist Comic Elements in Aristophanes and the Old Testament* (Gorgias, 2014), pp. 170–191. See also Juliana Claassens, ‘Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic Laughter as Resistance in the Context of Trauma’, *Old Testament Essays*, 28.3 (2015), pp. 655–673. As her title suggests, Claassens sees the comedy of the book as a form of resistance or resilience.

these questions may be enough, to make us sensitive to those who are afraid but who still need to go back to Galilee to follow the story through, perhaps for the first time.

It also opens up the possibility of acting not out of our strength and our power, but out of our own weakness and fear. It is possible for Christians to become too blasé about the resurrection, to take it for granted. But in doing so, its full impact and strangeness and unexpectedness is lost. There is a reason for the cyclic celebration of key Christian feasts or memories within the diachronic development of history. It is a reminder that the story is always to be experienced anew, that the transformative power of the Christian message is not a one-off, but ongoing, continually renewing and enabling life in all its diversity and richness.

Meeting Mary in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's telling is both more dramatic and more directed than that of Mark. The women are not idly wondering about how to roll back the stone but are simply overwhelmed by the presence of the angel of the Lord who makes the guards fall into a stupor. The angel greets them with the message not to fear, the same words that Jesus will use a few verses later. The message that the women receive is the same as in Mark, and this time they leave, filled both with fear (the third time fear is mentioned in this story) and joy. As they head off, they encounter Jesus and we are told that they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Jesus then repeats the message of the angel, and the women set off to pass on the message. After this, they disappear from the story.

The story is partly dependent on Mark but adds and transforms it in different ways. In Mark, the women go to anoint the body of Jesus, but Jesus has already been anointed in Matthew 26:6–13. In this text we read that 'by pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial' (26:12).²⁴ So the anointing has already taken place, and yet still the need to see is there. As Jeffrey Aernie puts it, 'In each of the scenes

²⁴ See Matthias Konradt, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. by M. Eugene Boring (Baylor University Press, 2020), p. 435.

in which Matthew explicitly identifies the women, there is an emphasis on their visual proximity to the narrated events.²⁵ To be able to respond imaginatively to mission requires having the courage to place oneself in a place where, however unexpectedly, the Lord can be encountered. The women go together, and as so often in Matthew, there are two of them (two demoniacs, two blind men, and so on).²⁶

Given that the gospel will culminate in a few verses' time with the command to go out, baptising and teaching, in order to make disciples, this pericope should also be read in terms of mission. Here the women do eventually carry out the task that is given to them, so in that sense they are successful. But they need to be encouraged to do this by Jesus. The tendency of the church community is to focus *ad intra*, which is one way of reading the references to worshipping.²⁷ In our setting, if we worship Jesus rightly (which of course is also important), then that is sometimes regarded as sufficient. People outside may be attracted by our worship, if they come to our services, but what matters is centring our life on Jesus who is present among us, wherever two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20). Again, I repeat, this is important. Moreover, it is also a good thing to invite people to participate in our worship services. For if Christ is not present in them, we might ask why we are bothering.

But worship is even more important insofar as it sends us out to complete the task we are given. The eleven go to Galilee, so we can even assume that the mission has the desired result. But it comes about because they recognise that worship includes both gathering and dispersing — in the telling final Latin phrase of the Roman Catholic liturgy, *Ite, missa est*. This means that the mass is done and the people are to go, but of course 'missa' is also the feminine of *missus*, the one who

²⁵ Jeffrey Aernie, 'The Corporate Portrayal of Women in the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative Disciples', in *Character Studies in the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. by Craig Evan Anderson and Matthew Ryan Hauge (T&T Clark, 2024), pp. 149–162 (p. 161).

²⁶ The very title of Aernie's chapter, 'The Corporate Portrayal of Women in the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative Disciples', is indicative of this.

