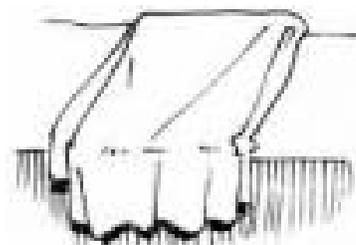


## Apostle to the Apostles

Pat Marrin | Jul. 22, 2009 NCR Today



Of all the lyrics that blend human love with religious longing, Leonard Cohen's 1967

song "Suzanne" is perhaps the most provocative and moving. It describes a relationship with a young woman that is both real and beyond real -- a spiritual journey in which the meaning of love transcends bodily union to achieve communion outside of time and space. In the second verse, the song shifts focus to the mystery of Jesus and describes our response to him with these words:

"And you want to travel with him  
And you want to travel blind  
And you think maybe you'll trust him  
For he's touched your perfect body with his mind."

The figure of Mary Magdalene, whose feast is celebrated by the universal church today, is, like Cohen's song, the provocative surface of a deeper story we only catch glimpses of in the gospels, especially the fourth gospel attributed to John. Mary loves Jesus. In the conflated gospel tradition, she is sometimes identified as the woman who anointed his head (kingship) and his feet (suffering) with precious nard at one of the final meals with his friends and disciples at Bethany before his final journey to Jerusalem. With this act, Mary shows that she understands that he is going to die, and she lavishes her love on him so freely that it embarrasses the disciples and prompts the complaint from Judas that such wasted extravagance could have fed the poor instead.

At Jesus' death, most of these same disciples will have fled in fear, but Mary is at the cross, at the burial site and, after Sabbath observance, back at the tomb to complete her heart's gift of anointing Jesus' body.

For her fidelity, she is the first witness to the risen Christ, the first apostle sent to preach the good news of the resurrection to the other apostles, locked behind closed doors, fearful, incredulous, even hostile to her role and her claims. Her primacy, then, exceeds even that of Peter, though her authority, like the memory of the woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany, will recede to anonymity in the life of the church.

This may change, but for now she remains a figure of great fascination, a reminder that the heart sees better than the mind, that loves knows what reason only comes to faltering and unsure. On her feast day, Mary Magdalene invites us to follow her beloved Jesus, who calls us each by name, his perfect body given freely each time we seek him as she did.

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