

Women & Angels of the Bible: Mary Magdalene and the Angels at the Tomb

Forward Movement Managing Editor Richelle Thompson recently chatted with Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the popular book [Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter](#), and Kate Moorehead, author of the newly released [Angels of the Bible: Finding Grace, Beauty, and Meaning](#).

You can also listen to this conversation in a special episode of the [Forward Day by Day podcast](#), released on April 2, 2020.

Richelle: Welcome to this conversation with two of our favorite Forward Movement authors, Kate Moorehead, author of *Angels of the Bible Finding Grace, Beauty, and Meaning*, and Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the best-selling *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*. Welcome, Kate, Lindsay. Thanks for being here with us today to talk about the role of women and the role of angels in the Bible.

Thank you. Good to be here.

Richelle: So, we've had some great conversations already exploring Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel and the angel who visits Eve at the gate of the Garden of Eden. And then, in our last conversation, we talked about Hagar and her encounter with an angel of the Lord. And today, we'll visit with Mary Magdalene, a relatively well-known figure in the Bible but one who has some misconceptions. So first, let's talk about who Mary Magdalene is. What do we know about her? Where does she fit in the biblical story?

Kate: Well, she's one of the main characters in the gospels. And what's so interesting about Mary Magdalene is how much she's been sidelined through the centuries. She's equal in importance and significance to Peter but yet often not talked about as much. There's also this grave misconception throughout the centuries of her being a prostitute. And there isn't even a word for prostitute in the gospels in the ancient Greek. So how she became a sexual symbol is a really interesting thing to muse about. But she was a very devout follower of Jesus. And we know that Jesus healed her, that she had seven demons, and then she became one of his closest disciples and a witness to the resurrection.

Richelle: Lindsey, anything you want to add? I know you've spent a lot of time in your life, lifting up the voices of women in the Bible, and I thought it was interesting when Kate talked about Mary Magdalene being sidelined. What is your response? What are your feelings about that?

Lindsay: Sidelined in the sense of people misunderstanding her. She has a pretty big impact on the Easter Sunday lectionary. We hear about her quite often. Here's what the Bible says about Mary Magdalene. She was healed by Jesus from seven demons. She traveled on the road with Jesus' disciples at least some of the time. She stood at the foot of the cross. She was the first to see and talk with Jesus after the resurrection, and she proclaimed him as the Christ. She is mentioned in all four gospels. Interestingly enough, we do not hear from her verbally until after Jesus has died at the encounter at the tomb. We think we know her. We have all this data in the Bible: where she was and what she was doing, but she only speaks, I think, sixty-one words. So it's a pretty big impact for somebody who we don't even hear from until after Jesus has died. But she does show up continually through all the gospels.

Kate: Yeah. What's so interesting is that although she's a major character in the four gospels, she is gone in the Book of Acts. She just sort of falls off the face of the earth, and we do not know what happened to her. She was so essential. You know, the Eastern Orthodox call her the apostle to the apostles because she proclaimed that Christ had risen and told the disciples that. But then she just doesn't appear again in the early church. And that's always been a mystery.

Richelle: How unusual is it in this period of time for a woman to have such a significant role in ministry?

Lindsay: It depends how we define ministry. There were a number of women in the Bible: Mary and Martha of Bethany in the New Testament, in the gospels, Mary, Jesus's mother. There are several women, but when Mary Magdalene's name comes in with the rest of them, she is usually right at the top, so she's seen as a leader among women. So it is unusual in this sense. We know who the men are; we knew what they were doing, and then here is this company of women that just arises in different places but sees Jesus all the way through, collectively from his birth through the tomb and afterward. So

it's unusual, but it's not, in that there are a number of women that go with Jesus on his travels.

Kate: Yeah. And Jesus himself was so very open to women as human beings. I mean the longest conversation he has about himself as the Christ is with the woman at the well. So he has these amazing conversations with women, and he engages with them in a way that men did not do. So it's remarkable to think about how much he related to them and how much he loved them as people.

