There Were Also Many Women There

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[0:00] Please turn with me this morning to Matthew 27 and verses 55 and 56.

Matthew 27 verses 55 and 56. There were also many women there looking on from a distance who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.
Blessed are you, O God, King of the universe, who has not made me a Gentile. Blessed are you, O God, King of the universe, who has not made me a slave.
Blessed are you, O God, King of the universe, who has not made me a woman. Such are the morning prayers of the Jewish Sidduer, still repeated today by many thousands of religious Jews. Until recently in Saudi Arabia, women were not allowed to learn how to drive. And in many rigid Islamic states today, they require the permission of their husbands to leave their homes.
[1:28] In their own nation, until 100 years ago, women did not have the right to vote in national elections. Women, Gentiles, and slaves.

What's the difference to a religious hardliner? One of the characteristics of a cult is the way it treats its woman with dignity, or as objects purely of male desire.
Well, these verses are a story about women, courageous female disciples who stayed with Jesus until the very end, unlike their male counterparts. The text tells us, Many women were there. Matthew names just three, but we know there were others as well. While Peter and the other disciples had abandoned Jesus to his fate on the cross, these godly women stayed with him, offering him whatever comfort they possibly could.
And it would seem, from the other Gospels, offering Jesus' mother their love and support. In this, they proved superior to their male counterparts. That they were loyal to Jesus both at the height of his popularity and in the depth of his misery.
[2:46] The early Christian church was made up of both male and female. Throughout the New Testament, we read that prominent women provided homes and support for the Christian mission.

Such a thing was highly frowned upon by their Jewish countrymen, intent as they were on the destruction of the so-called Jesus cult. They had forgotten that male and female God made them. That gender inequality was a consequence of the fall of humanity into sin and not a creation ordinance. And here at the foot of Golgotha's cross, we read, many women were there.
And yet, in the last analysis, this is actually not a passage about women at all, but about Jesus. About how Jesus' faithful followers provide continuity between his death on the cross in Matthew 27, and his resurrection from the dead in Matthew 28.
These women see him die, they observe his burial, and they are witnesses of his resurrection. That's their privilege, and that's their function within the text.
[4:05] These courageous female disciples who stayed with Jesus to the very end, and beyond it also. So this morning, I want us to notice four aspects of these verses, the many women were there text in Matthew 27.

Attachment, absurdity, attestation, and advancement. And again, the ultimate message of this passage is this, that these women provide evidentiary continuity between Jesus' death and his resurrection.
That their hearts so broken on Golgotha's hill will in three days' time be lightened in the garden.
First of all, attachment.
Attachment. There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him.
They had followed Jesus, just as Matthew had, when Jesus called him from the tax collector's booth, with the words, follow me. These women also heard the call of Jesus to follow him.

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[5:24] Many a person hears the call of Jesus to follow him, but closes their heart to him. If you have heard the voice of the gospel being preached, then you too have heard Jesus calling you to follow him.

That soft yet powerful voice of Jesus inviting you to a life of discipleship and learning. Just like these women. Would you also follow him?
We also learned that they'd followed him from Galilee, Now Galilee was hundreds of miles to the north of Jerusalem, and yet these women had left their homes to follow Jesus as he made his way south from Galilee to Jerusalem.
They had left their rural home country and traveled to this busy city. They left behind them their familiar settings, and for the sake of Jesus, they embraced the unfamiliar setting of Jerusalem.
Little had they expected to find themselves huddled together at the foot of a small hill outside Jerusalem, experiencing together a supernatural darkness, a supernatural earthquake, and the death of their master.
[6:39] You know, the tragedy is that for many people, their discipleship is so pathetic that they can't even be bothered to get out of their bed on a Sunday morning for Jesus, let alone follow him from one end of the country to the next.

The reason they were looking on from a distance, as the text tells us, is because there was a crowd of religious mockers who had prevented their coming close to the cross.
Remember, these mockers were religious men to whom women were no better than Gentiles or slaves. These women did not have a look in.
It was only when these crowds began to disperse that they would have been able to approach the cross, as from John's account of the crucifixion, they clearly did.
But as far as Matthew was concerned, they are only able to look from a distance. So they could see Jesus, and Jesus can see them. They get as close to Jesus as they possibly can.
[7:53] Their male counterparts are hiding miles away. But they're getting as close as they can to Jesus. They are loyal to him in life, and loyal to him in death. But the main feature I want you to notice is that these women had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him.

