



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Not Just a Rolling Stone”

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at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone was rolled aside from the entrance. –John 20:1 (TLB)*

*I said to him, “Lord, how does a person who sees a vision see it—[with] the soul [or] with the spirit?” The Savior answered, “The ‘visionary’ does not see with the soul or with the spirit, but with the mind which exists between these two—that is [what] sees the vision . . .”  
–Gospel of Mary 7:5-6*

*Changing is not just changing the things outside of us. First of all we need the right view that transcends all notions including of being and non-being, creator and creature, mind and spirit. That kind of insight is crucial for transformation and healing. –Thich Nhat Hanh*

*Rocks become stones when humans interact with them and use them in cultural settings, often after smaller chips have fallen off the old block.*

–S. Brent Plate in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*

### Call to Shape Things of Worth

All around the world this morning, Christians are celebrating the open tomb—the stone has been rolled away. “He is risen!” they are proclaiming. Whatever you believe about Jesus’ resurrection, one thing should be evident these thousands of years later—Jesus’ attitude of love for all cannot be contained or restrained by a stone rolled over the mouth of a tomb. His spirit is, indeed, alive and well, even in Unitarian Universalism, for we believe, as he did, in the inherent worth and dignity of everyone. It is important to remember that Unitarian Universalism grew out of the religious traditions that celebrate Christmas, Easter and other Jesus-centered occasions. Let us resolve to be as open as we say we are to the words of prophetic men and women from every religion. May we not confuse the gentle man that preached love for all with those of his so-called followers through the centuries who have transformed his message of love into one of hate. May we roll away the stone that could prevent us from hearing the story of the first Easter.

**Story:** “Mary of Magdala” (*Based on John 20: 1-18.*)

The story goes that after Jesus of Nazareth was killed on a Friday, his body was laid in a borrowed tomb in a garden. This tomb may have been only a cave-like opening in a hillside.

On Sunday, so the story goes, Jesus’ friend and follower, Mary who was from the region called Magdala, went to the tomb in the garden carrying fragrant herbs and oils with which to anoint the body. Anointing the body was the custom of the time because they had no other way to preserve the body.

As Mary walked toward the garden early that morning, she worried about how to get into the tomb because a huge stone had been rolled in front of the opening. The stone was there so that wild animals, thieves and robbers and such like could not get in to steal or damage the contents. There was also fear that because Jesus was so popular with the people, his followers would steal the body and carry it away. But it turned out that Mary didn’t have to worry about the stone. When she got to the tomb, the stone had already been rolled away. Mary looked into the tomb and found that Jesus’ body was not there. She was frightened and stayed outside the tomb crying because Jesus’ body was missing and she didn’t know who had taken it or where it was.

Jesus was more than Mary’s friend. He was a teacher and prophet. He was believed by some of

his followers to be the son of God. Some said that he could feed thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fish and that he could heal the sick, cure blindness and lameness, and overcome mental illness. Still others saw him as a kindly wanderer who was able to attract large crowds of people because he made promises of a better kingdom to come. Others saw him as a threat to the Roman government which had tight control over the Jewish people. Some saw him as a threat to the Jewish religious leaders who imposed strict laws that they said were God's laws.

Because he attracted large crowds and caused people to get excited, the government leaders conspired with the religious leaders to get rid of him. And so it was that he had been killed.

The stories say that as Mary waited outside the open tomb crying, a man approached her and said, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking that he must be the gardener, Mary appealed to him. "Sir," she said. "If you have taken him away, please tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

Then, according to the story, the gardener, who she realized was really Jesus, called her by name: "Mary," he said. She immediately recognized his voice and called him "Teacher," because he had taught her so much while he was living.

The story says that Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me because I have not yet gone back up to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them for me, 'I go back up to him who is my Father and your Father, my God and your God.'"

Mary ran to tell Jesus' other friends and followers what she had seen and heard. This, according to the story of the first Easter, is how Mary of Magdala became the first person to see Jesus after he arose from the tomb.

### **Reflection:**

Mary of Magdala, commonly called Mary Magdalene, was one of at least five Mary's mentioned in the four ancient books called "gospels" that are canonized in the Christian testament. The most famous Mary was, of course, the mother of Jesus. There was Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, who was also called Mary of Bethany. The other two Mary's are identified as Martha, mother of James and Joseph, and Mary, the wife of Clopas.

The gospels are not clear about who Mary Magdalene was or what position she held among Jesus' followers, although her presence at some of the most significant moments of his life indicates that she was at least a part of the inner circle of Jesus' friends and followers. After all, three of the four gospels name Mary Magdalene as being among the women who were present at the cross during the crucifixion and all four gospels say she was present at the tomb either during or after the burial, or both. And the gospel of Mark as well as John's gospel, as depicted earlier, says Mary was the first to see Jesus after the resurrection.

