

Church of Mary Magdalene



Church of Mary Magdalene, Jerusalem: Golden Domes on the Mount of Olives

The **Church of Mary Magdalene** is the Russian Orthodox church on the slope of the Mount of Olives in occupied East Jerusalem, recognisable from across the Kidron Valley by its seven gilded onion domes. It was built by Tsar Alexander III and his brothers in memory of their mother, Empress Maria Alexandrovna, and consecrated on 1 October 1888. It holds the relics of Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna and the nun Varvara, killed in Russia in 1918, and is home to a convent of Orthodox nuns. This guide covers its history, architecture, religious significance and its situation under occupation since 1967.

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Quick facts

Church of Mary Magdalene at a glance

Arabic name	كنيسة مريم المجدالية
Location	Western slope of the Mount of Olives, above Gethsemane, East Jerusalem
Commissioned by	Tsar Alexander III and his brothers
In memory of	Empress Maria Alexandrovna (d. 1880)
Architect	David Grimm
Consecrated	1 October 1888
Style	Russian Revival (16th–17th-century Muscovite), seven gilded onion domes
Relics and burials	Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna, nun Varvara, Princess Alice of Battenberg
Community	Convent of St Mary Magdalene (sisterhood since 1936), about 30 nuns

The name: who was Mary Magdalene?

Mary Magdalene, named after the town of Magdala (al-Majdal) on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee near [Tiberias](#), was a follower of Jesus. According to the Gospels she stood at the foot of the cross and was the first to see Christ after the resurrection (Mark 16:9), which is why Eastern churches call her "Equal to the Apostles" and "Apostle of the Apostles". The church's murals tell her story.

Location

The church stands on the western slope of the Mount of Olives, directly across the Kidron Valley from the Old City of [Jerusalem](#) and al-Aqsa Mosque. It sits just above the Garden of Gethsemane and the Church of All Nations, a short walk from the Tomb of the Virgin Mary. Olive and cypress trees surround it, and the path to it is part of the traditional Palm Sunday route.

History

- **The idea (1881):** according to Al Jazeera's encyclopedia, Archimandrite Antonin Kapustin, head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, proposed the church after a pilgrimage in May 1881, on land the mission had acquired on the Mount of Olives.
- **Construction (1880s):** Tsar Alexander III and his brothers paid for the church from their own funds, at a cost of about 200,000 roubles, in memory of their mother, Empress Maria Alexandrovna, who died in 1880. The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, founded in 1882, oversaw the work.
- **Consecration (1888):** on 1 October 1888 Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich and his wife, Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna,

consecrated the church on the Tsar's behalf, in the presence of the Ottoman governor of Jerusalem and more than 150 Russian pilgrims. Elizabeth was so taken with the place that she asked to be buried there.

- **After the Russian Revolution:** the Ottoman authorities seized Russian properties as "enemy property" during the First World War. Britain, which ruled Palestine under the Mandate, refused to recognise Soviet authority over Russian church property, and the church remained with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which still runs it.
- **1921:** the remains of Elizabeth, killed by the Bolsheviks in 1918, and of the nun Varvara arrived in Jerusalem and were laid in the crypt.
- **1936:** a sisterhood was founded at the church, which became the Convent of St Mary Magdalene.
- **1948-1967:** the Mount of Olives remained in the part of Jerusalem under Jordanian administration until its occupation in 1967.

Architecture and art

Architect David Grimm designed the church in the style of 16th- and 17th-century Moscow churches. Its seven gilded onion domes, each crowned with a tall Russian Orthodox cross, rise above walls of carved white stone, and a blue circular mosaic of Mary Magdalene sits above the entrance. The silhouette is so distinctive that the church is one of the most photographed landmarks on the Jerusalem skyline.

Inside, an iconostasis of white marble and bronze holds icons painted by the Russian artist Vereshchagin. The large murals on the walls, by the Russian painter Sergei Ivanov, depict Mary Magdalene's life:

- her healing by Christ;
- her standing before the cross;
- Christ appearing to her after the resurrection;
- above the altar, Mary Magdalene before Emperor Tiberius holding a red egg, the origin of the Orthodox Easter-egg tradition.