Richelle: That's wonderful to hear. As we talk about Mary Magdalene, I want to dive right into the idea of the seven demons that she was plagued with. What are those demons? What does that mean?

Kate: I think that the concept of demon was an umbrella term in the time of Jesus. It was one of those terms that they use to refer to things that they could not see and could not understand. Today, we have many more specific medical terms or even sanitized terms for some of the things that they would have called demons, like epilepsy, for example. If someone just suddenly falls on the floor and starts foaming at the mouth, they would have thought of that as a demon. Some of the things that today we would call mental health issues like cutting yourself or speaking to things that aren't there were considered demons. I think it's really important to reclaim some of the spiritual language, but we have to be very careful not to condemn people. In fact, in the time of Jesus, the demonic act was never condemned. They were considered innocent. Something was possessing them. Something was taking them over. And the idea was to take that thing out. And so I do believe that there are things that possess all of us. You know, if you talk to someone who's an alcoholic, they hear voices telling them to drink. They have thoughts that are definitely not healthy thoughts. We all have those thoughts. Even Jesus was tempted by the devil and had temptation come to him. It's a very broad concept, and I think we need to engage with it again. I also think it's very important to be careful in how we engage with it because we're not calling anyone evil. But we are talking about a battle, a spiritual battle that goes on in the mind. And I think we all need to understand that we can be tempted and we can be led to do things that are not good and not healthy if we're not careful.

Richelle: So, in this healing, Kate, I've heard you talk a little bit about that the demons are angels of some sort. Can you elaborate on that a bit more?

Kate: Well, in the scripture, it's certainly the case that the demons are angels that have fallen. Angels have some kind of free will, according to the scripture. So just like the fact that we could be influenced by angels that bring us to goodness and to God and to beauty, we can also be influenced by spiritual forces that lead us into darkness. And I do think that is a very healthy thing to think about, that there are influences within our minds and in our world that call us to either of those two options, and we as free human beings have a choice to make. So, yeah, the demon was considered a fallen angel and Satan was the chief among them. But the problem is we've so cartoonized and sidelined and misconceived all this stuff that it becomes rather frightening to us in a fundamentalist and condemnatory way. And then many Episcopalians sort of wrote it off, sort of erased it because we just couldn't handle all that complexity.

Richelle: Lindsay, when you hear this from the perspective of your scholarship with women in the Bible, what does it bring to mind for you?

Lindsay: Well, I think it's a really interesting angle, and I think about those wild boars or pigs that were taken over by the demons. And I know throughout the Bible, we see reference to God. What's interesting in the Hebrew Bible is if you think of Saul on the battlefield the night before he died and he visited the Witch of Endor, it says that God put a demon into him because God was not happy—he wasn't killing enough people ferociously enough in battle. And so, I think it's an interesting idea because it gets into the whole idea of evil. Kate, you talk about Episcopalians kind of blowing things off. Well, we don't like to say the word Satan, even though we say in the baptismal service. It makes us very uncomfortable. And I appreciate your thoughts that we have to be careful about the way we say this because we're all pretty sensitive, and many people go to therapists, and we are all very sensitive. But I'm wondering: I have a sense of Jesus healing Mary Magdalene both physically and spiritually and emotionally. So I can see the part about demons and mental illness and epilepsy. But what if she had a form of cancer? What if she had a broken arm? I'm curious to know the scope of demons. Do you see it as just an emotional thing or a physical thing? And how do you see the scope of demons?

Kate: Well, in the gospels in the Greek, they usually distinguish between healings and exorcisms, and healings are usually for physical illnesses. But certainly, you're right. A cancer could cause someone to act strange. Demon was something that someone couldn't see, but it could have been physical. I mean, epilepsy is a physical thing. It's a physical disorder. It's not a mental health condition, but it would be considered a demon because you can't see it. You can see a broken arm. You can see a tumor even if it starts coming out of the body. I don't think they had the kind of clear definitions that we do. A demon was something that wasn't good, that seemed to take over a person. Either it caused some grave illness or caused them instability mentally. And I don't think they needed the kind of strict definitions that we do today. So it was a broad term.

