

Chapter 5

The Two Marys

Several Marys are mentioned in the Gospel texts, which is not surprising as Mary (in Hebrew Miryam) was the most popular girl's name of that era. The two most prominent and well-known female characters in the New Testament are both called Mary. They are Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary of Magdala. As the Church gradually became institutionalised, its male leaders and theologians interpreted their respective characters in such a polarised manner that Christian women ever since have tended to be stereotyped in Roman Catholicism as either madonnas or whores. We shall begin our consideration of the Madonna/whore dichotomy with an exploration of the life of Mary Magdalene, who is certainly one of the most misunderstood women in history.

In Roman Catholicism, until the 1960s Mary Magdalene was officially a 'sinful woman'. In twentieth-century Ireland, for example, homes for unmarried mothers set up by religious orders were referred to as Magdalene laundries; here, so-called 'fallen' women, who had borne children outside wedlock, lived out their days washing and ironing for the well-off. It was thought that this unpaid, menial work was a means for the women to atone for their sins, as Mary Magdalene had atoned for hers.

After Vatican II, with its new emphasis on Scripture, Mary Magdalene's name was finally cleared. In popular Christian consciousness, however, she continues to be confused with the unnamed prostitute discussed in the previous chapter, although even a superficial reading of the Gospel texts tells the reader a very different story. The image of Mary Magdalene projected by the Roman Catholic Church until the very recent past is a complete travesty of her role as portrayed in the Gospels.

The Gospel texts make it very clear that Mary Magdalene was the woman disciple who was closest to Jesus. Her significance in his ministry is indicated by the fact that she is generally the first mentioned in any list of women. We have already noted the Lukan tendency to cite the names of three persons as witnesses to significant events, such as the Transfiguration. When listing three male disciples, Luke always names Peter first; in parallel fashion, lists of female witnesses always begin with the name of Mary Magdalene. It can be deduced from this that she should be seen as a disciple who is on equal terms with Peter, despite the fact that Peter receives so much more attention in the texts. Her importance is further emphasised by the fact that in each of the Gospels she is depicted as one of the Galilean women who watched Jesus' crucifixion, saw where he was buried and returned to the tomb on the first day of the week. In John's account, she is the first witness to the Resurrection.

Feminist theologians cite these Gospel incidents as evidence that Mary Magdalene was a 'leader' of the women in the same way that Peter was leader of the twelve. However, of even greater significance for the restoration of harmony between the sexes is the emotional depth of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

The special bond that existed between this man and woman, Jesus and Mary Magdalene, is revealed almost by chance in John's resurrection narrative. John's intention is not so much to recount an emotional episode between the two as to provide convincing evidence that Jesus has risen from the dead. The evangelist reports that 'early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark' (John 20:1) Mary goes to visit Jesus' tomb alone. She finds the tomb empty and in great distress runs to find Peter 'and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, crying, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him"' (20:2). All three return to the tomb. Seeing that it is indeed empty, Peter and 'the beloved disciple' return to their homes. Mary is inconsolable, however, and cannot bring herself to leave; she remains behind, weeping and distraught. Looking into the tomb, she sees two angels 'in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet' (20:12). They ask her why she is weeping and she answers, 'They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him' (20:13). The intensely emotional charge of the scene that follows can give women readers the skin-prickling sensation of being actually present at the tomb:

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (20:14-16)

As this and other post-Resurrection narratives make clear, the risen Jesus is in some way unrecognisable to those who knew him in his earthly life and at first Mary Magdalene mistakes him for the gardener. In asking her why she is weeping and whom she is looking for, Jesus comes across as mildly teasing, since he is well aware that she is looking for him. When she still does not recognise him, he speaks her name in a tone of voice that instantly evokes for her the essence of their relationship. The reader can only strain to imagine the depth of feeling and evocation of shared experience that must have resonated in the one word, 'Mary!' This must have been a relationship of great depth and intimacy; it is also clear, however, that it was not the type of bond that has been suggested in books such as the *Da Vinci Code* or even in some of the apocryphal (non-canonical) gospels. The amazed response of 'Rabbouni!' gives further insight into the earthly relationship that had existed between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The Hebrew word 'rabbouni' means teacher or master; theirs was a relationship that had clearly evolved from psychical healing by Jesus to deep friendship and mentoring. To compare their relationship to one between teacher and pupil or master and disciple is only to describe its form or structure. The joyful tenderness of their post-Resurrection encounter implies that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were extraordinarily close; the fact that it was Mary to whom Jesus first appeared and not his mother, or Peter, or 'the beloved disciple' would seem to suggest that she had been more sensitive towards him during his ministry than anyone else. That their relationship was a physically affectionate one is evident from what Jesus says immediately following Mary's recognition of him: 'Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father' (John 20:17). Simultaneously with her cry of 'Rabbouni!', Mary instinctively throws herself upon Jesus. Theirs was certainly a bond of deep love but it was a platonic love. The capacity for unconditional love and empathy towards women indicated in the sayings, deeds and preaching of Jesus seems to have

