



Part I—Finding Our Resilience

LESSON ONE

Mary Magdalene, the Tower



SCRIPTURE

John 20:11–18, John 11:17–27

MAIN IDEA

Our faith is strengthened by learning more about Mary Magdalene, a towering witness to the resurrection.

Opening Prayer

God of grace, open up the scriptures to us as we study them today. Help us to learn from Mary Magdalene's witness and service to you, that in times of joy, challenge, death, and new life, we can proclaim the good news and confess you as the Messiah. We offer our gratitude to you for your many gifts, and we ask, O God, for the strength and resilience to go out and share the promise of the gospel. Amen.

SUMMARY

Mary Magdalene is a significant figure in the Bible. She was close to Jesus, served with him, and traveled with him. New scholarship shows Mary Magdalene may be the one who anointed Jesus, and the one who gave the central Christological confession in the Gospel of John. Mary Magdalene was at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified. She went to the empty tomb on Easter morning. She was the first witness to the resurrection. She was the person Jesus appeared to on Easter morning, as recorded in John, and she received the first apostolic commission in this Gospel to go and announce that Jesus is risen.

People have conflated Mary Magdalene with other Marys in the Bible, and our tradition has also sometimes disparaged Mary, for whatever reason. While some have diminished Mary, she was known as a witness to Christ and a tower of faith whom we should pay attention to, as she leads us to “the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (John 11:27).

LESSON

Mary Magdalene traveled with Jesus. She provided for Jesus and those who followed him and, along with other women, financially supported Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ entourage included male and female followers, who served alongside him.

Given the attitudes toward women during this time, and even by some today, these women disciples of Jesus are remarkable. Though other followers disappeared when Jesus was crucified, these women witnessed where he was buried and sought to provide him with proper burial rites.

When the women disciples are listed in the Gospels, Mary Magdalene’s name always appears first in the list, with one exception. Mary’s history is colorful. She suffered from mental illness, yet she was cured by Jesus. The eighth chapter of Luke says that she was cured of evil spirits and infirmities, and that seven demons went out from her (Luke 8:2; cf. Mark 16:9). A note in *The Harper Collins Study Bible* clarifies that evil spirits and infirmities were afflictions to be healed, not sins to be forgiven, and that seven demons indicates the severity of her afflictions.¹

Mary Magdalene experienced healing, and she spread the good news of Jesus Christ, witnessing to Jesus Christ as Savior. I imagine her saying:

This ministry with Jesus has given me meaning and purpose that I never had before. I do not really remember what my life was like before I became part of this faith community. Jesus is a different kind of rabbouni. He speaks our language, and we can relate to his teachings. His parables are, on the one hand, practical, but on the other hand, have different levels of understanding and deeper meaning.

Traveling with Jesus is hard. It is both physically and emotionally taxing. But, it is also amazing. Jesus will not hesitate to share the faith with women. He is kind and caring with children. And, Jesus has healed so many people, even me! It is clear to me that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

They call me Mary the Tower. I think that’s because I’m always willing to share the faith and be a witness. You can count on me. If you could learn firsthand from Jesus, see his goodness and share in this ministry with him, I think you would have a towering faith, too.

What’s in a Name?

Many early Christians believed that Mary Magdalene was from Bethany. And, evidence suggests that Magdala was not a place. In other words, the name Mary Magdalene is not meant to indicate that she is from Magdala. Instead, this is a title. Mary Ann Beavis writes, “there is no reference to such a town in sources contemporary with Jesus. . . . Luke’s observation that Mary was ‘the one called Magdalene’ ([Luke] 8:2) suggests that [Magdalene] (μαγδαληνη) was a nickname or title from the Aramaic *magdala* (meaning ‘Mary the Tower’ or ‘Mary the Great’).”²

1 Wayne A. Meeks, Jouette M. Bassler, Werner E. Lemke, Susan Niditch, Eileen M. Schuller, eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), annotation on Luke 8:2–3, 1972.

