Spirituality



The interior of Duc in Altum Church in Magdala, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Israel (Wikimedia Commons/Ovedc)



by Patty Breen McNeil

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 21, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Last September, three days after my 37th birthday, I embarked on a journey I have long wanted to take: a visit to the Holy Land.

There were many sacred moments that expanded my faith and perspective on this trip: praying at the Wailing Wall, sharing dinner in the homes of Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem, celebrating Mass in the Easter tomb, walking the Via Dolorosa. And yet, the most healing and powerful place was Magdala, the small seaside town right on the Sea of Galilee, home to a now-well-known follower of Jesus named Mary.

You see, the previous day, our group had gone to Cana, the site of the first public miracle of Jesus at a wedding. To be honest, I was dreading it. As a Catholic woman in my late 30s who has been divorced and annulled despite deeply desiring lifetime marriage and partnership, I was not looking forward to a bunch of married couples renewing their wedding vows.

While I tried to time "going to the bathroom" in hopes of avoiding having to watch wedding vow renewals, it didn't turn out that way. I sat in the back of the church with big tears rolling down my face. My heart felt heavy with the grief that the deepest desire of my heart may never happen.

Advertisement

But then came Magdala. Our day began with a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. By mid-morning and after a short bus ride to Magdala, we had Mass in the main church.

The most striking thing about Magdala is that the altar is made out of a boat — similar to the style of fishing boats in the time of Jesus. If you get close, you can see that the altar is set up against open glass and sits directly upon the Sea of Galilee. It looks as if the boat is sitting on top of the sea.

Somehow I ended up as a lector. After the first reading, I went back to my spot in the front pew. I can't even remember what the homily was about, but at some point during Mass I put my head in my lap and began to weep. I couldn't stop: The fear of spending my life alone, the ache of my unfulfilled desire, having to watch everyone else's life come together so neatly, it all came up, uncontrollable.

As tears and snot poured down my face, it was suddenly as if I felt Mary of Magdala come and sit next to me in the pew, put her arms around me, and accompany me through the immensity of what I was feeling. *Oh sweet Patty, I understand what it is to not have life go the way you imagine. I understand. I can relate to what you are feeling.*



The Magdala Center on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Israel (Wikimedia Commons/Ovedc)

I cried harder and harder, just letting Mary's presence nurture my tired spirit. I cried until I had no tears left. I just sat in the pew with my big sister Mary, overlooking the Sea of Galilee together.

Mary of Magdala was not a typical woman of her day.

At the time of Jesus, the city of Magdala was a major trade center on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Local fishermen would sell their catch of fish to be salted

and preserved for export to Rome and other places across the empire.

But now, Magdala's fame rests on its relationship to Mary Magdalene. It is interesting that she is not identified as the daughter of a father or husband, but rather the city in which she lived and came from. This likely points to the fact that Mary was unmarried, independent and perhaps even able to support herself.

While Mary of Magdala has had her name dragged through the mud over Christian history, she is first identified in the gospels as the woman from whom Jesus cast out seven demons (see Luke 8:2, Mark 16:9). Luke lists Mary as the first of many women who accompanied Jesus and supported his public ministry from her resources.

> Here is a strong, brave, tenacious woman in the Scriptures that I can relate to as a single woman — but, more importantly, one who understands and sees me in this 'right now' season of my life.
>
> Tweet this

She followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, and was one of the few people at the foot of the cross. The first recorded witness to his resurrection, she was given the exalted title "apostle to the apostles."

While much is unknown of her life before she met Jesus, I wonder if the life that opened up to her might not have been the one she'd imagined. What mental and emotional distress did she suffer from before Jesus cast out the demons? Was she ostracized from her family and community?

What were the desires of her heart as a little girl — and as she became a woman? What brought her joy? What were her passions? Had she ever fallen in love, or wanted to be married? Did she have regrets or unfulfilled longings?

Here is a strong, brave, tenacious woman in the Scriptures that I can relate to as a single woman — but, more importantly, one who understands and sees me in this "right now" season of my life.

Maybe you are single like me. Perhaps you're divorced, civilly remarried or just feel lost in your own life sometimes. Maybe your path has not gone the way you imagined or hoped. This daughter of Magdala just might be the spiritual companion you need to move forward, wherever the journey takes you.

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 18-31, 2023** print issue under the headline: Mary Magdalene came to my rescue.