come to full fruition in his bond with this particular woman. It can be assumed that the other women mentioned in the Gospels also experienced some degree of this unique male love; it is no wonder that women flocked around Jesus.

However, the fact that the risen Jesus appears in the glory of his divinity to a woman first has a symbolic significance beyond any personal relationship. Throughout his ministry it was, notably, women who had an unswerving faith in his divinity. In Mark 8:29–34, Peter, who has witnessed a series of miraculous healings carried out by Jesus, confesses Jesus' messiahship. However, Peter can only partly identify with the kind of messiah Jesus is called to be. This becomes clear when Peter rebukes Jesus for his statement that he must be a suffering and rejected messiah, provoking the famous reprimand, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things' (8:33).

Peter cannot fully confess to the divinity of Jesus because he does not understand how divinity can involve suffering. Along with the other disciples, he requires Jesus to be a powerful, miracle-working, political messiah. An incident that parallels Peter's confession and that is reminiscent of the interaction between Jesus and the woman of Samaria occurs in the fourth Gospel, when Martha of Bethany plays a pivotal role in the drama of the raising of her brother Lazarus. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany – the village of Martha and her sister, Mary – Lazarus has been dead for four days. Martha goes out to greet Jesus with a declaration of faith, in spite of her brother's death: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you' (John 11: 21–22). A conversation ensues between Jesus and Martha about resurrection, which culminates with Jesus' revelation to Martha, 'I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' Unhesitatingly, Martha replies, 'Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming to the world' (11:25–27). Martha's acceptance of Jesus' messiahship is unequivocal, even though she has not yet seen Jesus bring her brother back to life. Also, in the fourth Gospel, the evangelist places on the lips of a woman the words he himself uses when describing his whole purpose in writing an account of the ministry of Jesus: 'that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name' (20:31).

The faith of one woman, Martha, goes some way towards explaining why the fourth evangelist also narrates in detail the story of how the risen Jesus appeared first of all to another woman. The contrast between Peter and Martha is mirrored in the contrast between the male disciples of Jesus and the female disciples. Mark's gospel, in particular, portrays the former as being incapable of understanding the essential message and revelation of Jesus and as being obsessed instead with rank and position (9:34). Even when they have been rebuked by Jesus, the sons of Zebedee again look for special privileges (10:35–45). In the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples fall asleep when Jesus most needs their support and, when the guards arrive to arrest Jesus, they flee in fear (14:37–50). Finally, as prophesied by Jesus, a cowardly Peter denies his Lord (14:66–72).

The women disciples, on the other hand, are reported in all four Gospels as remaining steadfastly with Jesus throughout his time of trial. From the earliest days of the Galilean ministry through to the Passion and death of Jesus, his female disciples loyally stood by him while the male disciples abandoned him at the crucial time of his arrest and passion. The women present at the Crucifixion are made up of two groups, those who had followed him from Galilee and 'many other women' who had gone up to Jerusalem with Jesus (Mark 15:41). The impression given is that the women disciples understand and have faith in the messiahship of Jesus. The male disciples on the other hand, preoccupied with status and prestige, wanted Jesus to take the path of power and glory, a glory in which they could have shared. They could not understand why a man of the calibre of Jesus did not focus on the usual male goals, and imagined his divinity would be revealed in their achievement. By contrast, the female disciples never expected him to be predictable. In conclusion, it can be argued that the risen Jesus appeared first to a woman in acknowledgement of women's ability to recognise his divinity in loneliness, humiliation and suffering, as well as in mighty deeds and miracles.

