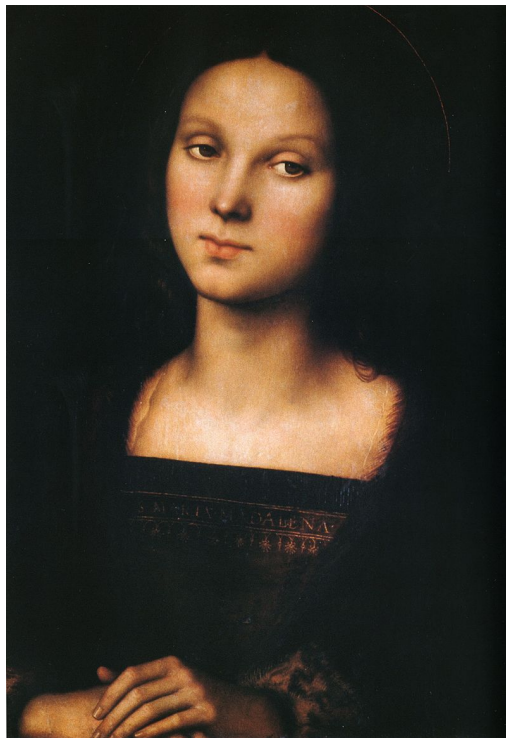


(Apologies for how long it takes for me to write these Matt's Messages! I'm very glad people are asking for more of them, but I'm a slow thinker and writer. I've been working for over a month on a three part Matt's Message about the Trinity, but it's become so complicated that I'm just confusing myself, so I've put it on the back burner for a while. I'm taking a break from the Trinity articles to write this one. Enjoy!)

*Matt's Message for July 22nd: The Apostle to the Apostles*



Just look at this face for a minute. Before I say anything, what do you think that expression means? The slightly tilted head. The relaxed, half-lidded eyes. The glance off to the side. Is she smiling? Is she just about to smile? Is one eyebrow raised a little? What do you think? Remember: art is about what *you* think, not about what the art critics tell us to think.

This painting is in an art book which I've mentioned before in an earlier Matt's Message: *Florence – The Paintings and the Frescoes*. My daughter, Fiona, and I sometimes look through this book together. When Fiona turned the page and saw this painting, she said, "This one's GOOD." It was neat to hear Fiona say that because I also thought there was something powerful about it.

Who is this woman? Well, she's one of the most famous women ever, but we don't really know very much about her. She experienced some sort of extreme psychological trauma and was healed by a young Jewish teacher, whom she then followed around – as a student and friend – for the rest of his life. She was a wealthy woman and she supported the Teacher's ministry financially. When the teacher was crucified, all of his male students and friends abandoned him – except his best friend, John. But there were a few women who watched him die on the cross, then visited his tomb. This woman was one of those: his most devoted, faithful followers.

This is a painting of Mary Magdalene. It's not *really* her. It was painted around 1500 years after she was alive. But it's an artist's impression of what she may have looked like.

I don't know anything about the painter. His name is Perugino; that's all I know. But whenever I'm flipping through my Florence art book, I always stop at this one for a while. And I think about this woman: Mary Magdalene.

Okay. You've thought your own thoughts about the above painting – had your own experience with it – so now I'll finally give you my own thoughts. And you're welcome to disagree with me. (Please note: I don't really know anything about art. I just have a few art books...)

To me, her expression means one thing: confidence. It's not arrogance, but a quiet, calm confidence. And when I think about it, I think that it makes sense that Mary should have that expression. *It's the expression of one who was the first to see and speak to the resurrected Christ.*

Her life was changed when Jesus healed her. (In Luke chapter 8, she's described as one "from whom seven demons went out.") Her life changed even more when she followed Jesus, listening to his teachings as well as making sure he had food to eat and places to stay. Her life changed again when she had to witness this man being crucified. And then her life changed again, when she met him in a whole new way: risen from death. How could her life ever go back to normal after seeing him freshly risen from death? That meeting with him would have marked her – changed her – forever. I think, when I look closely at the painting, I can see the expression of someone who has seen an indescribable wonder. It's the face of someone who has just seen a new world appear. It's the face of someone for whom the world now holds no fear. It's the face of someone who has quietly, confidently entered into a whole new kind of life.

I would even say there's *power* in that face. It's the glance of someone who *is not impressed* by the great people and things of this world. Her power and peace is derived from her relationship with a man who annihilated death. What could you *not* do if you knew someone who had defeated death itself?

I think it is the face of someone who knows a secret. She certainly has some kind of knowledge. It's this knowledge that gives her power and serenity. Serenity! That's it! That's the face of someone who has reached serenity after terrible trauma and joyful realization.

The painter, Perugino, knew nothing about what Mary Magdalene might have looked like. But he brought to life the way she must have felt after meeting the risen Jesus. She is now confident in who he is and who she is. She knows how much she is known and loved and cherished.

Imagine how you would feel if you had met the risen Christ face to face. Maybe you have met him, just not face to face. Maybe you've met him heart to heart. I wonder if your meeting with him gives you that same confidence? Do you have a confidence that could help you overcome all odds? Do you just *know* – deep in your heart – that the most important thing has already happened: the door to new, true, real, eternal life has been opened? I think that's how Mary in the above painting feels. She just *knows* these things now, so there's peace, confidence, and even courage in her face now.

Mary Magdalene's star is rising. In 2016, Pope Francis changed her "memorial" day to a "feast" day, which means she's now celebrated on par with the Apostles themselves. When the Pope did this, he referred to her as "the Apostle to the Apostles." This makes sense because she told them about the risen Christ before they told anyone about him.

Dan Brown's 2003 book *The Da Vinci Code* portrayed Mary Magdalene as Jesus's wife and an image of the Divine Feminine. We don't have to believe any of Brown's speculative theology (based on the evidence of gospels that were written centuries after the four original, "synoptic" gospels). But he does have a point and countless readers around the world recognized it: it's time for Mary Magdalene and other women to be celebrated as just important (or *more* important!) than Jesus's male followers. Jesus often clashed with the men around him: Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, and his own disciples. But every single time he interacts with a woman, it's positive! Did you ever notice that before?

When you learn about the historical context, it's absolutely shocking to see a man of Jesus's time having deep conversations with women, really listening to them, and even letting them change his mind sometimes. So I think it's great that Mary Magdalene is getting the recognition she deserves. Jesus broke a lot of social conventions, really shattering many traditions; talking theology with women in public was just not done! Thanks to Jesus's attention to women, there are a number of strong female voices throughout the gospels. Do you think the Roman Emperors of the time, like Julius Caesar, were taking time to encourage women to speak their opinions? No. They were not. That was a Jesus thing and the church should reflect Jesus's respect for female experiences and voices.

So on July 22nd this year, let's take some time to remember and celebrate this awesome woman, the one who brought the Good News to the Apostles.