²⁷ It is also important to note that the clinging to his feet and the worship are also to demonstrate that Jesus is truly risen from the dead, in a bodily form that the two women have no difficulty in recognising. They are witnesses of both his death and burial and that he is risen.

is sent. The women are sent as Christians today are sent, and however small their task, it has to be carried out faithfully.

In Matthew, then, Mary Magdalene is first of all not alone. Mission begins and continues in community. Matthew and Luke both agree that Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs. Moreover, as is well known, in Matthew 10, in the end, the disciples go nowhere (cf. Matt 11:1). So, the first two disciples tasked with carrying out a specific mission of the Lord in Matthew and who actually carry out the task entrusted to them, are the two Marys, who begin the task of mission that will also be extended to the apostles and to the whole church. Their mission does not end with this, but it is the crucial part of the story, the transformation from fear to new life, from grieving death to celebrating life.²⁸

Mary of Magdalene in the Gospel of Luke

The final synoptic version of the story is in Luke. At first in this story the women are not named: they are simply those who followed to see where Jesus was lain (Luke 23:55). They are not afraid by the absence of the body, but perplexed (the Greek word is ἀπορεῖσθαι — so it was for them an *aporia*). They are however frightened by the sight not of one but two men, who almost sound like they are telling the women off: ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’ In keeping with the re-centring of geography in Luke, there is no command to say that Jesus will meet with them in Galilee. Indeed, in this case, there is no direct mission.

There are various possible explanations for this, depending on how one understands Luke and his attitude towards women,²⁹ but there is at least one obvious consequence to be drawn. Mission is, it is true, a passive word — or as has been said for the past sixty or seventy years, it is participation in the *missio Dei*. So, in this sense being sent is something that happens to us. But it happens, as the women demonstrate, not necessarily through a direct message, but as the result

²⁸ See Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, p. 336.

²⁹ See Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?*, pp. 200–202, in a chapter tellingly entitled ‘The Galilean Women: Disbelieved Witnesses’.

of a commitment to serve the Lord, made already at the beginning of Luke 8. It is participation also in a tradition, literally the handing on of what has been entrusted to us. So, simply to receive the message is to receive the invitation to convey that message to others — the feet of those who proclaim good news take them to the rest of their community, to share the good news that they have received.

This time, though, the problem is with the hearers: ‘These words seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them’ (Luke 24:11). Although excuses are made for this based on interpretations of Jewish legal traditions at the time, Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, in their commentary on the gospel, argue that

the reason the men in Luke do not believe the women is not because they are Jews following a particular legal system: the reason they did not believe is because the idea of a dead person rising was incredible, unbelievable, to them.³⁰

This at least justifies the response of the women in Mark. The other disciples would indeed have found it impossible to understand what was being told to them.

Clearly this was neither the first nor the last time that men were reluctant to accept something on the say-so of women, and the apostles do not come well out of this. Only later do we hear that the Lord had appeared also to Simon (Luke 24:34), and this changed their minds. Perhaps one of the things to take from this narrative concerning mission is that, even if the good news is announced, for many it will remain an idle tale, something that is dismissed as folly, and the messenger will be dismissed. There are opposing reasons for this, to do with the nature of how the message is presented as well as with the ability of the listener to respond seriously. In Luke’s Gospel, of course, the apostles should believe and the women should be trusted. But perhaps it also needs that final shift of imagination to see how to make what is obvious to us also obvious to others.

³⁰ Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 648, and see also p. 654.

Again, this comes back to how to make the story hearable. I certainly do not want to suggest that a watered-down version of the story is offered, but it requires engaging with the imaginative capabilities of the other to learn what they are capable of hearing in order that they can attend to the telling of the story in its fullness. What is good news here and now, what is transformative, what brings life and hope, even in the midst of the most horrible suffering, such as crucifixion? Jesus appears with his wounds (Luke 24:36–40). Here they are enjoined to touch him, to engage with him at the most fundamental level. And this is what the apostles failed to do with the women. They dismissed their witness as ‘idle talk’. So, this is also a reminder that the ‘missionary’ must listen to those around, those who apparently carry less weight or importance for us in society. It is not the privileged, the good ‘church people’ who bring the news, but those who are normally ignored and excluded. Who is the bearer of good news in our context?