Mary Magdalene, as the first person to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared and the first one sent to proclaim the message of Christianity is, by the very definition of the word, the apostle to the apostles and a founder of the Church. As we shall see at the end of the chapter, her special relationship with Jesus is also relevant to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. For now, however, we must embark on a discussion of the Marian dogmas associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Mary Ever Virgin

The sixth-century Pope Gregory I formalised Mary Magdalene's mistaken reputation as a sinner when he delivered a powerful homily, in which he conflated Luke's anonymous sinful woman with her. As a result, she became known as the sinner woman, a fictional, though central, figure in Christianity. Gregory, who also felt that there were too many female figures in the Gospels reduced them to two, the other being the mother of Jesus. By the time of his papacy, her virginal conception of Jesus had been extended to encompass a perpetual virginity.

The doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary has always been controversial and remains so to the present day. This is because there are numerous mentions in the Gospels of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. In addition, while the virgin birth is directly attested to in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, there is no such declaration of the perpetual virginity of Mary. Aside from the numerous scenes in which the siblings of Jesus are described as being present, in Matthew 1:25 we are told that Joseph 'had no marital relations' with Mary until she had borne Jesus, the implication being that subsequently he did. So how did this doctrine come to be and how is it reconciled with the biblical texts?

There are two possible explanations given for the Gospel references to the brothers and sisters of Jesus other than that they are his biological siblings. The first, which goes back to a second-century apocryphal gospel called the *Protoevangelium of James* and was later promoted by Epiphanius of Salamis in the fourth century, is that Joseph was an elderly widower when he married the young teenage Mary and had sons and daughters by his first wife who are the brothers and sisters mentioned in the Gospels. This would mean that Jesus had stepbrothers and sisters as opposed to biological ones. The alternative explanation is a philological one, based on linguistics. In classical Hebrew there is no word for cousin, so brother/sister were used instead. From this it is argued that the so-called brothers and sisters of Jesus could actually have been his cousins.

Mary's perpetual virginity was established as an orthodox doctrine by Ambrose, the archbishop of Milan, in the fourth century. By that time the spread of ascetic orders of monks and nuns had led to the promotion of celibacy in the Church as the ideal state and the consequent devaluation of marriage to a lesser status.

For Ambrose, Mary's body had never been penetrated and therefore defiled by lust. Her perpetual virginity also included virginity *in partu*, meaning that her hymen remained intact even after childbirth. Ambrose

developed a new ecclesiology by analogy with the virginity of Mary, asserting that the Catholic Church is a pure body undefiled by any form of heresy. Ambrose was supported in his doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity by two other theologian/saints of the era, Jerome and Augustine. The latter two had indulged themselves in the debauchery of the Roman Empire when young and their later conversion to Christianity resulted in deep feelings of guilt about their sexuality and revulsion towards the human body. All three men associated the virginity of Mary with their belief that, since Jesus had no sexual origin, he would have been free of all sexual desire. Yet, as we are told in Hebrews, 'we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (4:15). Nonetheless, this new teaching gave rise to a disgust for the human body in the Early Church and a belief that Christian virtue must be grounded first and foremost in control of the body. For all three men even a good marriage could not be ranked as comparable in virtue to an ascetic life of sexual renunciation.

The negative consequences of this new emphasis on the renunciation of one's sexuality as the highest form of Christian living were and continue to be particularly harsh and difficult for Roman Catholic women. This is due to the anomaly that, in contrast to religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church, who take vows of celibacy and chastity, Mary was simultaneously a wife and mother. The doctrine of her perpetual virginity is preached in such a way as to place her in a different category to all other women and leads even to faithful wives and mothers being tainted with sin since they cannot conceive without sexual interaction. Ironically, in light of the fact that Jesus' revolutionary treatment of women totally subverted Proverbs' polarisation of women into the perfect wife/dangerous seductress stereotypes, the institutional Church polarised them further by defining the perfect wife as also a virgin. As I shall shortly argue, however, even if Mary did renounce sex in her marriage to Joseph, her virginity in no way casts a slur on the sexuality of women generally. To prepare the way for this argument, I shall briefly summarise the debate on whether or not Jesus had biological siblings.

The apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* mentioned above is the earliest source to assert the perpetual virginity of Mary. Its purported author describes himself as 'James, the brother of Jesus', who was a highly influential leader in the earliest days of the new Church in Jerusalem. The scholarly consensus of the early institutional Church was, however, that the gospel of James was written in the mid-second century and therefore could not have been authored by James; it was

deemed non-canonical at a number of Church councils. Nonetheless, it remained extremely popular and was quoted in several other ancient manuscripts.

Two brilliant third-century theologians, Tertullian and Origen, both of whom made crucial contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity, had opposing views on the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity. Tertullian (d. 220) believed in the virgin birth, but also that Mary did not remain a virgin afterwards and that the brothers and sisters mentioned in the Gospels were Jesus' younger half siblings. Origen (d. 254), on the other hand, asserted her perpetual virginity. In contrast to Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, the fourth-century writer, Helvidius insisted that the brothers and sisters mentioned in the biblical texts were the children of Mary. In contemporary times the debate continues, with leading Roman Catholic, biblical theologian, John P. Meier arguing that all of the evidence indicates that Jesus did indeed have blood brothers and sisters. The overall scholarly consensus, however, is that the biblical evidence is inconclusive and can be interpreted as meaning that Jesus was the only child of Mary.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that a superficial reading of the biblical texts gives the impression that Jesus did have actual siblings who would have been his younger half-brothers and sisters by Joseph and Mary. The brothers of Jesus are mentioned in the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles and Acts and named as James, Joses, Judas and Simon. In Mark 6:3 his sisters are also mentioned, though unnamed. There are no qualifying statements that suggest they are cousins or step-siblings. The argument that ancient Hebrew does not distinguish between siblings and cousins is countered by the fact that the New Testament is written in classical Greek, which does have separate words for brothers and cousins, and that *adelphoi*, 'brothers', is always used. In addition, a reading of the texts gives the distinct impression that Jesus experienced the kind of sibling rivalry that can only occur among siblings who live in the same house. The real question in my opinion pertains to whether they were step-siblings or half-siblings.

There are some indications that they may have been step-siblings. One is the view that it would not have been permissible at that time for younger siblings to taunt an older one as Jesus' brothers did when they tried to stop him preaching at the outset of his ministry (Mark 3:31) and when they urged him to go public with his works in Jerusalem at a time when it would have placed his life in jeopardy. We are also told that 'not even his brothers believed in him' (John 7:5) and the Johannine text gives the impression of sibling rivalry; their taunting of him to go

to Jerusalem at such an early stage of his ministry can be interpreted as resulting from jealousy that he is Mary's 'special' son. The general antagonism displayed towards Jesus by his siblings would perhaps be more likely if they were his older rather than his younger siblings. Thankfully they changed their minds post-Resurrection and became part of the Early Church, with the oldest, James, being its leader.

Another significant indication occurs when Jesus, dying on the cross, places his mother in the care of 'the disciple whom he loved' (John 19:26–27), who is traditionally held to be John the evangelist himself. This can be interpreted to imply that Mary had no other sons of her own. Finally, it is frequently pointed out that Joseph does not appear in any episodes related to the ministry of Jesus and that the last time he takes part in any Gospel narrative is when the twelve-year-old Jesus accompanies his parents on their annual Passover visit to the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2: 41–51). From this it can be hazarded that Mary was a widow by the time that Jesus began his ministry, with the likely implication that Joseph was indeed an older man when he married her and a widower with children. This is further supported by the fact that none of the siblings of Jesus attended the Temple in Jerusalem with him, which is an indication that they were older and could look after themselves.