2 Mary Ann Beavis, “Reconsidering Mary of Bethany,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (April 2012): 286–87.

One Sister or Two?

New scholarship by Dr. Elizabeth Schrader Polczer shows a major textual problem in the manuscript of Papyrus 66 (or P66), which is the world's oldest near complete copy of the Gospel of John. In Schrader Polczer's article in the *Harvard Theological Review*, she suggests that the initial circulating version of the Gospel of John may not have included Martha, and thus in P66 the scribe altered the manuscript.³ Only recently have hundreds of transcriptions of the Gospel of John been made available simultaneously online, which allowed Schrader Polczer to view numerous manuscripts at once.

When Schrader Polczer looked at P66, she was surprised to see in the manuscript where the scribe changed Mary's name to Martha. In John 11:27, Martha confesses Jesus as the Messiah. Schrader Polczer says that this was not Martha but Mary Magdalene. Thus, the woman who gives the major Christological confession in John is Mary Magdalene.

In her research Schrader Polczer shows that sometime in the second century, a scribe altered the oldest text of the Gospel of John and split the character of Mary into two. Mary became Mary and Martha.

In *Codex Alexandrinus*, an early fifth century Greek manuscript, the scribe originally wrote, "There was a certain sick man, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary his sister."

Schrader Polczer states, "The first printing of the King James Bible has only one sister" (1611 KJV, John 11:3) and, "we get the exact same reading in the 1526 Tyndale Bible and the 1591 Bishop's Bible."⁴

Note that the textual problem is in the Gospel of John, not in Luke. Martha still exists in Luke 10:38–42. But Schrader Polczer's deep dive into the text with new eyes demonstrates that we have conflated Mary and Martha from Luke and that these two sisters don't show up in the Gospel of John. In other words, John 11 and 12 originally described one sister, and her name is Mary.

A Central Character

Two major Christological confessions are found in the gospels. The first one is in Matthew 16, where Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Then, Jesus names Peter the Rock.

The second Christological confession is in John 11. Mary Magdalene is believed to be the one who speaks with Jesus when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Mary Magdalene says to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Like Peter the Rock, she is Mary the Tower, confessing that Jesus is the Messiah.

Schrader Polczer says, "Imagine if you read a Gospel of John where Mary gives the central confession of John's Gospel, and she is implied to be the same woman as Mary Magdalene. She goes on to anoint Jesus. She's there at the foot of the cross. She doesn't abandon him. She goes to the empty tomb alone on Easter morning. She is the one and only person who Jesus appears to on Easter morning . . . And, then he gives her the first apostolic commission in this Gospel to go

3 Elizabeth Schrader, "Was Martha of Bethany Added to the Fourth Gospel in the Second Century?" *Harvard Theological Review* (Cambridge) 110, no. 3 (July 2017): 362.

4 Elizabeth Schrader, "Mary Magdalene and the Gospel of John with Elizabeth Schrader," Women Erased series, Future Church, YouTube, August 26, 2021, video, 1:04:37, youtube.com/watch?v=_b3Y3cJ0Ic8.

and announce that he is risen. That is an extremely important character. That is a central character in the Gospel of John.”⁵

She goes on to say, “Now imagine that you are somebody in the second century, possibly an editor of the Gospel of John, and you see exactly what the evangelist is doing, and you don’t like the idea that Peter’s authority might be challenged by Mary Magdalene . . . We know that Mary Magdalene was a controversial figure, and we know that Peter seemed to have some sort of problem with her . . . Imagine if the followers of Peter knew what John was doing, and they see the confession, and they say there’s an easy way to fix it . . . you just change Maria [Mary] to Martha.”⁶

Activity

Read John 11, replacing Martha’s name with Mary (Magdalene) and revise the plural “sisters” to “sister.” Imagine that you have just read Papyrus 66, Codex Alexandrinus, or the first printing of the King James Bible (all of these include only Mary, not Martha, and only one sister, with the exception of the scribal additions in P66 and Codex Alexandrinus). Share with others what you noticed in your reading and imagine what it must have felt like for earlier Christians to know Mary Magdalene as the one who gives the important Christological confession in John.

