Some say that women cannot be priests. They cannot be priests because all twelve
disciples, chosen by Jesus, were men. After the resurrection the eleven remaining disciples
were sent out as Apostles, still all men, and were joined by another man, Matthias, who
replaced Judas Iscariot.

The apostles were all men. So priests should all be men, and in much of the worldwide
church, Orthodox and Roman Catholic, that is still the case.

But if you read the gospels carefully, that’s not quite the whole story. There are female
followers of Jesus from the very beginning. These women are named: Salome, Mary the
mother of James and Joseph, Mary the mother of Clopas, Susanna and Joanna the wife
of Herod’s Steward Chuza, Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus of Bethany whom
Jesus raised from the dead. In a time in history where women could not even act as
witnesses in a court of law, it is remarkable that all four gospel writers make a point of
naming specific women as disciples of Jesus; with him from the beginning of his earthly
ministry to its end; who followed him as their Teacher, and provide the means for him to
continue his mission. We celebrate all those women today, brave followers of Jesus,
honoured and named in the gospels, but largely forgotten in the history of the church.

Amongst them is Mary Magdalene. Today is her saint’s day, and this is her story. Mary
Magdalene from whom seven demons had been cast out. Mary Magdalene who was there
at the crucifixion. Mary Magdalene who would go on to become not just an Apostle, but
Apostle to the Apostles, and the first person on earth to see the Risen Christ.

Mary was a common name in those times, Maryam in Aramaic or Miriam in Hebrew. So
this Mary is also called Magdalene, linking her with the village of Magdala on the North
West shore of the Sea of Galilee. It’s there that Luke first refers to her, along with Joanna
and Susanna in today’s reading. Followers of Jesus from the start of his ministry in
Galilee, and supporting him from their own means. All four gospels speak of Mary Magdalene but only Luke adds the detail that she had been delivered from seven demons. What these are we are not told. Seven is often used as a figure to indicate many. The implication is that she must have been severely disturbed, perhaps living a deeply sinful and disordered life, or suffering from what we might call a severe mental disturbance. Our first reading described King Saul suffering in this way. He seemed to suffer from violent mood swings that threw him into despair and sometimes savage rage. The young David is brought in to soothe him with music and singing.

A popular legend has it that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, and that her demons concerned her selling herself in this way. There’s no basis in scripture for this view, though Magdala had something of that reputation, and Jesus is often condemned for eating with sinners. There’s also a powerful story in Luke 7, where a notoriously sinful woman comes to Jesus at the house of a Pharisee, and as he reclines at table, she kneels behind him, weeping over his feet and kissing them, drying them with her hair. The other men are shocked. But Jesus commends her for the love she has shown him. ‘I tell you her sins, which were many have been forgiven’ And to the woman he says, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

Immediately after that passage in Luke is the one we heard today, when Mary Magdalene and her deliverance from seven devils are mentioned. It’s is possible that Mary and the unnamed woman are one and the same, but we cannot be sure.

In a similar story, this time in Bethany near Jerusalem, a woman anoints Jesus with scented oil of great worth, and again wipes his feet with her hair. This time the woman is named as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Could this Mary be the same person as Mary called Magdalene? In popular understanding they have often been held to be the same, but again there is no direct justification for it in scripture. The unnamed sinful woman and Mary of Bethany may simply be two separate people, and what we have are oral memories of two different meals, with features that have become a little blurred in the gospel accounts.

I wonder though, not least with our knowledge of human trafficking in our own age. In the gospels we meet Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany, the village outside Jerusalem where many sick and disabled people lived. Bethany means ‘House of the Sick.’ Had Mary and Martha gone there with their sick or perhaps disabled brother Lazarus? There is no mention of their parents in the gospels and none of them appear to be married.
Could they have gone there as orphans even? Could Mary have gone to Magdala with false promises of work and found herself caught up in the sex trade instead, a practice still so evident even today? Her horror, and sense of degradation, her need to go on supporting her brother and sister, her guilt and shame; all enough for her to indeed be the notorious woman who came by night and washed his feet with her tears. The woman forgiven and released from her seven demons, the woman who found peace and purpose in the company of Jesus. When finally he came to eat at her family house in Bethany, her sister Martha chided Mary for sitting at Jesus’ feet instead of being in the kitchen, where a chaste woman should be.

But perhaps Mary understood the true power of shame, and knew it had no hold of her anymore. For Mary, to be at the feet of her Lord, her Saviour, was the only place on earth she could be.

It’s just possible that Mary of Bethany may be the same person as Mary called Magdalene. But it’s not probable. The simplest solution is that these are two quite different but remarkable women in Jesus’ life. To focus on Mary Magdalene as a fallen woman, as Catholic legend has done through the ages, is perhaps to distract from her true place in the Gospel story, which is quite unique.

What we do know is that Mary Magdalene was there at the crucifixion, she saw his body taken from the cross, and she saw the place where Jesus’ body was laid to rest.

And there’s more… John’s account of Mary Magdalene at the tomb on the first day of the week, as sun was rising, on the first Easter Day. Perhaps no other reading in scripture is so tantalising, and so beautiful. As Mary, through her grief filled tears, asks a passing man where Jesus’ missing body has gone. And the man, who she had taken for a gardener, turns to her and says her name, ‘Mary’. And she knows instantly it is the Lord. In those days when women could not preach or teach. When a woman’s testimony counted for nothing in court. In those days it is Mary Magdalene, from whom seven devils have been cast out, it is this Mary of all people who is sent, by the risen Christ, to preach the Good News. ‘Go to my brothers and say to them.’ Jesus tells her. Our Risen Lord instructs a woman to be the first evangelist, the first preacher of the Good News of his Resurrection. That one instruction alone should have been enough to overturn all patriarchy in religious life. The fact that it didn’t is the stuff of a lecture series, not one Matins sermon!
Read it in John 20 as Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord.’

Note that language. ‘The Lord’, in Greek ‘Kyrios.’ The very word used in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek Old Testament to translate the Hebrew word Yahweh, the holy name of God.

Mary Magdalene, the most unlikely Apostle to the Apostles, ordained by Jesus to be the first person to proclaim the resurrection, that same Mary also declares the divinity of Christ.

With all other brave, often forgotten, women disciples and apostles across every age and generation, we give thanks today. For St Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles.

Amen.