The biblical evidence of the question of the perpetual virginity of Mary, nonetheless, remains inconclusive and must be deeply and carefully interpreted in order to affirm it. Yet, apart from the evidence, a Church tradition that has lasted for so long demands respect, even if belief in it is difficult. Moreover, Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and some Anglicans and Lutherans accept it. Luther rejected the notion that virginity is a superior state to marriage and abolished ascetic religious orders and compulsory celibacy for clerics. Part of his justification for this was his conviction that Church belief in the superiority of virginity as a way of life had led to an unhealthy elitist division between the clerical Church and the laity. He also discarded much traditional Church teaching, such as that of Thomas Aquinas, on the grounds that it was philosophically based. One of the mantras of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*, meaning that faith must be based on the biblical texts alone. Yet, Luther himself and other major reformers, such as Zwingli, Calvin and Wesley, accepted the perpetual virginity of Mary. This was partly due to pressure from more radical reformers to declare that Jesus was no more than a prophet. For Luther, as for the other three reformers mentioned above, the perpetual virginity of Mary was a guarantee of the Incarnation. This is a reason that has some validity and is certainly more

acceptable than the belief that virginity is a superior state to marriage. In contemporary times, due to the lack of direct biblical attestation of her perpetual virginity, most Protestants assume that Mary did have more children. And of course the implication of Matthew 1:25 referred to above that Joseph did have 'marital relations' with Mary after the birth of Jesus must also be kept in mind. The question of the perpetual virginity of Mary remains an open one.

If Mary and Joseph did indeed agree to renounce sexual engagement in their marriage, I would argue that the reason would not have been a belief in the sinfulness of marital sex. If Mary, as well as being entrusted with rearing the Son of God, also had to mother the children of Joseph's previous marriage, she most likely decided that it would be best not to have any more children. She may also have felt that she and Joseph should prioritise their roles as parents of God's son. Her sexual renunciation would have been made for the benefit of her son and, in doing so, she would have been following in the path of countless mothers who have made sacrifices for their children, including the sacrifice of their physical lives. Also, if, as some theologians have argued, Joseph was between eighty and ninety years old when he married Mary, and she might only have been fourteen when she conceived, then she might have preferred to be relieved of the obligation to engage sexually with him. At any rate, remaining virginal would have given her greater power in the relationship and over her life generally.

The doctrine of the virginal conception, which is biblically attested, is central to the divine origin of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity. However, another Marian doctrine, one that is not scripturally attested, affects our consideration of the character of Mary in a way that is also significant for the divinity of her son and doctrine of the Trinity. This is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed in 1854 by Pope Pius IX and eventually declared an infallible doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. The latter doctrine is often misconstrued as meaning that Mary's conception, like her son's, was not the result of sexual intercourse. The real meaning of the doctrine is that Mary was conceived free of original sin and that, due to a combination of this and the action of divine providence, she lived a sinless life. The rationality behind the doctrine is that the mother of a sinless divine son would have to have been sinless herself in order to be capable of guiding him. It is commonly held that, for a man to relate well to women, a good relationship with his mother is extremely important. Interestingly, our new knowledge of the deleterious impact of evolution on human nature

can now give us far greater insight into the kind of person Mary would have been, which is both helpful and exciting since the New Testament texts reveal little about her character. It can now be argued that Mary would have been free of the damaging female characteristics described in Chapter One above; female rivalry, jealousy and competitiveness, excessive desire for wealth and a willingness to compromise oneself sexually in order to obtain it have marked the evolution of the female sex and tainted it, although great qualities have also evolved. Mary would have been free of the most unpleasant characteristics and been an exemplar of the greatest ones. As well as being a great mother, she would have been a great woman overall, the ideal woman, meaning an exceptionally human one. Therefore, Mary is not in a different category to other women, though she is certainly an exemplar. It is also a great compliment to the female sex that the only sinless, fully human person is a woman. Her sinless son, though fully human, was also fully divine.

In Roman Catholicism, however, Mary is not perceived as a full person but defined totally in relation to her virginal motherhood. She is, thus, subject to the same religious double standard that polarises women and judges them in relation to their status as virgins or non-virgins. As long as her moral perfection is treated as due to her virginal motherhood, Mary, along with all other women, is denied full personhood.

Another significant reason for the fourth-century establishment of the perpetual virginity of Mary was Augustine's linking of original sin with sexual intercourse. He even went so far as to speculate that, before Adam and Eve's act of disobedience, they might have been able to produce offspring without sexual engagement. Since Eve has traditionally been held responsible for original sin, from the first century onwards male theologians, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, began to glorify Mary as having made up for the disobedience of Eve through her obedience to the will of God and her virginal life. From the fourth century onwards the doctrine of her perpetual virginity became a defining feature of Mary's categorisation as the new Eve and, hence, a stick with which to beat all non-virginal women.