Ministering to him. That had been their role. Ministering to Christ. Serving him in whatever way he needed to be served. They prepared his meals.
They washed his clothes. They supported him. They protected him. But perhaps the greatest of all ways they ministered to him was by being here at the cross.
They could see him, and he could see them. Their presence there must have brought them great pain. But it must have brought Jesus great comfort.
Because Jesus could look up from the eyes of the mocking crowds into the eyes of his faithful followers looking on from a distance. It must have given Jesus such strength to know that at least these faithful followers had not abandoned him, but they were with him to the very end.
[9:10] And that's the point. Attachment. These followers of Jesus were attached to him, both for good or for ill, both in life and death.

Just as he had loved them, and just as he had been loyal to them, so they loved him and were loyal to him even now. Their attachment to him was not passing, not temporary.
It was permanent. It was complete. The apostle Peter had promised that he would die for Jesus if it came to it, but when push came to shove, Peter denied his Lord and ran for his life.
These women had made no such promise, but when push came to shove, they stood by their Lord and they supported him even to the very end.
Yes, even when the very earth shook under their feet. They were not Jesus' fair-weather friends. They were in it to the end. I used to be pretty good at golf, even if I say it myself.
[10:16] Now, I'm a fair-weather golfer. I'll play if the weather is fair, but if I have to take a wind cheater with me or an umbrella, I'm not going to bother.

It is such a shame that so many Christians seem to be fair-weather disciples of Jesus. They follow him when the going's good, when there are lots of other disciples, when it's cool to be a Christian, when it's easy.
But when life takes a dark turn, when the rains of adversity fall and the winds of trouble blow, they abandon their faith in him.
They do a Peter. They run away and they hide. They come to church if it suits them. But supposing their child's Sunday sports training should get in the way, they'll give church a miss.

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They'll shout loud and proud when the weather's fair, but you won't see them for dust when the going gets tough. You won't find them at the foot of the cross for the suffering Jesus.
[11:22] As far as these women were concerned, this was the end of Jesus' messianic mission. All their hopes were dashed and their dreams broken, and yet they still remained loyal and they stayed with them to the very end.

What kind of attachment is it to Jesus, may I ask, when we prefer Sunday football to serious faith and rugby training to resilient tenacity?
What kind of loyalty to Jesus is it when we are willing to abandon him for someone else's love or for the sake of our self-indulgent careers?
These women spent their lives ministering to Jesus, but perhaps their greatest hour was when, against all odds, they stood at a distance and by their very presence there, supported Jesus in the time of his greatest need.
Learn a lesson from these remarkable women of faith. Many women were there. Would you have been there that day, sticking with Jesus, even as he'd stuck with you?
[12:39] Or would you have found a convenient excuse to mark yourself absent? Sorry, my kids have got rugby training. You might think that I'm banging on a boring drum, but believe me, one of the basic marks of being a follower of Jesus is that you meet with other followers of Jesus and that is what we call church.

You want to take your stand with Jesus? Take your stand with other Christians and however hard it is for you and however many privileges that you and your children have to forgo.
Do not forsake the gathering of yourselves together. Attach yourself to Jesus. Take your stand at the foot of the cross alongside these many women.
Attachment. Second, absurdity. Absurdity. Blessed are you, O God, King of the universe, who has not made me a Gentile or a slave or a woman.
They were the lowest of the low in the society of Jesus' day. The victims of male obsession, societal prejudice. Their social status was so low that they were not permitted to be witnesses in a court of law.
[13:59] Testimates could not be trusted and therefore their evidence inadmissible. Basically, men had stitched up the legal, political, and societal structures of the nation in order to secure their own positions and to preserve their own power.

So imagine how absurd it is that God should choose such as these women, these lowest of the low in the society of Jesus' day, to be examples and models of loyal faith.
You might understand it if he chose the disciples. For even though they were not of high class Jerusalem stock, they were at least men and Jews at that.
How foolish a thing that God did not choose Herod or Pilate or the high priest to be Jesus' loyal follower. Or indeed, how foolish it is that God did not choose the emperor of Rome, King Tiberius Caesar, to stand at the distance in support of the king of kings and lord of lords in this most valiant of quests.
But God chose the weak things of the world, chose the foolish things of the world, the things that are not things at all. Many women were there.
[15:21] God chose these women to be witnesses of the cross of Jesus. He chose the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, the weak things of this world to confound the strong, and the things that are not to confound the things that are.