One of the questions we must confront before we go much farther is whether we are to take Jesus' resurrection as literal. Was the body of Jesus resuscitated, living and breathing and literally walking and talking with Mary Magdalene and others? Bishop John Shelby Spong, the Rev. Matthew Fox, and other modern theologians suggest that the answer is NO. Matthew Fox, who developed and teaches Creation Spirituality—I suggest that you Google it to find out more if you are interested—says, "The Easter event transformed the Christian movement, but that does not mean that it was the physical resuscitation of Jesus' deceased body back into human history. The earliest biblical records," he notes, "state that 'God raised him.'" Fox encourages us to question, raised him "Into what . . . [?]" for, Fox asserts, "The experience of resurrection must be separated from its later mythological explanations" ("Responding to Bishop Spong's 12 Principles and the Future of Religion," <http://johnshelbyspong.com/2016/10/06>).

Let me point out here that the writers of the gospels were not eyewitnesses to the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. While three of the gospels are named for apostles, all of the disciples, according to biblical scholars, had died by the time the four gospels were written, which scholars believe was 37-65 years after Jesus' death (*Smithsonian*). This passage of time helps explain many of the contradictions in the gospel stories regarding the birth, life, and death of Jesus. It is also important to note that the gospel stories were not meant to be historical accounts.

According to the gospel stories, however, Mary Magdalene and others felt the presence of Jesus as though he was physically resurrected. And these experiences were transformational for Jesus' followers and for the world.

But even before the crucifixion and resurrection, whatever our understanding of that word, Jesus

transformed Mary Magdalene in other ways. The status of women in Palestine before, during and after the time of Jesus was lowly. As indicated by four of the five Mary's being identified by their relationships with men, the role of a woman was as adjunct to husband, father, brother, or uncle. Mary of Magdala, however, is an exception. In addition to adding her place of origin, Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus cured her of an ailment—referred to as casting out seven demons but not necessarily referencing possession by evil spirits. Remember, in this time, the causes of illness were even more mysterious than we know them to be today.

Obviously, by healing Mary of her illness or illnesses, Jesus transformed her life. And by including her in his inner circle, he further empowered and promoted her, giving her life purpose and meaning. Some scholars have speculated that Mary may have been the widow of a wealthy man who left his wealth to her, therefore making her independent both socially and financially. If that is true, then her husband's death also transformed her.

However Mary came to be a student of Jesus and however she came to be liberated from the strictures of Jewish laws regarding women's status, she and the other women followers of Jesus seem to have made it possible for him and his male disciples to do what they did. Remember that Jesus was an itinerant teacher, wandering from town to town, teaching, preaching, healing and making both friends and enemies along the way. He and the twelve men who are called his disciples or apostles had no visible means of support. Some were fishermen; one was a tax collector; Jesus, himself, had probably learned the carpentry trade from his father Joseph, but the gospels don't record much about their pursuing their trades. The women, Mary included, may have provided for their needs.

The picture of Mary of Magdala that I have been describing is from the four gospels that were canonized into the New Testament, as some of us know it, by the early church fathers, that is the popes and other men who were leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, in the Fourth Century of the Common Era. Despite her transformation from woman afflicted with sickness into the herald of the good news of Jesus' resurrection, Mary Magdalene does not appear as the hero of the rest of the story in those books. In fact, one of those gospels records that the disciples did not believe her when she told them she had seen Jesus.

And in the centuries following the canonization, Mary Magdalene became confused with several other women mentioned in the four canonized gospels, most notably the repentant prostitute who, in a sexually-charged incident, anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, wetting his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. This transformation of Mary of Magdala into a prostitute—even a repentant one—appears to have been a deliberate effort put forth in a series of sermons by Pope Gregory the First to reduce her importance and authority in a church growing ever more orthodox in opposition to women in positions of power and authority and ever more condemning of female sexuality. Indeed, the church's opposition to women could have played a role in the omission of other writings about Jesus and his followers from the canon of scripture.

All of the writings that were eventually accepted into the Christian canon and all of those that were rejected by the church fathers emerged from communities of early Christians that flourished following Jesus' death. Many of these communities, while diverse in belief, practice, membership, and leadership followed Gnostic traditions. When the final canon was adopted, Christians in these communities were labeled as heretics and their writings as blasphemous. Many of these Christians went underground. Their writings were, for the most part destroyed—at least those copies that could be located by the church authorities.