In the New Testament there is no mention of Mary as the second Eve, whereas in the Pauline writings Jesus is described as the new Adam, who redeems humanity. As pointed out above, the Johannine narrative of how Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene does have echoes of the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, which, as we are about to see, can be interpreted to mean that Mary Magdalene is the closest female biblical character to the first Eve.

The drama of the Johannine account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene was sparked by her inability to recognise him and her presumption that he must be the gardener. The young man, Jesus, meeting the young woman, Mary, in a garden immediately after he has redeemed humanity from the sin of Adam calls to mind the Garden of Eden in which the sin occurred. Nor is Mary totally mistaken in thinking that he's the gardener, for in a crucial sense he is. As we are told in Genesis chapter one, God created the universe through his Word, which in Christianity is interpreted as the second person of the Trinity. One of Jesus' most frequently used Christological titles is the Greek *Logos*, which means Word. John's gospel begins with the beautiful statement, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being' (1:1-3). Jesus is the gardener of the whole of nature, including Eden, presented in the Bible as its most harmonious and perfect manifestation. Counter to the (male) Early Church tradition of holding Eve responsible for the first sin, Genesis chapter three makes it clear that Adam is with Eve throughout her temptation and that the consequent act of disobedience is a joint one. It is also clear that God holds both Adam and Eve equally responsible.

Therefore, the Johannine account of Jesus' first post-resurrection encounter can be interpreted symbolically as a redemptive version of the Genesis creation accounts. It is also more suitable to link Mary Magdalene with Eve rather than the other Mary, as Eve was Adam's wife, not his mother. Theirs was the first sexual coupling and the first marriage, the one that set the scene for the loss of harmony between the sexes. It can be hazarded that there was a romantic attraction between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but it would have been a wholesome one without any taint of objectification or lust. Any desire Jesus might have felt for Mary Magdalene would have been contextualised within his overall love for her as a person. Jesus, celibate for the kingdom of God, would not have taken advantage of Mary's overwhelming love for him, and this is confirmed by her use of the title 'Rabbouni'. The loving and harmonious relationship between the two can be interpreted as a crucial first step on the path to the restoration of a healthy state of harmony between the sexes.

The crass and inaccurate stereotyping of Mary Magdalene as the archetypal prostitute who repents of her 'fallenness' (a term, remember, that can never be used in reference to a man) is a gross insult to the manner in which her relationship with Jesus is portrayed, and a gross

insult to the female sex overall. It highlights the destructive power of the double standard and the vulnerability of women who cannot be neatly slotted into a conventional societal niche to being tarnished by it. The embarrassment caused both during Jesus' life and after his death by his association with women continues in institutional Christianity to the present day. It is especially reflected in the general liturgical bypassing and downplaying of Mary Magdalene's role in the Resurrection narratives; the Easter Sunday and Monday readings traditionally highlight the role of Peter, even though Mary Magdalene and some of the other women are reported in all four Gospels as being the first visitors to the empty tomb. This is yet another distinction between the treatment of women in patriarchal institutional Christianity and their treatment by its founder as it was reflected in the early Church. In liturgically minimising Mary Magdalene's role to the advantage of Peter in the Resurrection narratives in order to prioritise the role of men in the Church, institutional Christianity is doing itself no favours; for John's account is far more convincing about the truth of the Resurrection than any other precisely because of its emphasis on the role of Mary Magdalene. It is highly unlikely that the evangelist would have included such an account if it were not true, because the witness of a woman was considered to be so unreliable; indeed, the tale has the authentic ring of a first person account and many biblical theologians believe that Mary Magdalene was associated with the Johannine community from which the Gospel emerged. The aspect of the narrative, however, that convinces me more than anything else of its authenticity is the incidental revelation of the nature and significance of Mary Magdalene's bond with Jesus: could the author of what is generally considered to be the most beautiful and theologically brilliant of the Gospels really have been a master of deceit capable of faking such transparency and artlessness?

In the following chapter, we will see how Jesus specifically healed the Madonna/whore dichotomy in his friendship with the two sisters, Martha and Mary of Bethany.