Consider with me for a moment that you are a second century reader of the Bible, and in your Gospel of John, there is only one Mary (Mary

Magdalene, the Tower). I know this is hard to do. When learning about Christ’s life and ministry, many of us are drawn to the courage and frailties of the Christian witnesses who surrounded Jesus. In their humanness, they made mistakes, just as we do. And, they were towers of faith, as many of you are.

So, if you are confused about which Mary is in John’s Gospel, you are in good company. Many are trying to figure this out, even the Nestle-Aland Editorial Committee of the Greek New Testament, the international committee that ensures that the Greek New Testament adheres as closely as possible to the original manuscripts. They met with Schrader Polczer to discuss the new scholarship and consider whether to add a note about Mary Magdalene to their next edition.

I imagine that Mary Magdalene said to herself,

It has been an amazing journey. Every day was not easy. We faced so many challenges, both in our ministry and personally. And, we saw and were a part of so many miracles. I am filled with gratitude that Jesus recognized greatness in me. And, he has been there to speak up for me when others have challenged the ways I have chosen to serve. He has shown me great support and love, and Jesus has become my best friend.

Dimming Mary’s Light

I believe that Mary’s faith was towering because of the way she handled conflict and moved through it, first and foremost, to serve Jesus. In apocryphal literature (books that did not make it into the biblical cannon), there is a conflict

5 Elizabeth Schrader and Joan Taylor, “The Mary Magdalene Mystery with Elizabeth Schrader and Joan Taylor,” Women Erased series, Future Church, YouTube, April 28, 2022, video, 1:11:20, youtu.be/TIJvTr_H1_0. (Also see Elizabeth Schrader and Joan E. Taylor, “The Meaning of ‘Magdalene’: A Review of Literary Evidence,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 4 (2021): 751-773. doi:<https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1404.2021.6>.)

6 Schrader and Taylor, “The Mary Magdalene Mystery.”

between Mary Magdalene and Peter.⁷ There are stories of Mary instructing the disciples, sharing teachings that Jesus shared with her. There are also stories of Peter and others challenging Mary.

Misinformation about Mary persists, as well. Some still believe that she was a sex worker, but no biblical evidence supports this. Throughout the history of the church, Mary Magdalene has been linked together with the woman who came from the city who was a sinner, who weeps and wipes the feet of Jesus (Luke 7:36–8:3). Many of our study Bibles now note that there is no reason to identify Mary Magdalene with the woman from the city who was a sinner.⁸

Did people intentionally seek to dim Mary's light and witness? Were the scribal additions in the Gospel of John intended to diminish her authority?

Activity

Imagine that you are a woman disciple of Jesus. It is both exhilarating and challenging. Write some of the things that you would like to see, say, or do. When you see Mary the Tower, what might you say to her?

Mary the Tower Is a Model of Resilience

Resilience is the ability to bounce back in the face of challenging circumstances. One of the characteristics underlying resilience is courage. Adapting to change and moving forward in the face of adversity is also a part of being resilient. So, what does resilience have to do with Mary? What do we notice about Mary the Tower?

First, she was a woman who traveled across Palestine with Jesus and a group of mostly male disciples. I can imagine that in a patriarchal society, there were those who found this inappropriate. And, there was speculation that Peter had a dispute with Mary. It takes a strong woman to be able to serve as Jesus taught her in a male-dominated society. This takes courage and resilience.

Mary called Jesus “rabbouni,” because he was her teacher. He told her to “go” to the disciples and “tell” them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” She was the first woman preacher to “go and tell” of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” To move forward in the face of death and resurrection takes resilience. It seems evident that Mary had this quality, and so I propose that Mary the Tower is a model of resilience.

Finding Our Resilience

The demands of Christianity are difficult at times, especially when we are questioned or challenged by others who are significant in our communities. Sometimes these conversations are hurtful or harming. Particularly if we are in a leadership position, we have to find a way to be resilient. And, that way is through the very faith that we profess, through prayer, Bible study and spending spiritual time with God. For some of us, this is the only way we can get through a hard day.

