

Weekend of Sunday, April 21, 2019
Easter/Resurrection of Our Lord/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 24:1-12
Sermon Title: “First Witnesses”

Theme

Evidently expecting to find Jesus’ corpse, some of his women followers go to the tomb with embalming spices. After a perplexing encounter with the empty tomb and angelic visitors, the women become the first to proclaim the amazing news of resurrection.

Text

¹On the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Sermon

¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

It would be fun to go around the room and get your opinion on this passage of Luke's telling of the Easter morning story!

Men be saying, "Well ..."

Women be saying, "Nothing has changed!"

Well, let's talk about that some more. As you know, I've been leading a study called the "People of the Passion" where we discussed the major characters in the Drama of the Passion. And then a week later, having had vigorous discussion with those who participated, I preached a sermon based on that same character or characters. And last week it was the "First Witnesses" who, as it turned out, were all women.

Before I get into "the women" I would like to take this opportunity to address some of your questions and point out some curious idiosyncrasies to the resurrection accounts, and I would like to do it chronologically.

In synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Joseph of Arimathea alone sought permission from Pilate to take the body of Jesus down from the cross and hastily buried it in a tomb. In those same synoptic accounts, the women (emphasis on the plural) came to the tomb with spices to anoint the body on Sunday morning.

In John's gospel, Joseph was joined by Nicodemus and they brought their own spices to anoint the body as it was buried. And in the passage from John that you heard at the beginning of the service, Mary Magdalene came alone and without spices, presumably because she was aware that the body had already been prepared.

Some of the questions that came up in the study are: "**How or who rolled away the stone?**" and "**Was Jesus raised by God, or was he able to resurrect by his own power?**" These are great questions and I am so glad you asked. And I will answer

two ways; scripturally, which will not answer your question specifically enough, and what I think and why I think what I think.

Scripturally, Matthew wrote that as the women were approaching the tomb there was an earthquake and an angel descended and rolled the stone away and told the women,

Matthew 28:5"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for *he has been raised*, as he said.

Mark didn't mention an earthquake, but recorded that the stone was already rolled away when they got there, and when they went into the tomb a man dressed in white told them,

Mark 16:6"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. *He has been raised*; he is not here.

The words, "he has been raised" would indicate to me that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Luke's account varies slightly. No mention of an earthquake, but the stone was already rolled away, and two men in dazzling clothes greeted them and said,

Luke 24:5b-7"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but *has risen*. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

The words, "has risen" seems to me to indicate that Jesus raised himself.

And just to fulfill my need for completeness, John recorded no earthquake; Mary alone went to the tomb and found the stone rolled away; she encountered no angels or men in dazzling white clothes; and left to go tell the disciples what she had seen.

Later, when she encountered the risen Lord Jesus, he did not mention how he escaped the tomb – whether he had been raised or whether he rose.

So *my* thoughts: Matthew alone recorded how the stone was rolled away when he wrote that the angel descended and rolled the stone away. But I think the question is irrelevant, because even in Matthew's account, when the stone was rolled away all it indicated was that the tomb was empty. So you see, the tomb nor the stone was an issue for the risen Lord Jesus. My guess is that just as he, in his glorified and resurrected form, was able to appear to the disciples behind closed doors (John 20:19-20 & Luke 24:36) and teleport from place to place, as he did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the sealed tomb was no problem for him to vacate. The fact that the stone was rolled away was so that human beings could see and bear witness to it being vacant, and believe.

I think that whether Jesus himself had the power to rise from the dead or not is the wrong question. He may have had that power – he raised others. I think he chose not to use it just as he chose not to pull himself off the cross and save himself from suffering and death.

I think he trusted his Heavenly Father in both situations; in his suffering and death on the cross and in his being raised from the dead. And the reason I think this is the case is because there would be no point to it all if Jesus could just push his own *reset* button like a video game.

But by going through the betrayal, the denial, the abandonment, the torture and abuse, being nailed to the cross, and suffering through it to death and the grave demonstrates for us **1) his obedience to his Heavenly Father; 2) his trust in his Heavenly Father that even through his own death, things are going to turn out well for him and for us, both of which are an example to us; and 3) his obedience and trust demonstrate his and his Heavenly Father's great love for us.**

Jesus Christ, in his fully human nature, had to live and die a human death and trust his Heavenly Father would raise him up or his death and resurrection doesn't mean that much to us. But his being raised from the dead, by the glory of the Father, gives us hope that we too will be raised to new life.

Now, onto the women, the "First Witnesses."

Matthew ~ "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary"

Mark ~ Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome

Luke ~ Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them

John ~ Mary Magdalene

I could bore you with the details but allow me to cut to the chase. "The other Mary," aka "Mary the mother of James" are likely the same person and she is not Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus.

