

Breaking Barriers: Mary Magdalene and the Missionary Mandate in John 20:11–18

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ABSTRACT

John 20:11–18 presents one of the most significant post-resurrection encounters in the New Testament, where Mary Magdalene becomes the first witness and messenger of the risen Christ. This paper offers a missiological reading of the passage, exploring Mary's role as a paradigm for breaking cultural, religious, and gender barriers in mission. In a socio-historical context where women's testimonies were often disregarded, the risen Lord entrusts Mary with the primary proclamation of the resurrection—a task central to the Christian missionary mandate. Through exegetical analysis, the study examines the theological significance of Jesus' commissioning words, "Go to my brothers," as an apostolic sending that informs the Church's mission. The paper engages with missiological scholarship to highlight how Mary's witness exemplifies the holistic nature of mission, encompassing both proclamation of the good news and the transformation of social structures that hinder marginalized voices. By situating Mary's experience within the broader biblical and historical tradition of women in mission, the study challenges contemporary missional practice to embrace inclusivity, recognize the Spirit's gifting across gender lines, and reclaim the pioneering contributions of women. The findings underscore the enduring relevance of Mary Magdalene's witness as a theological and missiological model for the global Church.

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INTRODUCTION

Mary Magdalene occupies a unique and often underappreciated place in the narrative of Christian mission. In the Johannine resurrection account (John 20:11–18), she emerges not merely as a recipient of divine revelation but as the first commissioned witness of the risen Christ—a role that parallels the sending mandate given to the apostles (Keener 2003, 1209–10). In the first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman context, women's testimony was often dismissed as unreliable in public and legal settings (Josephus, Ant. 4.8.15 §219), making Jesus' commissioning of Mary both culturally radical and theologically significant.

Mission is not simply about geographic expansion or numerical growth; it is about bearing witness to God's salvific acts in Christ (Bosch 2011, 8–9). By instructing Mary to "Go to my brothers and say to them..." (John 20:17), Jesus establishes a missionary paradigm in which gendered social boundaries are transcended for the sake of the gospel (Witherington 1984, 124). This pattern aligns with broader biblical themes of God's Spirit empowering unlikely or marginalized individuals for leadership and proclamation (Acts 2:17–18).

Mary's role also disrupts reductionist understandings of mission that exclude women from apostolic leadership. As Oduyoye (2001, 72–73) notes, reclaiming women's contributions in mission is both a theological necessity and a corrective to patriarchal distortions in ecclesial structures. This study demonstrates that Mary's encounter with the risen Christ is both a historical and theological turning point and a model for inclusive, barrier-breaking mission across generations.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Mission / Missionary Mandate

In the Christian context, mission refers to God's sending of the Church into the world to bear witness to the gospel and participate in God's redemptive work. Bosch (2011, 9) describes mission as a

multidimensional enterprise encompassing proclamation, service, and social transformation. The missionary mandate refers to the responsibility entrusted to believers to continue Christ's redemptive work, as exemplified in Jesus' commissioning of Mary Magdalene.

Trailblazer / Barrier-Breaker

A trailblazer or barrier-breaker ventures into previously restricted or marginalized spaces, setting a precedent for others. In missiological studies, it refers to individuals whose actions challenge cultural, social, or gender norms to advance the gospel (Oduyoye 2001, 72). Mary Magdalene's role qualifies as trailblazing because her commissioning subverts patriarchal expectations about women in religious leadership.

Witness / Apostolic Witness

Witness (martyria in the New Testament) refers to testifying to the truth of God's revelation in Christ. Apostolic witness extends this role to the authoritative proclamation of the gospel for the edification and expansion of the Church (Keener 2003, 1210). Mary Magdalene embodies this function, becoming the "apostle to the apostles" tasked with delivering the resurrection message.