Lindsay: What interests me is that Jesus clearly believed in demons. And it's like, okay, well, it's not just the disciples. It's not just the guy on the side of the road or the woman on the side of the road. Jesus is talking about demons. So we have to take them seriously.

Kate: Right, exactly. And the fact that they counted seven--now seven was considered a whole number--but Mary Magdalene must have had different things going on. It clearly wasn't one issue. There were a number of things going on. So she had multiple issues.

Lindsay: Well, what gives me strength in looking at her and what interests me is that she had dealt with the demons in her own soul. She had dealt with the darkness in her own soul. That gave her, in my mind, the strength to go into the darkness of the tomb.

Yes. One of the things I love about her is that she can be a saint for all of us who are struggling and who have felt depression or anxiety. And almost everybody in some way or another has some kind of issues that they've had to deal with. She gives us a role model of a person who's really suffered and gotten in the dirt and messed around and struggled. And in her struggle, she becomes the greatest disciple, because, like Lindsay said, she's not afraid of the tomb. She is the one person present at the cross in all four of the gospels. No one else can make that claim. She doesn't leave. Everybody else runs away. Well, she doesn't leave because she's already been in the pit.

Lindsay: I got chills going through me when you talk about that her getting ready to go to the tomb on a cold morning. Richelle, forgive us if we're jumping ahead here. It's just so exciting to think about things I love.

Richelle: Jump ahead! I love the conversation, and I love where it's going. Well, let's just jump right into that, then. Lindsay, take us to the tomb.

Lindsay: Well, I'm talking from the Gospel of John. That's my favorite gospel to look at it. Chapter 20 is where we see the most when it comes to Mary Magdalene, the most of the Mary. So she's gone to the tomb on that cold, cold morning, and I believe she went to say goodbye, to finish the job, to take that moment because she wouldn't leave her friends. She wouldn't let him just vanish off into the darkness. She wouldn't let Jesus just go.

Lindsay: So she's going to anoint him. There are different stories, and they're going to anoint him, going to say goodbye. And she goes in there, and it's empty, as we know. And this is, of course, coming up on the greatest biblical story of all time. But let me switch to Kate here, because right away, Mary Magdalene sees the two angels there.

Kate: Yeah. So she comes into the darkness and faces this incredible grief and fear and walks right into it. And there are the angels, which tells you a lot about going into the midst of your fear or learning about your own suffering because that's where God often meets us. And the angels basically just say he is not here. Don't look in the pit and a more. He's already gone. He's risen, which is wonderful. And of course, angels are present in the tomb in all four of the gospels. They're there waiting to give us that pivotal news. Angels often are standing on the bridge between earth and heaven, and they often are present to tell us something we couldn't otherwise hear. And I don't think the news of the resurrection was something that she could have taken in without the presence of some kind of extraordinary celestial presence to wake her up a little bit. But even still, she's not completely awake because she goes out into the garden and sees Jesus but doesn't recognize them, which is a beautiful story.

Richelle: Kate, that's interesting. And it raises a question for me. Why did the angels need to be there? I mean, why not have Jesus directly talk to Mary Magdalene? I'm interested in your thought that it was to prepare her for that unbelievable news of Jesus

actually being there, that to see those angels helped her open herself up to possibilities that she hadn't imagined before.

Kate: Yeah. Yeah, I like to think of them as interpreters, translators, bridge builders. We can't sometimes encounter the direct interaction with God. It's just too powerful, too much for us. So we need someone to say, "God's coming. Get ready." Or "God says this to you" because if God spoke directly to us, we might explode or go crazy or something.