This economy is utterly absurd. Almost as absurd as growing his kingdom through men and women like us, men and women so frail and so changeable, so very variable.
We are not the great and good of society. We are not the creme de la creme of the human evolutionary quest. But God has chosen us to be witnesses of the cross of Jesus.
We might think that God in his wisdom would have chosen the elite of our society, the A-listers, to be witness bearers of the gospel. Surely they would have more impact on our society than the Jane Doe's and the Joe Doe's like us.
But no, in the wisdom of God he chooses the weak and foolish things so that all the glory goes to him. He chooses men and women of no social status and whose testimony is admissible in a court of law to be witnesses of the cross of Jesus.
[16:48] Just as God demonstrated his sovereign righteousness in the weakness of the cross, so he demonstrates his sovereign power in the witnesses to the cross.

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The messengers of the cross are going to be thought of as being weak and foolish. They're going to be unimpressive and lowly. They'll be more like the despised Paul or how he needs to work in his image, Paul.
Paul. They'll be more like Paul than they will the popular super apostles whose dental implants shine and whose Armani suits are lint rolled every morning.
Perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised at the cynicism of our world towards modern day super apostles. After all, the witnesses God chose weren't super in any way.
Many women were there who were there. Well, you know, if these women could be witnesses of the cross, then sure you can too, whoever you are.
[17:59] However weak, however foolish you may feel, if many women could be there, then at the very least, we can tell our family and friends what they witnessed that day and how it's changed us.

Third, attestation. Attestation. As I said earlier, the primary function these women serve in Matthew's narrative is to provide continuity between the death of Jesus, the burial of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus.
So they see him die in Matthew 27, 50. They see him buried Matthew 27, 61. They see him raised, Matthew 28, 9. They are attesting witnesses to all these things.
The death, the burial, the resurrection of our Lord. They provide continuity to the narrative. These three great events, death, burial, resurrection.
They are the only witnesses to all three. So they provide attestation, evidence. But remember, their evidence was inadmissible in a court of law.
[19:17] No matter that there were three of them, the Matthew says, many women were there, their eyewitness testimony counted for nothing in a Jewish court system of the day.

But what it did count was in the early Christian church. among those women are three are named. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Mary the mother of the sons of Zebedee, the disciples, James and John.
Mary Magdalene is a constant. Commentators differ as to the precise identity of the other two, some even arguing that they were very close relatives of Jesus, his aunts, perhaps.
However, what we do know is that among the many women, these three are named. The early Christian church had access to these women's testimonies.
Matthew's writing this gospel toward the end of the 50s A.D. Perhaps Mary Magdalene was still alive at this stage. She could be approached by any doubting believer in the early church and asked, tell me the story again of the death and the burial and the resurrection of Jesus.
[20:37] She could be required to attest the facts of the gospel and she would willingly oblige. But even if she wasn't still alive, these three women were well known by reputation to the early Christian church, just like we might whisper the names of famous Christians of recent times to each other.

so the early growing church was still small enough to remember firsthand these great women of faith so that at the very mention of their name there was an aid of honor and respect and trust.
Their testimony was inadmissible in a Jewish court of law, but as far as the church was concerned, it was entirely as valid as that of men. Did you know that in fact the Free Church of Scotland was in fact the first Christian denomination in the United Kingdom to give women the right to vote in ministerial elections preceding the state by some 80 years?
The point is this, these women are named so that the early church has reliable witness to the factual and evidentiary truth of the death and the burial and the resurrection of Jesus.
See, the problem is that many of these early Jewish Christians to whom Matthew's writing were under pressure to renounce their faith in Jesus and to return to the fold of rabbinic Judaism.
[22:05] Their Jewish countrymen were scathing in their mockery of anyone who could possibly believe that the Messiah could be crucified and then buried and then rise again. They refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

For any doubting Christian, danger of being swayed by the mockery of their countrymen, all they had to do was to schedule an appointment with Mary Magdalene or one of the other women who had been present for all three events and they would have learned with certainty that Jesus had in fact died, been buried and had risen on the third day.
You see, the naming of these three women is very deliberate on the part of Matthew. It's that added assurance of the truth of Jesus and his gospel.