And, at other times, we profess Christ with great joy. And on nondescript, noneventful days, many of us lift up our hearts and minds to God, because we are so very grateful for all that God has done and continues to do for us.

7 See the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary (also known as the Gospel of Mary Magdalene).

8 See Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), annotation on Luke 8.2, 91 NT. Also see Marc Brettler, Carol Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), annotation on Luke 8.2, 1882.

When I was a young minister, I was in a hospital room visiting with a family whose loved one was unconscious and near death. I encouraged each family member to say goodbye. After each one spoke to their loved one, I asked if they wanted to sing a hymn. The mood in the room lightened. The adult children told me how much their father loved music. We sang, and all of a sudden, the atmosphere in the room changed. People started to smile and laugh. At first, I was not sure what was happening. A time of sadness turned quickly into a time of joy. In retrospect, I think the family began to identify their strength, resilience, joy, and identity in the hymns of the faith, and ultimately in their savior Christ Jesus.

I used to think that resilience is a quality that only some people have. But I have seen very vulnerable populations of people find resilience. How much of the capacity to recover quickly from dire circumstances is situational? A number of people have said to themselves, “I have to recover quickly, because other lives are depending on me.” In many ways, this can be a big burden, but in other ways, it can be the spring that allows you to bounce back into shape.

Women disciples, like the male disciples, traveled the same number of miles, faced similar

opposition, and were faithful in supporting Jesus in his ministry. I imagine that they did a lot more than we will ever know. And, these women made sure that the ministry was financially afloat, similar to what Presbyterian women have done in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for decades.

These women exercised profound influence, wisdom, and discipleship, including Mary Magdalene, the Tower. We are drawn back to Mary the Tower, for we realize how important she is to Christianity, the church, and to Jesus. The more we uncover and rediscover about Mary the Tower, the greater our faith is strengthened by this towering witness to the resurrection.

Closing Prayer

Loving Christ, we thank you for Mary Magdalene and her witness in the history of Christianity. We are also grateful for those women, named and unnamed, who have led us to you, O Christ, through their love, service, ministry, and proclamation. We thank you for women today, whom you have called to serve in the church. Walk with them and guide them as they pray, preach, sing, teach, and lead, Gracious God. You pave the way for women to serve you. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you suppose we are just learning about Mary the Tower?
2. Do you think part of Mary Magdalene's witness was erased from the Bible? If so, why?
3. What does it mean for us to uncover that Mary Magdalene may have given the central Christological confession in the Gospel of John?
4. How does it impact you to know that Mary Magdalene may be as central and significant a figure as Peter?
5. Is it surprising to learn that some, including some of the male disciples, may have questioned Mary's authority?
6. Why has so much misinformation about Mary Magdalene persisted through the centuries?

LESSON ONE NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slightly textured appearance with some minor discoloration or foxing, particularly towards the edges. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

*Suggestions for Leaders***LESSON ONE: Mary Magdalene, the Tower****Central Concept**

This lesson contains an interesting presentation of new biblical scholarship. Here we encounter a clear separation of the story about the Martha and Mary who Jesus visits in "a certain village," as told in Luke 10:38-42, and the story about the Martha and Mary who live in Bethany with their brother Lazarus, as told in John 11:17-46.

Encourage participants to keep an open mind and most important, focus on Mary Magdalene. Invite them to consider the biblical evidence about who she was and what she did for Jesus, and her subsequent courage, resilience, and witness to "the Christ, God's Son, the one who [has come] into the world."

Connect

(20 minutes) Because this is your first gathering for this study,

- if all know each other, invite all to name something that has encouraged or inspired them in the last two months.
- if all or any are new to this group, invite everyone to say their name, one Bible study experience they have appreciated and why, and one hope they have for this study.