Lindsay: It's interesting. When Mary Magdalene first gets to the tomb, she realizes that Jesus is just not there. And she runs to get Peter, then Peter and John run back to the tomb. John gets there first, but then Peter goes into the tomb, and nothing is there. It's empty. But then when Mary Magdalene goes back, that's when she sees the angels. So it's a very conscious move on the part of the angels to appear first to Mary Magdalene, at least in the recounting of John. What I particularly like about that scene is that she's crying. She sees two white-robed angels sitting there where Jesus had lain, and they say, "Why are you crying?" because they are acknowledging that grief. As you said in your book, in your chapter about Mary Magdalene and the angels, they pay attention to her grief first. They don't just have her step away; they don't just say, "Jesus is coming. Turn around." They help her acknowledge her grief. In the Old Testament, in the song of Hannah, when she can't bear children, and her husband says, "Am I not worth it to you? Am I not worth seven sons to you?" And he says, "Why are you so sad?" And then, all of a sudden, we have the angels saying, "Why are you so sad?" And then Jesus comes along, and he says, "Why are you so sad?" And I'm thinking, well, what's the matter with everybody? Of course, you should be sad, Mary Magdalene. But I think that's a pivotal moment when they say, "Woman, why are you crying?" It's kind of making that circle from when Eve stepped out of the garden. We talked about this earlier in one of our podcasts, how the angels said, "You can't go back. Find another way." Well, this is the other way. It's almost as if Jesus remembers that moment and acknowledges her grief and acknowledges the sadness and the brokenness, and then she recognizes him. But she can't get to that point without going through her grief first. And Jesus recognizes that and recognizes the emotions. And the first words from Jesus are, "Woman, why are you crying?" So that's a pretty wonderful story.

Richelle: So Mary Magdalene has seen the angels. She has been emotionally prepped for something else happening. And she sees a figure and still doesn't recognize it as Jesus. Right? She says at first, "Is that the gardener?" I mean, that seems a pretty natural response. We've talked about the humanness of Mary Magdalene. Probably if we were there, we would respond in a similar way.

Kate: Yeah, there are such interesting biblical texts about human perception. When we assume that we understand something, we can't see it clearly. I think we do that with our loved ones a lot. We think we know them so we don't really look at them or listen anymore. Mary Magdalene thought Jesus was dead. She could not at first open her mind, even with the prep of the angels, even with this figure appearing out of nowhere in the blue. What would a gardener be doing there at sunrise? He'd be a hardworking gardener. She thought she knew what she was looking at. It does make you wonder how often we look at things, and we don't really see them because we think we already know what's there.

Lindsay: We fail to see the divine when it's standing right in front of us.

Kate: Exactly. Yeah.

Richelle: So Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus. She's overjoyed. Lindsay, take us through what happens next.

Lindsay: Well, after she says, "Why are you crying?", and then she thought he was the gardener, then she says, "Sir, if you have taken him away, let me know where he is."

Kate: And you just hear her. She loves Jesus so much. Her love is so profound in that one question. Isn't it just remarkable?

Lindsay: You know what I like about her? She is not going to let this go until she knows where he is, even if she has to rebury him herself, drag that rock back, or get people to help her with it. She is not going to let this man that loved disappear.

Lindsay: She is alone in that moment. Jesus chose her. Jesus healed her. No wonder she was the one that he appeared to because she would not let him down. She would

not betray him. Everybody else had betrayed him. Look at Peter, who was betraying Jesus. But she would see this through to the end, even if it meant that she'd have to go and get the body from where they dragged it and put it back in the tomb herself.

Lindsay: Then there's this other funny part when he says, "Mary," and she recognizes him at that moment because he has said her name. She runs toward him, and he says, "Don't cling to me, for I haven't yet ascended to the father, but go find my brothers and tell them that I'm going to send it." I'm thinking, What? What? There's a little secondary mini betrayal. Of course, she wants to throw her arms around him and give him a big hug is the way I see that. Now, I don't know if they were hugging in those days, but she just wants to hang onto him for that moment. It's almost a reminder of the Transfiguration. Peter and James and John didn't want to come down from the mountain. And there's Mary Magdalene saying, "I need this moment." And then a little part of me says, "Jesus, she needs that moment. Give her that moment." Of course, he's already given her the biggest moment in the world, but she wants to hang onto that moment because all is healed and well.

