



## Discussion Guide

Date: 5/17/2026

Sermon Title: What does it mean to be a witness?

Scripture: John 20:11-18

This discussion guide is a layout to be used with a group or class. We have included opening and closing prayers to start and end your group. The guide may be used for personal or family reflection as well.

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, you meet us in our grief, our questions, and our searching. Just as Jesus called Mary Magdalene by name in the garden, call to us today. Open our hearts to hear Your voice and to recognize the risen Christ in our lives. Help us grow as faithful witnesses not because we are perfect, but because Your grace continues to work within us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, deepen our faith, strengthen our hope, and guide our conversations together. In the name of the risen Christ we pray, Amen.

### OPENING QUESTIONS: (Choose one to start with)

1. What characteristics or qualities define a devoted follower of Christ?
2. What do you already know, or think you know, about Mary Magdalene? Where does this understanding come from?
3. What keeps someone close to Jesus even during seasons of grief, confusion, or disappointment?

### INTRODUCTION:

In this week's message from our series Progress, No Perfection, we encounter Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. Mary is one of the most faithful followers of Jesus in the Gospels, yet she has often been misunderstood throughout church history. Luke 8:2 tells us Jesus healed her and delivered her from suffering, and from that moment forward she became a devoted disciple and supporter of Jesus' ministry. In John 20, Mary becomes the first witness to the resurrection. Before the disciples fully understand what has happened, Mary encounters the risen Christ and is sent to proclaim the good news: "I have seen the Lord." Her story reminds us that God often calls ordinary, wounded, and unexpected people to bear witness to extraordinary grace.

### DIGGING INTO THE SCRIPTURE:

Read John 20:11-18 (NRSV). Additional translations may be helpful for you and your group.

#### *Looking Closely at the Text*

1. What emotions do you notice in Mary Magdalene throughout this passage?
2. Why do you think Mary stays at the tomb while others leave?
3. What stands out to you about Jesus calling Mary by name?

4. Why might Mary not recognize Jesus at first?
5. Jesus tells Mary, "Go to my brothers and say to them..." What does this reveal about witness and discipleship?
6. Mary's testimony is simple: "I have seen the Lord." What makes this statement powerful?
7. What does this story teach us about who God chooses to share the Gospel?

#### *Digging Deeper*

8. Mary Magdalene began as someone in need of healing and restoration. How does God often use imperfect people for holy purposes?
9. How does this passage connect with the series theme Progress, No Perfection?
10. Have there been moments in your life when you encountered Christ in the middle of grief, confusion, or uncertainty?
11. What keeps people today from seeing themselves as witnesses of Christ?
12. In what ways can witnessing be more about authenticity than having all the right answers?
13. What does it mean to witness through compassion, service, forgiveness, or presence?
14. How can the church better affirm the voices and leadership of women in ministry and discipleship?
15. What would it look like for our church to embody resurrection hope in everyday life?

#### **YOU MAY WANT TO LOOK AT THESE SCRIPTURES TOO:**

- Luke 8:1-3; Matthew 28:1-10; Acts 1:8 ; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

#### **WESLEYAN & METHODIST REFLECTION:**

John Wesley believed Christianity is deeply personal but never private. Faith naturally moves outward into witness, service, and love of our neighbors. Wesley often emphasized that God's grace transforms ordinary people into instruments of God's work in the world. Mary Magdalene reflects this transforming grace. She is healed by Christ, remains faithful through suffering, and becomes the first proclaimer of resurrection hope. Mary's witness was not based on status, perfection, or power. It was rooted in her encounter with the living Christ.

#### **SERMON QUESTIONS:**

1. Clayton mentions that May is Mental Health Awareness Month and that 20-25% of adults experience mental health challenges. How can the church be more open and supportive in addressing mental health, following Jesus' example of healing?
2. What does it mean that Mary was called "Magdalene" - possibly meaning "tower" or "fortress"? How might she have been a tower of strength in the early church?
3. As we celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women in the United Methodist Church, how have you seen women lead, teach, preach, and minister to others?
4. What does it mean that Mary Magdalene was called 'the apostle to the apostles,' and how does this challenge traditional understandings of church leadership?
5. Why do you think all four gospels emphasize Mary Magdalene as the first witness to the resurrection, and what does this say about God's choice of messengers?

#### **REFLECTION:**



1. What does the phrase 'progress, not perfection' mean in the context of discipleship, and how does Mary Magdalene's story embody this principle?
2. Have you experienced a time when Jesus brought healing to your life - physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually? How did that experience change your relationship with God?
3. Mary supported Jesus' ministry with her resources. The women of FUMCR bought land for \$50 in 1898 through creative fundraising. What creative ways can we support ministry today with our time, talent, and treasure?
4. Mary was the first to proclaim, "I have seen the Lord!" Who in your life needs to hear your testimony of what Jesus has done for you?
5. How does understanding the hymn 'In the Garden' as Mary Magdalene's resurrection testimony change or deepen your appreciation of her witness and our own call to share the good news?

#### **CLOSING PRAYER:**

Risen Christ, thank You for meeting us where we are just as You met Mary in the garden. Thank You for calling us by name and reminding us that Your grace is greater than our fears, failures, or limitations. Shape us into faithful witnesses of Your love and resurrection hope. Help us share compassion with the hurting, encouragement with the weary, and hope with the discouraged. May we continue growing as disciples, trusting that You are still transforming us day by day. Send us into the world to live as resurrection people, filled with grace, courage, and joy. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

#### **WAYS TO RESPOND:**

Choose ONE of the following practices to focus on this week:

1. Research mental health resources in your community. How can your group support mental health awareness?
2. Check in with 2-3 friends or family members this week with the follow-up question: "How are you REALLY doing?" Be prepared to listen deeply.
3. Practice listening prayer. Sit quietly and imagine Jesus calling your name. What might he be saying to you?
4. Consider one practical way you can support the church's ministry with time, talent, or treasure, and create a plan to follow through.
5. Read the lyrics or listen to "In the Garden" by Austin Miles in the morning before you begin your day.
  - How does understanding this hymn as Mary Magdalene's story change how you hear it?
  - Throughout the day, notice Christ walking with you and telling you that you are his own.
  - At the end of the day, pray with gratitude by naming the moments you recognized Christ's presence.