Ask participants to turn to the study's Introduction and find the definitions of "Resilience," "Joy," and "Identity." Point out the importance of resilience, joy, and identity as the focus of the study as a whole, and the theme of three lessons each. Invite people to read aloud the definitions, then give the following instructions.

1. Turn to someone near you and name one of the three themes you most claim as a strength you have.
2. Name one of the three you most hope to grow in your life.

Note that Mary Magdalene is today's focus, and she is offered as a model of resilience. Ask participants to name

anything they remember knowing or thinking about Mary Magdalene before they read this lesson. Encourage them not to worry about whether the new scholarship is right, and simply to note the idea as a possibility. (Try beginning with "I think ..." as a way to encourage maximum participation.)

Pray the lesson's Opening Prayer in unison.

Consider

(10 minutes) Explore what we know about Mary Magdalene by presenting this list of stories or mentions of her in the Bible.

- Mary anoints Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair, and Jesus defends her actions, John 12:1-8.
- Mary is mentioned first in every listing of Jesus' female disciples. She is a leader of a group of women who followed and served Jesus and supported him financially, Mark 15:40-16:1; Matthew 27:55-28:1; Luke 8:2-3; 24:10.
- Mary Magdalene is described as someone "from whom seven demons had been thrown out," Luke 8:2b.
- Mary Magdalene witnesses Jesus' death in all four gospels, is at the burial (Mark 15:47), goes to the empty tomb with spices to anoint Jesus (Mark 16:1), and either gets the news of the risen Christ or Jesus' instruction to go and tell the other disciples.
- The risen Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene and talks to her about his coming ascension, John 20:11-18.

Because the basis of today's lesson could be surprising for members of your group, preface the following examination of the information with an assurance that it is difficult to understand what happened and what it means. The gift of our exploration will be the opportunity

to know Mary Magdalene better and ultimately to reflect on her resilience.

Depending on time, use one or more of these ways to help participants clarify information presented in the lesson.

(15 minutes) Assign small groups to look at the sections, "What's in a Name?," "One Sister or Two?," "A Central Character," and "Dimming Mary's Light." Ask the groups to look for key pieces of information and insights to bring back to the whole gathering. Allow 10 minutes, then hear insights.

(10 minutes) Use these questions to glean what new insights participants have into Mary Magdalene.

1. What is the essence of Dr. Schaefer Polczer's discovery?
2. What implications does she draw from it about the intent of the editor?
3. What are the implications of the editing for our view of Mary Magdalene?
4. In what new ways do you see Mary Magdalene?

(10 minutes) Use this process to invite questions about Dr. Schaefer Polczer's work and how we interpret it.