Mary the mother of our Lord Jesus was present at the crucifixion, but apparently not at the tomb. Why, you ask? Some posit that she would have been an old woman by this time and being despondent over her son's death, probably didn't feel up to seeing his body again and attending to the details of burial. Could be?

But it is also possible that she knew he wouldn't be there! Hmm! Remember, she was visited by angels when she was chosen to be his mother. She raised him herself. She became one of his disciples who followed him around. She knew him better than anyone. She trusted her Heavenly Father with his birth, and in his life, and I am suspect she trusted him with her son's resurrection too. I suspect she didn't need to go to the tomb, she knew he wouldn't be there.

Though Mary the mother of our Lord Jesus, is regarded within the Christian church as a model of faithfulness, and was present at his crucifixion, she is never referred to again in scripture. I will say more about that in a few moments.

The best supporting role in the drama of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ goes to ... Mary Magdalene. She is the one person, man or woman, who played the most prominent supporting role in the drama of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. All four gospels place her near the Lord throughout the drama. And why is that you ask?

Though the male disciples certainly had reason to be concerned for their own well-being during the Passion and that explains why they abandoned Jesus and went into hiding, the women were probably not seen as a threat. Why would the Romans or the Jews round them up and crucify them too? Up until the crucifixion, they served supporting roles in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. They were not the ones

who walked side by side with Jesus, and were not sent out on their own to do ministry in his name.

But at the crucifixion and beyond, they were the ones who kept vigil, who waited and watched – until all hope was lost – or so it seemed.

We could take the position that the women, especially Mary Magdalene were braver than the men. Okay, I can see how one might take that position.

We could also take the position that while Jesus chose the twelve male disciples, the women chose him. And at least in the case of Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus exorcised seven demons, her life was so changed by him, that she was *all in*. She, who had gained the most from him, was the most devoted to him at the end.

No matter which resurrection account you read, Mary Magdalene is the one common character that God revealed in Jesus Christ chose to be the "First Witness."

And now back to where we started a few moments ago; in the misogynistic world of First Century Palestine, women were simply little more than the possessions of their fathers until sold off to their husbands. They were not allowed to own property or hold jobs, or talk to other men who were strangers. And in that sheltered life, women were simply not considered credible. So when Mary Magdalene and the other women showed up to tell the eleven remaining male disciples what they had witnessed with their own eyes, ^{Luke 24:11} "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

About this reality that Mary Magdalene and the other women were the "First Witnesses," scholars say, it has to be true. If one was to make up a story about a man resurrecting from the dead, they would not have used women, because of their reputation as being not credible. But the very fact that all the gospels agree that Mary Magdalene and the other women were the "First Witnesses" is simply an indication that it must be true. No one would make up a story like that, and therefore it adds credibility to the whole drama of the Passion and resurrection.

What does the fact that the "First Witnesses" were Mary Magdalene and the other women say to us? God revealed in Jesus Christ is loving, and merciful, and

forgiving, and healing, and inspiring and if he can use a formerly mentally ill woman to bring Good News, he can certainly use you and me.

When asked how Mary Magdalene is thought of after the study, respondents said, she is to be admired for:

- her faithfulness to Jesus,
- for her bravery,
- for her quiet ministry of service behind the scenes,
- for her life lived in gratitude,
- for her willingness to be used even though she was not perfect
- All characteristics we admire in her and wish more of was seen in ourselves.

While the boys argued among themselves who was the greatest, Mary Magdalene quietly demonstrated that she understood what Jesus meant by servant leadership.

And finally, what happened to her after the Resurrection and Ascension of her Lord? No one knows for sure, but gnostic writings, other ancient writings that were excluded from the canon of the Bible, indicate that the other disciples, now apostles, were always jealous of the attention she got from Jesus and they simply excluded her from their apostolic ministry and writings.

Others say that the world was not yet ready for a woman evangelist and she simply faded into First Century life.

Those of us in the study mused that perhaps she and Mary the Mother of our Lord Jesus, went back to Nazareth and carried on together, becoming legendary themselves as the word of Jesus Christ spread and took root, entertaining visitors who wanted to meet Jesus' mother and the woman who was the "First Witness" to his resurrection.

But the details and idiosyncrasies of the various gospel accounts nor non-scriptural postulations about what happened to the women matter now, the only thing that really matters is that Jesus Christ, the star of the Drama of the Passion and Resurrection has indeed risen from the dead.

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And to those who may think, I spent too much time on Easter talking about anyone else but Jesus Christ our Lord, I say to you, I understand. But it was because real human beings witnessed his resurrection that we are here at all. So it is all good news!

He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Happy and glorious Easter to all of you!