Kate: Yeah, the naming of a thing was so important in the time of the Bible, the naming of God, the naming of a human being. The fact that he speaks her name increases her perception and opens her heart and opens her mind. And in the speaking of her name, she recognizes him. It's such a beautiful concept. And I think that's true. When someone that we love says our name, it can be beautiful and edifying and make us capable of being better people. And I agree with Lindsay. It's so strange that he won't let her touch him. It just makes you wonder about the resurrection itself. And in my book, *Resurrecting Easter*, I wonder about the resurrection. He appears in so many different ways. Sometimes he lets people touch him, and sometimes he doesn't. So I don't know what was going on. Maybe he was spiritually there, not physically there.

Richelle: So, I want to go back to this thing about she recognized him when he said her name. And then she called him back. When we go back to Exodus, the Lord says to Moses, "I know you by name." There is something all the way through the thread of scripture, all the way through from the Old and New Testament, that Jesus knows us by name, that he knows us more than the birds of the sky and the stars in the heavens and knows all the hairs on our head. And it's powerful that in this ultimate moment, the recognition comes from him saying her name and she calls him back, "Teacher."

Kate: Yeah, it's beautiful. Really beautiful.

Richelle: And why do you think scripture says in there that it's the Hebrew?

Kate: Or it could be the Aramaic. That's a great question, Richelle, because there are only just a few indications of the Aramaic. There's the Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, on the cross, When Jesus lifts up and resurrects that little girl who's died, he says, Talitha, cum. Little girl, get up. There are these primal moments in which the Aramaic is referred to, and I think it's just because the spoken word at that moment was so crucial, so vital to the story, that it never was translated. And it has this kind of potency to it.

Richelle: So, Jesus sees Mary Magdalene and says, "Don't hold onto me." But then she goes and really becomes the first evangelist to go and tell people the good news. Lindsay, Kate, do you want to share the words that she announces to the disciples?

Lindsay: In John, it's, "I have seen the Lord." Can you imagine what it must have been like for them? The closest I can come to it is if your parent died and you had siblings and your parent is in the grave, and we go to the funeral and everything, and then you run to one of your brothers or sisters and say, "I've seen Dad, I've seen Mom."

Lindsay: But Mary Magdalene is so excited, like the Samaritan woman by the well: I've seen him. I've seen the Messiah, the one he is to come. The joy and the clarity of purpose, clarity being in that moment...God bless her. In some of the other gospel accounts, the women were scared and trembling. In the Gospel of Mark, it originally left off in chapter 16 where the women saw him, and they were trembling and scared. And that was the original ending. But Mary Magdalene, thanks be to God, gives us more strength and more joy in that moment.

Kate: Yeah, she really proclaims that. She lays it out there. It's great to hear her voice, too, after all that. You know, I've read through all four gospels, and we're at the end of the Gospel of John, and finally, she talks.

Richelle: I mean, if you only get one line, it's a pretty good line.

Kate: If you only get to say one thing, it's a good one thing.

Kate: And then, as Kate said earlier, that's the last we hear of her. Right. "I have seen the Lord." And then we don't know what has happened to Mary Magdalene. But we know that witness that she offers reverberates to today.

Kate: Right. And it's really interesting because she's being rediscovered, and not just for women, but for those who struggle maybe with mental health issues or who have been in great suffering or turmoil, that she could become so strong that she could stay with Christ through the cross. She's such a powerful witness of the potential of the resurrection, even in the worst kind of circumstances. What a beautiful woman.

Lindsay: God often uses what we would call traditionally broken women and certainly men, too, but broken women to fulfill his purpose in the breaking in of the kingdom. His four female ancestors, with the exception of one, were all from over the transom, from different places, women who were broken and scarred in many ways. What I particularly like about Mary Magdalene and Rahab and the ones who were broken is that they've got such an essential part to play in the story. I mean, he could have picked somebody. Jesus could have appeared to Mary, his mother. Well, anybody would want to see their son and tell that story. But Mary Magdalene was strong, and she was outspoken, emboldened, courageous, and used to being kicked around, for Christ's sake. So it is a wonderful thing that she had the first sighting of him.