Gender and Ministry

In mission, gender refers to socially constructed roles and expectations assigned to men and women. Ministry encompasses service, leadership, and participation in God's mission. African theological scholarship emphasizes recognizing women's contributions to ministry and advocating inclusivity in leadership (Oduyoye 2001, 73; Witherington 1984, 124).

These clarifications provide a framework for understanding how Mary Magdalene's encounter in John 20:11–18 represents a model that challenges limitations on women's participation in mission.

Exegetical Analysis of John 20:11–18

John 20:11–18 recounts Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Christ outside the tomb, highlighting both theological and missiological significance. The passage begins with Mary “standing outside the tomb weeping” (John 20:11), reflecting grief, devotion, and the depth of personal encounter required for mission (Keener 2003, 1212).

When Mary sees two angels inside the tomb, she inquires about Jesus’ absence. This human limitation positions her to receive divine revelation. The turning point occurs when she encounters Jesus, initially unrecognized (John 20:14–15). This unrecognized presence symbolizes the discernment required for mission: the missionary must perceive God’s work in unexpected forms (Bosch 2011, 71).

Mary recognizes Jesus only when he calls her by name, “Mary” (John 20:16), highlighting the relational nature of mission: God’s sending is grounded in personal encounter and empowerment. The commissioning—“Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father’” (John 20:17)—represents the first apostolic sending in the resurrection narrative, making Mary the “apostle to the apostles” (Witherington 1984, 124).

Missiologically, Mary exemplifies barrier-breaking mission. In first-century Jewish society, women were marginalized in public and religious spheres (Josephus, Ant. 4.8.15 §219). Jesus’ selection of Mary subverts these norms, demonstrating that mission transcends gender and cultural restrictions (Oduyoye 2001, 72–73). Her witness embodies both proclamation and faithful embodiment, modeling perseverance and courage.

Theologically, the passage affirms that mission arises from personal encounter with Christ, Spirit empowerment, and obedience to divine commissioning. Mary’s role challenges contemporary churches to recognize women as full participants in mission and leadership.

Theological and Missiological Implications

Mary Magdalene’s encounter carries significant implications for the contemporary Church. Theologically, it demonstrates that mission originates from personal encounter with Christ, not institutional authority or societal expectation (Keener 2003, 1212). Jesus’ commissioning affirms that divine calling transcends gender, social status, and cultural norms (Bosch 2011, 72–73).

Missiologically, Mary models inclusive and transformative mission. She demonstrates that mission involves both proclamation and embodiment—communicating the gospel while modeling faithfulness and courage (Oduyoye 2001, 72–73). In African Christianity, where cultural norms sometimes limit women’s participation, Mary’s example validates women’s contributions and encourages holistic mission strategies (Witherington 1984, 125).

Mary’s witness highlights the relational and Spirit-empowered nature of mission, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity, relational engagement, and empowerment of marginalized voices (Bosch 2011, 75). Her example provides enduring guidance for churches worldwide to embrace inclusive, transformative, and Spirit-empowered mission.

CONCLUSION

Mary Magdalene embodies a trailblazing model of mission. Her encounter with the risen Christ shows that mission arises from personal encounter, divine empowerment, and relational commissioning rather than institutional authority or societal norms. By entrusting Mary with the first proclamation of the resurrection, Jesus subverts cultural and gendered barriers, affirming that God’s redemptive work is inclusive.

Her witness demonstrates that mission involves proclamation and faithful embodiment of gospel values. Contemporary churches, particularly in African contexts, are challenged to empower women in leadership, evangelism, and community transformation. Seminaries and theological institutions should integrate the study of biblical women leaders to foster awareness of barrier-breaking models of mission. Furthermore, African churches should adopt culturally sensitive, relationally grounded, and inclusive mission strategies. Finally, ongoing theological reflection on women’s roles

in Scripture is essential to foster a theology of mission that reflects divine inclusivity.

Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Christ provides a paradigm that bridges biblical witness with contemporary practice, offering guidance for global and African Christian communities alike.

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