The church also keeps a Hodegetria icon of the Virgin brought from Lebanon, venerated as miracle-working.

Relics and burials

- **Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna** (1864–1918): after her husband's assassination in 1905 she became a nun and founded the Convent of Saints Martha and Mary in Moscow. She was killed with members of the imperial family in July 1918. In 1981 the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia canonised her and the nun Varvara as martyrs, and in 1982 their relics were moved from the crypt to marble shrines in the main church. The Moscow Patriarchate recognised her sainthood in 1992.
- **Nun Varvara (Barbara) Yakovleva**: Elizabeth's companion, killed with her and buried beside her.
- **Princess Alice of Battenberg** (1885–1969): Elizabeth's niece and the mother of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. She asked to be buried near her aunt, and her remains were moved to the crypt below the church in 1988.

A small Russian cemetery near the church holds members of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission and the Palestine Society.

The convent

The Convent of St Mary Magdalene, also called the Gethsemane convent, was founded as a sisterhood in 1936. Today it has about 30 nuns of Russian, Arab, American, Australian, Serbian and Romanian origin. The church is open to visitors on set days, and the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene is celebrated every year with the participation of Jerusalem's Orthodox church leaders.

Russian property and the ownership question

Since 2022 the Russian government has asked Israel to recognise its ownership of the church, together with other Russian properties in Jerusalem, citing Ottoman-era documents and its status as the continuing state of the Russian Empire. The church continues to be run by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which restored communion with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007. Under international law, the occupation authorities have no sovereignty over East Jerusalem from which to decide such claims.

Under occupation since 1967

Israeli forces occupied the Mount of Olives with the rest of East Jerusalem in June 1967, and Israel later annexed the area, a step rejected by UN Security Council Resolution 478. Since then the churches of the Mount of Olives have faced recurring pressure:

- In early 2022, Israeli authorities moved to expand the "Jerusalem Walls National Park" over church land on the Mount of Olives. The Heads of Churches in Jerusalem protested, and the plan was frozen.
- Church leaders have documented a rise in attacks on Christian sites and clergy in Jerusalem, including a December 2020 attempt to set fire to the Church of All Nations below the convent and a March 2023 attack at the Tomb of the Virgin Mary nearby.
- Palestinian Christians from the West Bank and Gaza need Israeli permits to reach Jerusalem's churches, which are often refused or limited during feasts.

The church today (2026)

The church still holds its liturgies and opens to visitors, but the genocide war on Gaza since October 2023 has emptied Jerusalem of most pilgrims, and the closures

and checkpoints imposed in and around the city keep many Palestinian worshippers away. The Mount of Olives remains at the centre of settlement and "national park" projects that churches warn would alter the religious and historic character of Jerusalem.

Legal protection

The church overlooks the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls, which UNESCO lists as World Heritage in Danger. As a religious site in occupied territory, it is protected by the Fourth Geneva Convention and the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property, while UN Security Council Resolution 478 declares Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem null and void.

Frequently asked questions

Where is the Church of Mary Magdalene?

On the western slope of the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem, just above the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the Old City.

Who built the Church of Mary Magdalene?

Tsar Alexander III and his brothers built it in memory of their mother, Empress Maria Alexandrovna. Architect David Grimm designed it, and it was consecrated on 1 October 1888.

Why does the church have golden domes?

It was built in the Russian Revival style of 16th- and 17th-century Moscow, with seven gilded onion domes typical of Russian churches.

Who is buried in the Church of Mary Magdalene?

The relics of Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna and the nun Varvara, killed in 1918, rest in the church, and Princess Alice of Battenberg, mother of Prince Philip,

is buried in its crypt.

Can you visit the Church of Mary Magdalene?

Yes, the convent opens the church to visitors on set days and hours, which are worth checking before a visit.

Conclusion

For more than 130 years the golden domes of the Church of Mary Magdalene have shone over the Kidron Valley, a Russian church on Palestinian soil that tells of Jerusalem's place in the faith of the whole world. Under occupation and amid the genocide war on Gaza, it remains part of the Christian heritage of Jerusalem that its people and churches strive to protect.

Sources

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