

“ENCOUNTERS THAT EMPOWER”

Psalm 130, Luke 24:36-53

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Two weeks ago, I talked about how important it is to bring our whole selves (head, heart, and hands) to the reading of scripture. It's necessary to use your mind: to consider the literary, historical, and cultural context of a scripture, to discern the writer's intention for the original audience. Our minds help us to read the Bible in such a way that we don't just hear what we want to hear. Our hands remind us that the Bible is written for real people living real lives. It is a book whose messages intend a personal and corporate response. Our hearts insist that reading scripture is more than an academic exercise and more than a moral guide.

Now there are times when our hands are reluctant to respond to the clear call of scripture and times when we can't get our head around a particular scripture. But for me, it's the heart that both raises the most serious conflict with the Bible, while at the same time opening up its relevance for today. The heart wants to know why the truth discovered in scripture matters. It's really the best part of ourselves to address this question because the heart refuses to leave anything behind. Just as the head insists on the use of certain exegetical tools when interpreting the Bible, so the heart insists on the use of experience and various lenses for viewing life that have become a part of who we are. To put it simply, the head takes into account the role of women in the biblical world, while the heart remembers: "Women matter to me."

Sometimes the lens through which we see a scripture changes how we see that scripture. This is exactly what happened to me when I realized that today would be Mother's Day. I can't of course speak for women, but I can imagine how a woman might respond to this story. I have to say that this is not an affirming text for women and that surprised me.

It surprised me because among the gospels, Luke is regarded as the one most generous to women. In Luke they are clearly regarded as disciples in their own right. They provide financial backing for the ministry. They are acknowledged by Jesus in a variety of ways. They are used by Jesus as examples of faithfulness.

The chapter begins well enough. The women had been at the crucifixion and they made sure they knew where he would be entombed. After the Sabbath, they go to the tomb with the intent to honor Jesus' body with the proper anointing for burial. Luke has led us all along to expect this attention to detail and this act of faithfulness from these women. They are the first to hear the announcement of Jesus' resurrection. Angels don't appear to just anyone after all. So far, so good. I was planning to talk about encounters that empower and this fits perfectly. The message seemed an apt one for Mother's day as well.

Three of the women are even named. If Luke had stopped there, we could all say "amen," and I could sit down, and we could get on with acknowledging the incredible contributions

that mothers and other women have made to the health and welfare of not just the church, but the whole world.

But this is not the part of the story I'm preaching on. Maybe I'm being unreasonable, but the story starts to go a little sour for women at this point. To begin with, Luke leaves out Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden that John relates to us... probably because he doesn't know it. Angels are special, but it's not the same as seeing Jesus himself. Their announcement or evidence falls in the category of hearsay. It wouldn't pass muster in our courts of law and it doesn't sit well with the male apostles who view their report as an idle tale. Not believing women is apparently nothing new. But it's disturbing when the first male leaders of the church regard women as unreliable witnesses.

And it gets worse. We've mined the road to Emmaus for some encouraging words and spiritual nurture the last two weeks... but when you look at it through the lens of women's experience, it's suspicious that the first actual encounter with the risen Lord happens to these two men. I am aware of the possibility that Cleopas' companion may have been a woman, but when they tell Jesus about the women and the angels, they sound a little skeptical. And then when they return to Jerusalem to share their story with the "eleven and their companions" they hear the exciting news that the Lord had appeared to Peter!

That brings us to the encounter I read today on this Mother's Day, an encounter that speaks about empowering the disciples to become witnesses, an encounter where the women may be present (but not named) in the reference to the eleven's companions. When you look at the flow of the story, where the women are engaged in the practical aspects of discipleship, are privileged to hear the good news from a divine messenger, and whose names are acknowledged... when you go from there to being disparaged as unreliable witnesses and fading into the background as unnamed participants... you have to be a little troubled.

I may have exaggerated the problems here and on any other day, I would have plowed right ahead to the positive message of the disciples empowerment as witnesses. This is not the first time I have preached this text, but it is the first time I've noticed the problem. This is what happens sometimes when you lead with the heart, when you attend to the context of your own circumstances.

But it is Mother's Day, a day in which we acknowledge the importance of mothers for our growth and development as human beings. We give thanks for the mothers, biological and spiritual, who have nurtured us for this life. So my heart says on this day that I can't look at this story without asking about the women.

