

The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 14th April, 2024

"Mary, Mary, quite... invisible"



Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Mark 15:39-41,

Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

John 20:16-18

Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Luke 24:13-23

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him."

"There were also women..." Almost an afterthought in the story, but they're there.

The great German theologian Jürgen Moltmann once made a comment about resurrection in the Gospels: *"Without women preachers we would have no knowledge of the resurrection"*.

And, BOY! Did he set the cat among the pigeons on the internet!! The storm of indignation was large and, from my perspective, very interesting to watch.

The idea that women could - or should be allowed to - preach, or be called "preachers", clearly remains a step too far for some Christians.

I foolishly looked at a 'Reddit' stream online called *"Need help understanding why women can't be pastors?"*, and was shocked by the responses. Some were ... sort of... willing to describe the women at the tomb as 'witnesses', but that was as far as it went.

For the record, I hold VERY strongly to the conviction of the Uniting Church that women SHOULD be preachers.

But Moltmann's point is simply that the first witnesses to resurrection were women, and it's very hard to argue with him.

Those women told their stories to convince others of the reality of resurrection, and if that's not preaching, what IS? That's what I try to do each time I stand up in here front of you.

Moltmann's point then, and mine today, is to talk about the women without whom 'resurrection' would have been a secret long forgotten! I know I've spoken about this before, but that's ok: things worth saying are worth repeating.

Most of us long been pretty conscious of how our traditions and understanding of Scripture have tended to diminish the presence, roles, and importance of women in the biblical stories, sometimes to the point of invisibility – thus my title today.

Think, for instance, of significant Gospel encounters between Jesus and women, where the women's names don't get mentioned.

When Mark's Gospel tells of Jesus being anointed at Bethany, the story ends with the words: *"...wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her"*... but no one will know her name!

It also seems likely that the companion of Cleopas on the road to Emmaus was his wife, not another man. There's wide consensus that "Cleopas" in Luke 24:18 and "Clopas" in John 19:25 are the same person, placing his wife Mary not only on the Emmaus Road, but also at the foot of Jesus' cross.

These things have been in my head and heart as I've sat with the various stories of Easter. I suspect also that my sense of them has been heightened by the big conversations going on in our country at present, about the various forms of violence against women. These have exploded into the light after years of darkness. As confronting and unpleasant as it has been to hear them, and will continue to be, I believe it's a good thing that many courageous women are telling their stories.

Along with the rest of the community, I believe it's very important that we in churches are willing to listen, so that these women are seen and heard. They're not just stories '*out there*', they are ours too.

A friend sent me an article this week from the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#). Steve's a psychologist who deals with a lot of family trauma, and he thought I'd be interested in the article. I was. It's called "*Understanding spiritual and religious abuse in the context of intimate partner violence*", and it's pretty confronting stuff!

It talks of patriarchal attitudes and practices within formal religions that act to reinforce male dominance – including the ignoring – or worse, gaslighting – of women's stories . Not only women's, but mostly.

For us, I think that part of hearing the stories of women today, is paying attention to the stories of our ancestors in faith – all of them!

I'm very conscious that I don't want anything I say here to be 'token', and especially conscious that I'm not trying to tell women how to understand or interpret your experience and approach to Scripture. All I can do is reflect on my experience and connection to the stories and the life of faith.

Last week, I spoke about Thomas in that context, and discovered afterwards how profoundly his story speaks into ours sometimes.

Today it's Mary's turn, or rather the many Mary's – visible and otherwise – together with Salome, Joanne, those who get named as "*the wife of...*" whoever, and the ones who just get named in Luke as "*women who followed Jesus*"

I think we're all pretty aware of the way in which so much of women's experience, stories, value, and place in the way of Jesus, were 'painted out' of the early oral stories in the process of Gospel writing. We also know how Paul's letters were used by the various Christian communities - remembering that the 'genuine' letters of Paul pre-date the Gospels. (It's very evident elsewhere in the Scriptures too, of course, but that's for another day.)

Every story reflects the agenda and purpose of the storytellers, and something of their biases and preconceptions too. We know that in the time of the Gospels, one of these - very heavily influenced by Greek philosophy - was that the spiritual and public life was the realm of men, and the earthly and private life was the realm of women. In such a framework, why would you bother telling the stories of women when you were primarily interested in the ways of the sacred?

So the lack of names for women isn't really surprising. Perhaps the fact that women were mentioned in the stories at all, is proof of the radical nature of Jesus and his early community: the stories remembered were so profound that they couldn't be ignored!

Even then, however, some strange things happened to them. For example the traditions somehow turned Mary of Magdala into "Mary Magdalene the prostitute", despite nothing in scripture to support this. (That seems to be the work of Pope Gregory in the 6th century).

Each Easter Day, we can read four stories of the women going to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body. Details vary - names and the like - but in each Gospel it is the women who begin the story of resurrection. **Not only are they the first to tell the story, but they are the ones to first see it. Why? Because they are the ones whose kindness, devotion, and courage, has them at the tomb in the first place!**

While those who would become the formal leaders of the early churches were licking their wounds behind closed doors, 'the Marys' went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. If nothing else, let's remember that touching a dead body made them ritually unclean for a week or so. (I don't know if anointing the dead was traditionally '*women's work*' or not, but the fact remains that it was women who were there.)

At Emmaus, it was as Jesus received the hospitality and food of Mary and Cleopas, that he broke bread, and they recognised him.

It was women through whom the truth of resurrection - however we understand that today - began to be seen, and told. That matters. It matters because, if we only tell the stories of Peter, John, Paul, and the rest of the boys, the truth of resurrection is at best a half-truth.

That's true for the stories in the gospels, it's been true for the stories of resurrection in Christ told through the ages, and it's true for today.

When stories are invisible or denied their validity, 'resurrection' may well be much harder to see or experience: not only for women but for everyone.

We hear 'resurrection', and I suspect our thoughts turn immediately to Jesus. That's fair enough, we're followers of his way. But as I said on Easter Day, the Gospel stories of resurrection are as much about Jesus' friends as they are about him.

They are stories of women and men being freed and inspired into new life, full life, resurrection life. They are stories of people taking up the courage to live!

And in later making some of them invisible, the church lost a great deal of its richness.

As John's gospel so eloquently says, the stories are told so that we might 'believe in' - enter into - the way of Jesus the Christ, and there find life. It seems that the 'Marys' - or 'Miriams', to give them their Hebrew name - and the others did just that!

May their stories be ours once more, to touch our minds, hearts, and lives.