This leads to the recognition that the bearers of good news may not be those whom one might expect. The men, so dismissive, are those who are in positions of power in the community. They are the closest followers of Jesus, chosen by him and named by him. They have heard the words he has spoken, the promise that he would rise on the third day (Luke 9:22). But, and here again we can go back to Mark, how can this be believed? As we saw above, in the *Epistle of the Apostles*, the disciples more or less laugh in the face of the women. But it is precisely these women who have understood the message. Unlike in Mark or Matthew, they neither run in fear nor do they need the confirmation of the encounter with the risen Lord.

Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the Gospel of John

The final version of the story of the encounter of the women with Jesus is that in John’s Gospel. As already noted, Mary Magdalene goes alone. She runs to the tomb and finds the stone rolled away. This time there is no angel, no message, but, as in Luke, Mary still returns to tell the others what she has discovered. Now two men, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, run to the tomb to find out what is going on, and they too find the empty tomb. We are told that the Beloved Disciple saw and believed.

Sandra Schneiders argues that the important thing is not so much that he sees and believes, but what he sees and believes. Schneiders sees the search for an answer to the question ‘Where is the Lord?’: for the Beloved Disciple, seeing the face veil is a sign that ‘Jesus, the New Moses, has gone up the mountain to seal the New Covenant between God and the New Israel’.³¹

But this is only one answer. Not for the first time in John’s Gospel, seeing and believing is not quite enough, for following this the Beloved Disciple and Peter are described simply as returning to their homes. Meanwhile Mary remains, weeping. It is only now that the angels appear, and their only contribution is to ask why she is in tears. This odd question is of course to prepare us for the surprise that is to come. For as she turns, she sees someone, though without truly seeing him. She sees a man, whom she mistakes for the gardener.³² And she is still looking for death, for a dead body. But the text already implicitly points us to the truth of the resurrection. For she looks at where the *soma* of Jesus had lain, not his *sarx*.³³ Still, though, she needs to recognise the transformed reality of the risen Lord, to let her imagination work in order to see beyond the obvious and expected to the new. This, says Schneiders, ‘provides the second dimension of the answer to the question, “Where is the Lord?” He has returned to his own.’³⁴

It is only when Jesus speaks her name that she recognises him. Unlike in Matthew we are not told that she clings on to him, and yet Jesus responds with the famous phrase that has inspired so much art, *Noli me tangere*, do not touch me. There are many ways of understanding this. One is to see it as encouraging Mary to reimagine a world in which Jesus is alive but not present — to cling to him, to touch him, is to

³¹ Sandra Schneiders, IHM, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Liturgical Press, 2013), p. 47.

³² As Jaime Clarke-Soles notes, the article is important here. It is not any old gardener but ‘the’ (*o*) gardener, thus taking us back to Genesis. See Jaime Clarke-Soles, ‘Mary Magdalene: Beginning at the End’, in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. by Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 626–640 (p. 636).

³³ For more on this distinction, as crucial in John as it is in Paul, see Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, pp. 42–45.

³⁴ Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, p. 48.

reduce him to one form of presence only, and that is really the presence of the dead, of the corpse that she wants to anoint.³⁵ Now Jesus is living, and is set to return to the Father, and Mary is given the task of being the first proclaimer of this good news, the first witness to the fullness of the resurrection. And immediately she does as she is instructed.

This is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and beautifully human scenes in all four gospels, the sadness and tears of Mary, the gentleness of Jesus, the power of the resurrection. It is a picture of mission born out of love and inspired by love. In our setting, it can remind us that too often we can want the dead Jesus, clinging on to traditions and dreams of what things used to be. The church we want to resurrect is not the church of today, let alone of tomorrow, but something fossilised, however beautifully. Mary understands this when she hears Jesus's words, coming to truly see, and in truly seeing no longer needing to see the physical form, thus paving the way for the words which Jesus will speak to Thomas in a few verses: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe' (John 20:29).