One of the omitted writings, called Gospel of Mary, believed to have been written in the second century CE no doubt “emerged from a community that recognized [the] authority [of Mary of Magdala]” (*Smithsonian*). However, it was not included in the original canon and was lost or suppressed until it was rediscovered for sale in Cairo in 1896. It further languished in relative obscurity through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elaine Pagels introduced Gospel of Mary and other manuscripts from the same period discovered in Upper Egypt by an Arab peasant in 1945 in *The Gnostic Gospels* published in 1979. In 1994 Robert J. Miller included Gospel of Mary in his edition of *The Complete Gospels*. And in 2003 *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* by Karen L. King was published.

The writer of this gospel tells Jesus' story with a decidedly feminist twist: Mary of Magdala has a more prominent position in Jesus' inner circle than even Simon who became known as Peter, the Rock, to whom, as the Gospel of Matthew reports, Jesus said: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my

Church.” Peter even defers to Mary—until he and his brother Andrew begin to question if Jesus really chose Mary over them.

Other books omitted from the accepted canon, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, Wisdom of Faith, and Dialog of the Savior, also show Mary Magdalene and other women as holding important and prominent positions among the early Christians (*Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*).

Despite attempts by Peter and his descendant popes, Mary of Magdala’s reputation as an apostle of Jesus has persisted into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The four canonized gospels still gave enough indication of Mary Magdalene’s importance to Jesus to make the church fathers work hard to suppress her significance. She has been kept alive in oral traditions that depict her as the embodiment of Sophia, or Wisdom. Legends claiming that she was the wife of Jesus and mother of his children have persisted into this century and have become the subject of novels, such as Dan Brown’s *The Davinci Code*. Thus, Mary of Magdala was a woman ahead of her time. Like 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century women, she had to roll aside the stones of prejudice, misogyny, jealousy, lies, and deceit to claim her rightful place as a person of worth, a teacher, a leader, a bearer of knowledge. “Nevertheless,” it is safe to say, “Mary of Magdala has persisted.”

### **Meditation**

My mother died on April 21, 1985. It was a Sunday morning, two weeks after Easter . The irises—her irises—were in bloom that morning, as they are this morning. She planted them too many years ago for me to remember in the yard of the house where I grew up and where Herb and I now live. They bloom year after year—white ones, blue ones, purple ones, lilac ones, yellow ones. I have divided them and shared them. I have planted more, some from other sources. I feel Mama’s presence almost every day, but when the irises bloom, she walks with me through the garden. I keep her memory alive. I tell stories about her to my family and friends. As long as those stories live, as long as those irises continue to bloom and spread their rhizomes, my mother lives.

Mary of Magdala went to the garden that first Easter morning looking for the body of the person she loved more than anyone else on earth. The presence she encountered there—whether living or dead—transformed her. Because Mary Magdalene told the other disciples that she had seen and talked to Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth’s life continues to have meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Good Words for Going Forth:**

When S. Brent Plate says in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* that “Rocks become stones when humans interact with them,” he’s talking about literal rocks that have been elevated to the status of sacred objects. Three sets of such rocks exist in Jerusalem, the city that is sacred to three of the world’s great religions: the Wailing Wall or western wall of the temple built by King Solomon, sacred to Judaism; the Dome of the Rock, sacred to Islam as the place where “Muhammad the prophet underwent his mystical Night Journey” (p. 26); and not far from these two shrines, the Stone of Anointing which sits within the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is thought to be “the site where Jesus’s body was prepared for burial” (p.28). These are all literal stones, made sacred by their association with religious figures or occasions.

But it seems to me that we humans can also create stones in other ways. The sort of stones I’m talking about now can be used as defense mechanisms. We can hide behind or under them. For example, there’s the stone of jealousy, such as the disciples employed in denying Mary Magdalene’s authority in the inner circle of Jesus’ followers. There’s the stone of heresy which denied the Gnostics and other early Christian communities their place in the history of the Church. And, among many others that I don’t have time to identify, there is the stone of literalism that allows us to deny the possibility of something having happened because we think of it only in a literal sense, even as we accuse those with whom we disagree of taking it literally. Jesus’ resurrection is an example of this literalism.

So, on this Easter morning, my wish for you is that you may be liberated from whatever stones you are hiding behind or under so that you may experience the transformation that awaits your own resurrection.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. What stones must be rolled away before you are open to new possibilities?
2. Have you ever had a transformational experience? When? Where? Why? What precipitated it? How did it happen? Explain.
3. Have you ever experienced the presence of a loved one after they died? Share as much as you are willing to share about this experience.