

“FOLLOWING JESUS: THE WOMEN DISCIPLES”

Luke 8:1-3; Matthew 27:55-61

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

Texts like that little short reading from the beginning of Luke chapter 8 are, to me, both maddening and wonderful. Maddening because they are so brief, and leave me with question upon question. But wonderful in that they seem to invite us into a journey of curiosity and reflection. Texts like this one give us an opportunity to think about the Bible a little differently, to shift our attention to people we may have thought of as being on the margins of the story.

Who were these women? Luke tells us the names of three of them: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.

Mary Magdalene we know the most about. Usually she is described as a former prostitute and often identified with the woman who is called “a sinner” in Luke 7, but there’s no real justification for any of that. Luke says Jesus healed her from seven demons – I’d love to know what that means. It seems clear that she is full of gratitude, and we know that she had an ongoing role in the community around Jesus. She is the one person named in all four gospels as an Easter witness. There is also strong evidence of her significant leadership in the early church.

Joanna is the wife of a man who has a prominent job in the household of Herod, the Roman’s puppet governor of Judea. That makes her a rather unlikely candidate to be among Jesus’ followers, but this isn’t a passing fancy for her: She is among the women named in Luke 24 who discovered the empty tomb and reported the news to Jesus’ other disciples.

Susanna is not mentioned anywhere else in the gospels, only here.

And there were, Luke says, “many others.” I really would like to know *how many*. Who were they? Were they all followers of Jesus because, like those three named women, they had been healed of some physical, mental or emotional distress? What brought them to Jesus for healing in the first place? What made them think he could help them?

And then... How did they manage to leave homes, husbands (at least in Joanna’s case), families, responsibilities, to travel from town to town along with Jesus? How did their families and friends and neighbors feel about this? Where did these women get the resources they used to support Jesus’ ministry?

What was it like for them to be Jesus’ companions? Was the journey scary? Exciting? Difficult? Were they among the 70 who were sent out to proclaim the good news (as described in Luke 10; Jerry talked about that mission last week.) Did these women, like

the male disciples, have questions, disputes among themselves, and difficulty in understanding Jesus' mission? What were their relationships like with the male disciples? What role did they play in the early church as it developed? Most of all... why don't we know more about them and their journeys?

Because it's certainly clear, despite the brevity of the passage, that they did play an important role:

For one thing, they are named. (Think how many unnamed people there are in the Bible). The fact that their names have been remembered means something about their significance and suggests that their memories were honored.

For another thing, they provided resources and support for Jesus' and the other disciples. All of us who have been involved in the work of the church can understand why that mattered. Ministry needs faith and vision, but it also needs food and supplies and willing workers and people who nurture a sense of community in the day to day.

Plus we know that Mary Magdalene at least and probably some of the other women mentioned here *remained* among Jesus' followers throughout his ministry. This was not like a week-long mission trip for them! They were part of Jesus' community as he travelled, taught and healed, AND they were at the cross, at the tomb, and among the people who formed the early church.

So while there is a lot we don't know about these disciples, we do know some things:

- They are grateful.
- They are generous.
- They are practical; they understand that resources matter.
- They support not just Jesus and his mission, but the community.
- They are loyal and faithful.
- They are undeterred by difficulty, danger or sorrow.
- They love Jesus.

Ok, maybe we know the important things. We could do worse than to take the faith of these women disciples as our model.

But how is it, why is it, that we don't read more about them? Why are women so much in the background and on the periphery of the gospels?

We tend to assume (if we give it any thought at all) Jesus' disciples were all men (in keeping with his culture) and that women did not play a significant role in his ministry.

OR we assumed that women in that time and place had no power or freedom or ability to participate in any kind of public life.

But a careful look at the gospels tells us that our assumptions are not entirely true.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and the “many other” women of Luke’s account had resources, strength, a measure of freedom, the ability to claim their own beliefs and path. Certainly they lived in a largely patriarchal society. Their experience may not have been typical – perhaps they had advantages of wealth or education or abilities or just luck. It might not have been easy for them to follow Jesus. But they did. And that makes them disciples.

The stories of women’s involvement with and in Jesus’ ministry are woven throughout the gospels. Women are clearly there. We can discover their presence if we look for it. But why aren’t we told more?

Most likely, the second and third generation of the church became more male-centered as it morphed from a movement to an institution. The writers who gave us the story focused their attention on the male disciples. But the presence and power of the women disciples couldn’t be entirely eclipsed. So we have these tantalizing glimpses of them that make us want to know more.

In those glimpses, and in our wondering about all that we don’t know, is there anything that speaks to our journeys today?

I think there are a couple of things for us to think about.

First of all, the women disciples remind us how important it is to support and nurture the community of faith not just with resources but with service and caring and presence. I want to be careful here not to stereotype; I don’t want to say that women belong in the support roles or are more practical or are better at community. I want us all to see ourselves in those roles that build and nurture the community: quiet faithfulness over a long time; showing up in times of grief; giving as generously as we can; making food, eating together, feeding the hungry; walking with one another through life’s ups and downs.

What really gives me pause when I think about these women disciples is their commitment and faithfulness even though nothing about the circumstances could have been easy or convenient for them, even though they did not seem to get a lot of recognition or credit, even though at times it must have looked like their efforts were futile. We so often want everything on our own terms before we will sign on for a task; we want appreciation; and we want to see results – preferably without having to wait too long. The reality is that discipleship is often infinitely harder than we’d like it to be. The journey goes to hard places sometimes. I appreciate the stories – as incomplete and hazy as they seem to be – of these women who chose that difficult journey, and made it with grace, and with each other.

I also think there something valuable for us in the process of reflecting on these women of the gospels who have often been unseen in the story. I wonder if maybe our effort to see them can help us learn to see the people in our world who we often don’t see - people whose stories we don’t know, whose journeys we don’t fully understand.

The people whose invisible and often underpaid labor we rely on – farm workers, truck drivers, garbage collectors....

The immigrant family afraid of being sent back to the danger they fled from.

Undocumented immigrants workings in our greenhouses or nail salons.

People living with hard-to-see disabilities like anxiety or depression

Children who don't want to tell anyone that their family is sleeping in a car.

Young African-American men who are seen not as the persons they are but merely as dangerous.

Those who carry the scars of long-ago abuse.

Those who make the hard choice every day to stay sober.

Fathers and mothers working two jobs to pay the rent and feed their kids.

Those who do the unseen but necessary tasks.

Women and men who have survived grief and emerged with quiet but deep compassion for the hurting.

People who have believed their gifts weren't welcome in the church because they are young or gay or women or men or old or disabled or imperfect or quiet or different.

Sisters and brothers in the faith who have a journey to tell about, and no one to listen.

So many people whose journeys could inspire us, whose storied reveal necessary truths, in whose faces we might see Jesus.

Following Jesus is in many ways an individual decision, and a personal journey. But it's not a solitary pursuit. The road may be hard sometimes, but along the road we can find community if we want it, if we will take part in making it. There are women and men who walked the path before us, and those who walk it still, whose journeys have a lot to teach us... if we can see them, and are willing to learn.

Amen.