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## Mary the mystic

**Why one of the Bible's best-known verses has been the subject of a theological battle for generations**

**Jennifer Green, The Ottawa Citizen**

Published: Sunday, March 23, 2008

Why did the resurrected Christ appear first to Mary Magdalene and why did he admonish her, "don't touch me?" Because she was a mere woman? A sexual being? Could he have been a spirit, not a body -- a problem for what would become Christian theology?

John 20:17 says Mary did not recognize the risen Christ until he called her name. Then she breathed in awe, "Rabboni (master)." He replies: "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my father; but go to my brethren and say unto them I ascended unto my Father; and to my God and to your God."

The passage has intrigued generations of scholars and artists, fascinated by the frontier between flesh and spirit, man and woman. Dozens of medieval and Renaissance paintings are entitled, not the Resurrection, or Mary by the Tomb, but Noli Me Tangere, "don't touch me."



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**Noli me Tangere, by Andrea del Sarto.**

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Andrea del Sarto worked a subtle cross into the tranquil blue sky of his Noli Me Tangere. The Renaissance Florentine painter turned Christ's exposed and unblemished upper body toward a golden staff, but inclined his head in a tender glance toward Mary. The prominent little fence reins in a teeming garden, emphasizing the line between this life and the next.

Hans Holbein the Younger paints a sky that is practically black. Jesus is fully clothed, almost loaded down with robes, and he virtually recoils from Mary, hands up in defence, his face severe. She seems to lunge toward him, looking pretty angry herself. In the background, a man chases after a shocked and reluctant woman, a mirror image of the larger couple, suggesting that Christ's rejection of Mary is physical and sexual. No joie de vivre here.

Corregio's 1525 Noli Me Tangere is a masterpiece of tenderness. Mary sits back on her knees looking up at Christ with unbounding affection. He reaches down to her affectionately with his right hand, pointing toward Heaven with his left, as if inviting her to a higher spiritual plane.

Titian, Fra Angelico, the list goes on. But several feminist theologians believe the portraits of Mary Magdalene, one of the most malleable figures in Christian history, leave a great deal to be desired.

Jane Schaberg is author of *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, and professor of religious studies and women's and gender studies at the University of Detroit Mercy. She is mad as hell at what has been done with Mary -- in fact, all of feminist theology.

"There is very little art that presents what we're trying to say as feminist scholars.

"Usually you've got Mary Magdalene groping toward Jesus' groin, and that's about the measure of it. (It portrays) how stupid she was, and how retarded, and she's trying to retard him. But the point is, she is seeing him in the process of ascending, and that's what makes her the mystic and the inheritor of the spirit of Jesus."

Ms. Schaberg says many scholars believe John 20:17 has been changed over the centuries to downplay Mary's role. Now they are trying to research earlier versions of the text that "haven't been destroyed yet by a male perspective."

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