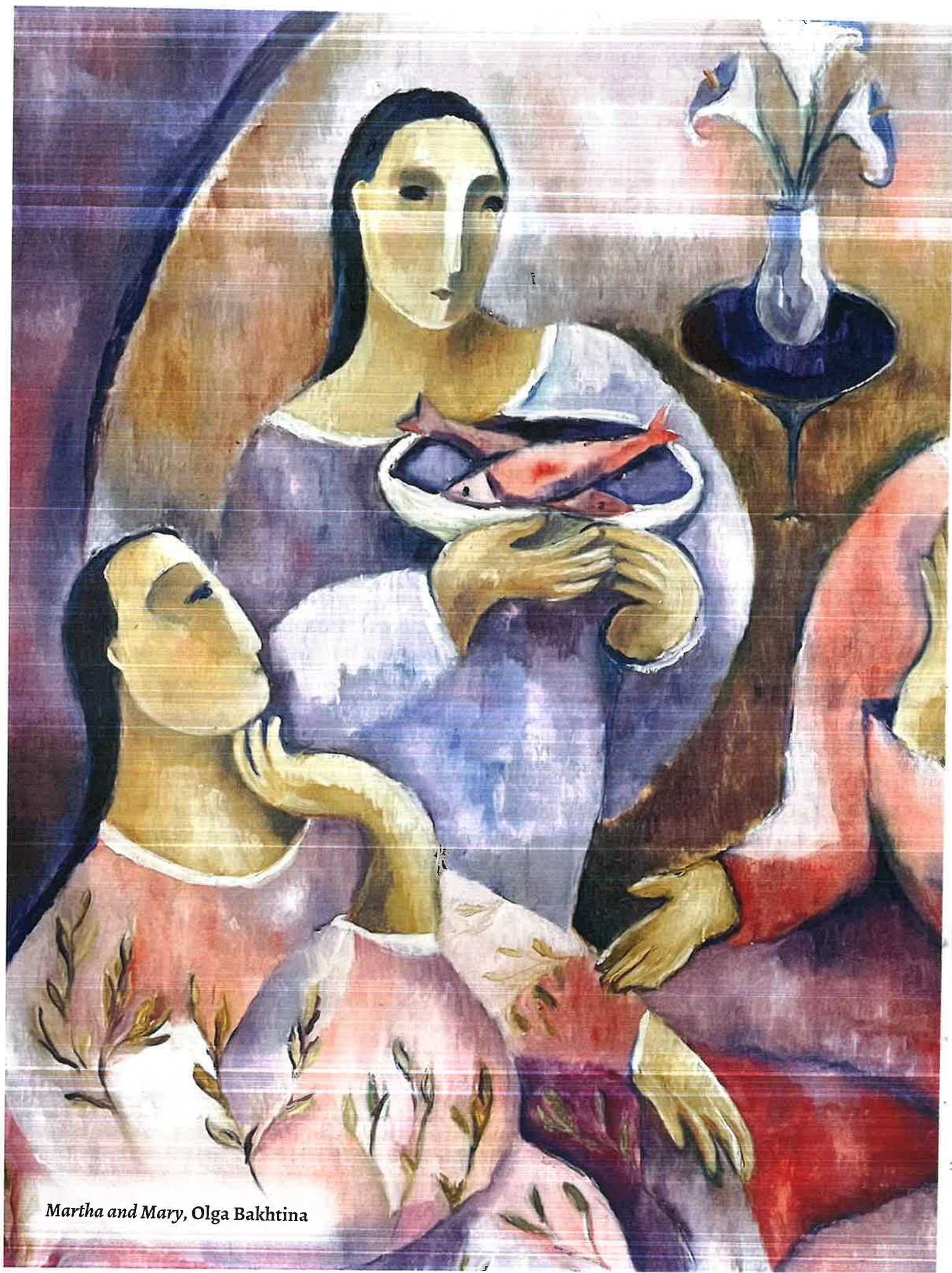
1. What intrigues or puzzles you about what an editor might have done, how it happened, and why it might have happened?
2. What questions do you have about the possible implications of this for our understanding of the role of women in Jesus' life and ministry?
3. No matter what, John 11:27 shows us that the evangelist who wrote the Gospel of John tells us a woman friend of Jesus, in the throes of grieving the death of her brother, understands who Jesus is and proclaims him "the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." What do you think she meant? What do those words mean to you?

Commune and Commit

(10-15 minutes) Use your choice of these questions and connections to lead group reflection on Mary Magdalene's resilience, and our own.

1. The author points to Mary Magdalene as a model of resilience. How do you imagine Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus, her women friends, and the other disciples, shapes her character and builds her resilience?
2. Name times and places that women need resilience in today's world.
3. Turn to a partner and name a time when you needed resilience and when you showed resilience.
4. Consider who has been a Tower of Strength for you? For whom have you been a Tower of Strength?
5. In "Finding Our Resilience" the author suggests strengthening resilience through the faith we profess, prayer, Bible study, quiet time with God, and expressing our gratitude to God. Either choose the one of these that most helps you gain or grow your resilience and name it to the group, or name something you have found that works for you.

Turn to the lesson's Closing Prayer. Note that it includes expressing gratitude for women who have led us to Christ and women called to serve in the church. Give everyone a moment to think of someone they know in each of those categories. Invite all to name them aloud when you pause after "proclamation" and after "in the church."



Martha and Mary, Olga Bakhtina