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Many people today doubt the truthfulness of the gospel accounts pouring scorn either on the death of Jesus or on his resurrection. For example, many people hold to what's called the swoon theory of Jesus' death.
That in fact, Jesus did not die on the cross but fell into some kind of coma-like swoon and that the coolness of the garden tomb caused him to revive on the third day.
[23:28] Many others, content to admit that Jesus probably was crucified, refused to believe that he was raised from the dead on the third day. Listen to these three women.

they were there in person to witness the death and the burial and the resurrection of Jesus. Some of us, mistakenly, I believe, elevate science to the realm of fact and faith to the realm of feeling. Faith is touchy-feely. It is independent of reason or mind. Science is evidence-based. It is best conducted outside the reach of illogical emotion.
Listen again to Matthew's insistence. Many women were there. Many women were there. Let the truth, let these women attest to the truth of what happened, not just to the early church, but let them attest the truth of it to you also.
Realize that faith is based on as much reason as science ever has been. And that historical fact as attested by these women and processed by faith is the foundation of our Christian faith.
[24:56] Don't let anyone fool you into thinking that as a Christian you're in the land of fantastic beasts and where to find them. You're in the territory of corroborated evidence and eyewitness testimony.

You're on sure legal and historic ground. You're on the side of reason, of logic. Attestation.
Let's take a quick drink. And then lastly and very briefly, advancement. Advancement. Blessed are you, O God, King of the universe who has not made me a woman.
A woman. Throughout history, of course, women have not been cherished as equals in salvation but exploited and oppressed. Their most important function has been to produce children, lots of children.
Leave the important stuff to the men, the politics, the cigars, the religion, the whiskey, and the planning. Children should be seen and not heard. In the society of Jesus' day and in many societies today, a woman should be seen and not heard.
[26:09] A Stockholm Syndrome type condition forces these poor women into willing complicity. But throughout his ministry, Jesus has consistently elevated the status and importance of women as his disciples.

The greatest model of faith found in the Gospels anywhere is that of the Syrophoenician woman who came to Jesus on behalf of her daughter pleading with him.
A Gentile woman and yet Jesus says of her, I have not found such faith not even in Israel. What about that woman who just a few days previous to this anointed Jesus with expensive perfume and then wiped him dry with her hair?
Jesus said of her, she's done such a beautiful thing for me. And now he chooses these many women who were there as witnesses of his death, his burial and his resurrection.
He affords them a privilege granted not to any of his male disciples. And throughout the early church according to the New Testament, Christian women played a huge part in advance of the gospel opening up their homes and providing hospitality to the early Christian church's missionaries.
[27:30] Emancipation was not the work of the suffragettes or Emily Pankhurst. Emancipation was predated some 1900 years by Jesus Christ Christ. And the church of today must continue to do all it can to campaign and ensure gender equality.

For in Jesus there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free, and no male, no female. But as we close, that's a bit of a sidebar.
I want to take you back there. Stand beside these women looking at the distance at the cross. Were they in tears when they heard Jesus' final cry? What did they say and what did they do when they watched him give up his spirit?
Many women were there, the text tells us. Male or female, are you there? Are you there? Are you standing loyally with them before Jesus?
You might be weak. You might be foolish. You might be so filled with doubts. But are you attesting to your family and friends that Jesus is your savior?

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[28:50] One thing is for sure. Surely, we'd rather be with them publicly supporting Jesus on the hill than than with Peter and the other disciples privately denying Jesus in hiding.

Let us pray. Father, the kernel of the story as we've discovered is that evidentiary continuity between the death of Jesus, his burial, and his resurrection.
These things aren't fantasies. Weren't written by J.K. Rowling. These things are true.
that your only beloved son died as witnessed by these many women, was buried as witnessed by these many women, and was raised from the dead on the third day as witnessed by these many women.
Lord, take away from us that sense that faith is just a feeling. Faith is based on fact, and we believe on the basis of these women's evidence that your son has been declared the son of God with power, and that he shall arise with healing in his wings.
[30:09] Give us the grace then to take our stand upon the truths of the gospel. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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