At the opening of today’s Gospel message it is clear that Mary of Magdala is the central character of the scene. In the context of the first century this is in itself significant - she is a named woman, a very rare thing in all first-century literature. Already the earliest recipients of this story would be surprised. Immediately the scene has been set with the stone moved across from the entrance to the tomb, two male characters are introduced: Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple; and we might now imagine this section in the Gospel will now be about them and what they are about to do. For the next eight verses this is precisely what happens - consequently today, when we are focussing specifically on Mary Magdalen, these verses have been left out. They establish the fact that the tomb is empty and the extent to which the two men are only dimly aware of what might have happened. They go back to join the other disciples, but this is not the conclusion of this scene as we might suppose.

Mary is left by the tomb - in distress - and encounters two angels before Jesus appears behind her. It is when he calls her by her name that she knows it is Jesus; then he tells her, “Go to my brothers…” and she “announces” to the disciples: “I have seen the Lord”. Without getting too technical over the Greek, it is made obvious not just by what happens but also in the vocabulary used, that Mary is sent as an apostle with the Gospel of the resurrection.

We are left in no doubt that Mary Magdalen really is the *apostola apostolorum* - the apostle of the apostles, as later tradition would dub her officially. This title was already in literary circulation by the 800’s and is not the recent invention of modern liberal scholarship. Mary fulfils all the criteria for being labelled an apostle: a direct encounter with the risen Lord and the commission to announce it to others. Compare the credentials St Paul uses to establish his own apostolate, and you will see that Mary is just as well qualified as he is. Or Peter or James or any of the other Apostles.

In fact, the fourth evangelist has already paved the way for this astonishing idea that a woman might be sent directly by Jesus to men with the Gospel. In chapter 4, the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob brings a whole village to believe and to come out to Jesus to see for themselves. Later in chapter 11 in the extended story about the raising of Lazarus, it is to another woman, Martha, that Jesus reveals himself as the resurrection and the life, eliciting from her the confession that he is the Messiah, the son of God. This means it is no accidental portrayal that the very first apostle in John’s Gospel is a woman - Jesus already has what we might call a track record for this writer when it comes to entrusting women with the important task of apostolic roles and actions.

2,000 years on and we are still struggling with the idea that the Lord might entrust women with such important apostolic roles. It is as outrageous for some present-day Christians that Jesus should commission women in the Church in this way as it was in the time of Mary Magdalen and the other apostles - and it is as surprising now as then that women might be called upon as apostles, surprising even to some of us women!

It is this countercultural element in the New Testament writings which has proved such a stumbling block to us in the Church of England’s recent debates over women’s ordination - and latterly in particular over women as bishops. Part of the Tradition of the Church is that our bishops are the modern successors of the apostles, and because in our experience all
bishops are men, we did not question our assumptions about who might be called to be bishops or the so-called fact that this arrangement within the Church was based on the twelve male apostles.

We manage to move swiftly past this episode in today’s Gospel and to pay much more attention to the sequel, which is the account of Thomas needing physical proof before he will believe that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. As for ‘The Twelve’ Apostles, it now strikes me as rather obvious that the New Testament itself attests to far more than only twelve apostles: for in addition to any list found in Matthew, Mark or Luke, we have Matthias, Paul, Apollos, Junias - and of course Mary of Magdala.

It is quite right to wonder with the disciples in John Chapter 4 what Jesus could possibly want with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob and why he was talking with her. Those who long ago have concluded that women should be admitted to the episcopate also need to remember how surprising it is that the Lord might commission women as well as men for apostolic ministry. As R.E. Brown the great Catholic New Testament scholar pointed out in several of his writings, women disciples clearly were seen as sharing the same status as their male counterparts in the community of the Beloved Disciple and it is possible that here these Christians had realised the Pauline dream of no distinction in status of male and female. But there were tensions in Paul’s own communities, and although Paul most definitely worked with women, calling them co-workers and commending them to other churches, yet this kind of contribution women were permitted to make in the mission and ministry of the church was soon limited and played down. The reasons for this may be largely the social and cultural norms of the time. This means that the existence of those key stories in the Gospels in which women are allowed centre stage and receive divine approval are all the more astonishing.

Today we honour Mary Magdalen as the first of the apostles, who was surprised by the risen Lord, who was called by name by Him, who carried out the Lord’s instruction to bear witness to the resurrection, and who played her part in the mission of the church. As the Church of England now prepares to appoint its first women bishops, let us pray that the Lord will continue to surprise us and call women as well as men of insight and courage in our own time, just as he called and commissioned Mary Magdalen.

And may we all remember our own call to walk with the Risen Lord and to witness to God’s undying love, redemption and gifts of grace for us all. Alleluia. Amen.