Richelle: Now, in some traditions, Mary Magdalene is associated with a red egg on Easter. Is this a tradition that either of you are familiar with?

Kate: There are so many different folklores and traditions that have risen up around her throughout the centuries. It's a overwhelming field, and I'm not an expert in that. I've only focused really on the texts of the gospels. Some scholars do that. But the egg was a symbol of resurrection because you know that the birth chick busts of the egg, and it's a great symbol. Mary Magdalene's color was always red, which is associated with passion. Again, we have the image of the prostitute, the sex, which harkens back to Saint Augustine, who thought that Eve had convinced Adam to eat the fruit because she tempted him with her sexiness, which was all Saint Augustine's crap.

Lindsay: Kate, do you think that when angels heralded the birth of Jesus before he was born and they are at the tomb, do you think they're just flying around in hundreds and thousands, and two of them are chosen to come down? Obviously, he knew that whole angelic world as much as he knows us and calling us by name. But is he buddies with the angels? Are they surrounding him? Clearly they're in the wilderness with him at these all these central times of his life. If you just think of that, as I know you have, the dynamics of this, it's pretty powerful stuff.

Kate: Yeah. I mean, it opens us to the notion that there are different realms of existence, which makes sense because we know that we see in three dimensions. Well, we know now that there are 13 or 20 dimensions, or I don't know, quantum physicists are always coming up with more. You know, probably in another dimension, angels are flying right in front of all of our faces. They're all around us doing stuff. We're limited in our perception. It gets back to that image of Mary Magdalene not knowing it was Jesus until he said her name. I think part of devotion is not so much what you believe in but rather how are you seeing God? Do you see God? I love that phrase. Don't seek God. See God. You know, God is right here, and the angels are right here. The issue is we're not seeing them because we're busy and distracted and disorganized and blinded, so yes, I think they were probably all around Jesus all the time, but I think they're probably all around us, too.

Lindsay: I have a friend who prays for me if I go on trips, and she's pretty compromised physically. She's had a lot of tough times recently in her own life. She says. You know, they're lining the tarmac now. They're waiting for the plane to take off, or look for the groups of angels in the hospital rooms. They're coming to get in your car, or they're going with you down the highway. It's this whole new way of thinking about angels that is pretty powerful.

And the interesting thing is that there's something in you that stirs, there's something in you that knows that there's a joy that comes. That may really be the case. It doesn't sound like fantasy to us. There is a truthfulness to it that there might be--I love the image of the cheering crowd when you get to heaven that all your loved ones are there with the welcome home sign, and a lot of folks waiting for us that are watching us.

Richelle: I think it's interesting. We have thousands of churches and not very many named after Saint Mary Magdalene. And I just wanted to share with you all a story. My husband and I were church planters of a Saint Mary Magdalene. And we met in this very small community center until one Sunday, the community center had double booked a gun show and worship. We had just closed on some land just a few miles down the street, and it was May. So we moved church underneath a big oak tree on this land and sat in folding chairs. And we had worship underneath that oak tree at St. Mary Magdalene, every Sunday, that whole summer, and it never rained, from ten to noon, that whole summer. And I thought, "There are angels here with us, and we have seen the Lord."

Richelle: It's great to be a part of Saint Mary Magdalene's story and to have her as an ancestor and this walk of faith of Christianity. Are there any other things that you all would want to share as you've been thinking about this or especially as we move on to Easter?

Lindsay: Just look for the angels. Believe in them and believe in this great witness in the Bible for thousands of years. And obviously, we're hoping for the good angels here. I know there are not-so-good ones sometimes back there in our faith. But this is a very powerful encounter. So, yeah, let's look for the good angels.

Richelle: That's wonderful. Kate, Lindsay, thank you so much for your time today, and I look forward to our next conversation and wish you a blessed holy week and Easter. May the angels and the spirit of Mary Magdalene always be with us as we seek to see the Lord.