And when I do that, I have to say that I'm disappointed in Luke... not because I see the patriarchal bias of his day reflected in the story. There's nothing really surprising about that and I can get my head around that. The really disappointing thing is that he made such a good start. He gave the women an important role early in the story and then unconsciously perhaps began to take it away. And we are still doing that. Women continue to struggle to have their voices heard.

The best thing we could do to honor our mothers this day would be to commit ourselves to attending to the voices of women every day. Before the Civil Rights movement, Eleanor Roosevelt was advocating for an educational system that worked for African Americans as well as it did for whites. She advocated for affordable housing that didn't discriminate on the basis of color. She pushed for New Deal programs offering employment opportunities to be inclusive of women. She visited factories and coal mines and hospitals and ghettos. And yet some editors would criticize her, accuse her of playing politics, interfering where she wasn't wanted, even suggesting that she should just shut up.

Women's voices continue to ring out on issues of gender discrimination, racism, fair housing, a broken educational system, and sub-standard living conditions for the poor. Many of these women are trying to be the hands and feet and voice of Christ bringing new life. Witnesses to the resurrection!

How sad that their words are viewed as idle tales. How sad that no apology is recorded when the news of Jesus' resurrection becomes impossible to deny! How sad that they fade into the background, no longer named except as "companions." It leaves me wondering where the empowerment comes in with this encounter with Jesus.

Just as troubling is that the flow in this story from women who are active participants in the life of the faith community to women who are dismissed is repeated in the first few centuries of the church. Women play active roles in leadership as the church forms only to be displaced almost completely by the end of the second century.

Luke probably doesn't mean to diminish the role of the women, but the way he tells the story is an actual reflection of how it was for women in his day and in the faith community. So what do we do with that?

What do you do when you see in the scriptures an injustice that isn't acknowledged? I know it's not really the main point of the story, but it troubles me. In fact it troubles me the same way an injustice in life troubles me. And we're going to see that happen as we read the Bible because the Bible is written and put together by real people from the real world. The Bible and the church doesn't get a pass on injustice. We get criticized for thinking that we're perfect when we clearly aren't. You don't have to be in a church very long before you realize that Christians can be unfair, dismissive, even cruel at times.

But Jesus still works with us. His resurrection tells us he's in it for the long haul. And really it's the encounter with the risen Lord that ought to draw our attention. Despite the dismissal there is still empowerment and maybe the empowerment is even more potent given the real world context that becomes apparent when we follow the women.

Even though they aren't named, the women are among the disciples that Jesus addresses. He once again opens the scripture to them. He reminds them of the necessity of his death and resurrection. And then he says this: "... repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

Now isn't that just what we need in a troubled world that among other things, dismisses the voices of women? The gospel is an invitation to stop doing the things that do harm to others. The life of discipleship is a life of repentance. Maybe that's how it came to be that when John writes his gospel, he includes Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ. We're supposed to be troubled. We can't stop doing what we're not even aware of doing. Change can only begin to happen when we're troubled.

Notice that Jesus gives his disciples this mission even while they haven't yet sorted out the injustices within their own community. Just keep putting it out there: repent and forgive, repent and forgive. And don't forget that this applies to you too. Don't neglect the inequities of your own community while you're naming the injustices in the world. This is what they experienced in Jesus: forgiveness. I happened on these words from Desmond Tutu: "Forgiveness is nothing less than the way we heal the world. We heal the world by healing each and every one of our hearts" (p.5).

It's okay to be troubled by the Bible. That's just how it goes for those who follow Jesus. That's where change can begin. And it can be really powerful when we see the sins of our world reflected in the stories of scripture. But the message we are called to carry, well that's where the real power is. The risen Christ turns us around and moves us and the world on a path of reconciliation and forgiveness; a path that we might say on this day acknowledges the wisdom and testimony of women as real and truthful and helpful.

For the times when we have dismissed the testimony of women, we seek their and God's forgiveness. We seek God's grace that we may hear the voices of those who have been unjustly silenced, whose wisdom and healing we need for our troubled hearts and for our troubled world. May we be empowered by the risen Christ to walk this path faithfully. Amen.

Tutu, Desmond and Tutu, Mpho. The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World. Harper One: New York NY, 2014.