

Did You Know?

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What comes to mind when you hear the word “apostle?” The men around Jesus? The twelve? That’s probably the case for most people. However, did you know that one woman in Scripture is named by Paul, “prominent among the apostles?”¹ And that another, while not directly named as apostle was literally sent by the risen Christ to tell the others the Good News of Easter?² And *this* one, Mary of Magdala, came to be known in the Eastern Church as “apostle to the apostles?”

What does the word, apostle, mean, anyway? And who is this unknown woman in Paul’s letter to the Romans? The word literally means, “one who is sent.” For those of us who follow Jesus, it means one sent by the risen Christ to proclaim his Good News. For Paul, an apostle was one, like himself, who had encountered the risen Christ.³ And, one who was willing, like Paul, to suffer persecution and prison for the sake of the Gospel. Paul did not use the term lightly. And he bestowed it upon two, most likely a married couple, Andronicus and Junia.

Who was this Junia? There’s much we don’t know, but we can piece together this much. She and Andronicus were Jewish Christians, related to Paul. And it is thought that they might well have been freed slaves, even members of the original Jerusalem community. We know that they worked with Paul in Antioch and were in prison with him, for the sake of the Gospel. They were courageous missionaries, at the dawn of Christianity. And St. John Chrysostom had this to say of Junia: “to be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles- just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their words and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.”⁴

But, in the Middle Ages, this woman “became” a man! It seems that the commentator on Scripture, Aegidius of Rome (1245-1316), could not bring himself to believe that a woman could be an apostle. So, he put the masculine ending on her name, despite the fact that Junia was a common name and the male version of her name was unheard of. But it was Martin Luther, in his German translation of the Latin, who cemented her “maleness” until the present day. Not until the late twentieth century was her womanhood restored, with the scholarship that produced the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. *She* is, indeed, outstanding among the apostles!

¹ See Romans 16:7.

² See John 20:11-18.

³ See Acts 22:1-21.

⁴ Bernadette Brooten, “Junia... Outstanding Among the Apostles (Romans 16:7),” in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, eds. Leonard and Arlene Swidler (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 141. She quotes from John Chrysostom (344/54-407) as found in *Epistolan ad Romanos*, Homilia 31, 1 (J.P. Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus series Graeca EPG) 60, 669, f.