Mary Magdalene has been described as the apostle of the apostles,³⁶ the one who sets in process the proclamation of the transformative news of the resurrection of Jesus. And yet, despite this pivotal role, after this encounter with Jesus and fulfilling the mission she has been given (John 20:18), she disappears from the New Testament story and we hear no more of her. Except of course we do, for her story remains one that is constantly told, we know her as the first and faithful witness of the resurrection, the one to stay and weep and then hear her name spoken, to receive and carry out the task of mission.

³⁵ See Clarke-Soles, 'Mary Magdalene: Beginning at the End', p. 637: 'He asks her to stop touching him not because he is ascetic, puritanical, or aloof, but because the story needs to move forward so that he can ascend to the Father who initially sent him.' Both the mission of Mary and the mission of Jesus are dynamic, both in the sense of powerful and in the sense of mobile.

³⁶ See Bernabé, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol', pp. 281 and 290. The phrase, Bernabé says, is attributed to the ninth-century Frankish bishop Rabanus Maurus, though it may be even earlier.

Conclusion

In all four gospels, Mary, either alone or with others, receives the first call to bear witness to the resurrection. Spanish New Testament scholar Carmen Bernabé, a specialist in the story of Mary Magdalene, writes that ‘Mary is sent to announce the interpretation of what, in fact, has happened to Jesus, despite what appearances seems to indicate. Death has not had the last Word, nor has the political-religious system won, because God has raised him and is with him.’³⁷ She is the one capable of imagining the reality of the transformed life in Christ, and the only response to that is to share it with others, to bring them to a new way of seeing that, as the Gospel of John insists, dispenses with seeing altogether to enter into a new relationship with the risen Christ.

Ultimately, then, the encounter with the risen Lord requires a change in imagination, a new way of seeing the world as another possible world, where not death but life is the end. It requires new ways of imagining what it is to be in relation to Jesus, and in and through him with all those who follow him. It necessitates moving from sorrow to joy, being ready to proclaim the good news that the Crucified One is now also the Risen One. In our context it means searching out the living Christ among the tombs, leaving the empty spaces, returning to the places of initial encounter with life and understanding for the first time that this is where the kingdom of God is to be built.

Mary’s story is, in some ways, strangely redolent of that of the Samaritan woman in John 4. As with many other stories in John, this is a story of an encounter both with the human Jesus — the man who is tired and thirsty and desires some drink and some rest — and the risen Jesus, the one who is the Living Water. The Samaritan woman too goes on to become a witness to the presence of the Messiah: “‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’” (John 4:29) As with Mary Magdalene in Luke, she does this without any instruction or command from Jesus. But unlike in Luke, other people in the village take her seriously enough to go and see. John is slightly more circumspect. There, Mary tells the disciples

³⁷ Bernabé, ‘Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol’, p. 289.

what she has heard, but in the evening, they are still unsure, the doors closed for fear of the Jews. And with the Samaritan woman, again her moment at the centre of the story does not last long. The rest of the villagers tell her, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world” (John 4:42).

This points to the last act of imaginative transformation required by the missionary. For ultimately, the task of mission is to make oneself redundant, to be, at best, a footnote in the history of the church in a particular place. It is not mission that ends, for there are always more places to go, more people to talk to, more ways and possibilities to witness to the transforming power of Christ in people’s lives. There is always the opportunity to help envision another possible world, one in which life, not death, is the final word, in which the loving presence of God is known and lived out. And yet for the individual missionary, to hear that it is no longer because of what they have said, but through people’s own personal life-changing encounter with the risen Lord that they have come to believe is the ultimate aim. There can be no greater complement to the missionary than this, and this is the story of Mary Magdalene, the first missionary of the risen Lord.