

Easter Sunday: The Women & Jesus, The Resurrection & The Life - 9th April 2023

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[0 : 00] Good to be with you this morning and on this Easter Sunday is the the resurrection of Jesus which obviously takes center stage for us. It's a resurrection so important, so radical I would suggest, so mind-blowing that it is the event on which our faith, our church and our lives as followers of Jesus is built. I mean if you took the resurrection away from Jesus and Jesus didn't rise from the dead, it would have been a good life he'd have lived, would have done some amazing things but in many ways he'd have been seen as not a lot more than an heroic failure. But if we embrace the truth of his resurrection and Jesus becomes therefore this life-shaping, life-loving, life-giving saviour, you know the one through whom and with whom and in whom is life itself and life itself which finds its eternal meaning. That's the significance it seems of this Easter day. Our words can't do it justice but suffice to say it's big stuff today in the story of our faith and yet what's beautiful I think within the enormity of Jesus' resurrection story is that there are loads of small, I'd say significant details that help us to see the difference that Jesus being alive today makes for us and our world. Now we could focus on all sorts of things this morning, it's a very rich story and indeed hope our life as a church as we go through the year is shaped by the reality of the resurrection but it seems to me that one of the main emphases of each of the gospel writers who tell the story of that first Easter and their accounts of it is the central role that women played in the Easter story.

For example, we're going to see in a moment how Luke's gospel reports the resurrection. I'm going to watch a little clip of the reading on the screen and as this plays maybe keep an eye on the role that women play in this account of Jesus' resurrection.

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb.

But when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.

In their fright, the women bowed down with 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.

[3 : 03] He has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee. The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.

Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the others.

It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

You see, in the midst of Jesus' death and resurrection, I think it's fascinating to see who was there. Because the consistent thread through the whole story is that it was women.

It was Jesus' female followers. So across the four Gospels, there's a real sort of mishmash of accounts of just who saw the risen Jesus and in what order.

[4 : 09] So we heard Luke's version of events there. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene on her own, and she was crying at the tomb when she famously mistook him for the gardener.

Whereas Matthew's Gospel, he puts the story this way. He says, The women, those ones we saw, hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Suddenly, Jesus met them. Greetings, he said. They came to him, clasped his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid.

Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me. So that's Matthew's account of what happened. Now Mark, he fills us in on some of the names of these women.

He mentions Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James. He mentions Salome. And then Luke, there's already a lady called Joanna as well. Now, it's quite tricky to work out the timeline on this, and quite who's involved and who is who.

[5 : 17] But I guess whilst that kind of logic problem, while that kind of detective work, it can be quite interesting to do. I think if we get too bogged down by the detail, it can distract us from one of the main takeaways from this story, in that consistently, across this Easter weekend, it was the women who were there.

So it was they who, along with other women, stayed at the cross to watch Jesus' crucifixion. It was they who saw where Jesus was buried.

It was they who prepared spices on Saturday night. And they also got up early, very early, on Sunday, to go to the tomb to clean and anoint Jesus' dead body.

And then it was these same women to whom Jesus appeared first. They were the first witnesses to the risen Jesus. And it was these women who Jesus then commissioned to tell all the others, including all the male disciples, about him.

Even though, as we saw in that clip, the male disciples reckoned these women were talking nonsense. However, since the word apostle means one who is sent, it seems to me that these women, not actually the male disciples, they were actually the first apostles sent by Jesus to share the good news of his resurrection.

[6 : 55] And yet what's fascinating is that this prime role for these women at Jesus' death and resurrection, well, it was consistent with the way that Jesus had always treated and championed women as being central to his ministry and central to his good news.

So, for example, as Luke mentions in his account, we read this, that the women who were at a tomb in Jerusalem were the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee.

Now, if we think about that for a moment, you've got Mary, Joanna, Salome, Mary Magdalene, various others, all of whom, we're told, had left their homes, maybe left their families, for what is over 100 miles away, up in Galilee, to find themselves following Jesus down to Jerusalem.

They've left everything to follow Jesus across the country. And if you think about that, that's an amazingly radical, dangerous decision on their part, at a time and in a culture, when women were generally treated so badly.

You know, they were risking their safety, their security, their lives even, to go cross-country following Jesus. Now, why would they? Why would other women do this?

[8 : 21] Well, because I think they saw in Jesus the reality of what God's loving, affirming presence looked like, a presence which gave their lives hope and meaning, which was denied them, in many ways, by the society of their day.

So there's other stories as well. For example, if we work a bit backwards from the events of that first Easter weekend, earlier in this week, a few days ago in the story, we read, for example, in John's Gospel, about a time when Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, when she anointed Jesus with expensive perfume before drying his feet with her hair.

Now, this anointing that she does, it happens at a mealtime, and women in this culture were generally meant to be seen and not heard. Yes, they could cook and serve, but they weren't allowed to engage in mealtime conversation if men were present.

And yet, although Mary, with this act of anointing Jesus, doesn't actually say a word, I think her actions in anointing Jesus, well, as we were saying last week, her actions speak volumes.

See, firstly, I think she's aware in ways which others seem not to be, that Jesus is destined to die soon. Because as Jesus acknowledges, she anoints his body in a way usually reserved for dead bodies.

[9 : 54] Secondly, it seems she's declaring through her actions, her belief, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour, promised by the prophets, since the word Messiah means anointed one, and she is choosing that time to anoint Jesus.

Although she's silenced by society, her actions declare her faith. And I think that's why Jesus says elsewhere, that she's done a beautiful thing for him.

But then thirdly, with this anointing act, what's fascinating, I'd suggest, is this. Because in biblical times, whilst, yes, dead bodies would often be anointed, it'd usually only be priests or kings who would be anointed while they were alive.

You know, anointed for a special role, which they had when they were living. So, not only is Mary's anointing of Jesus, her way of declaring that he is her priest, her king, she's also taken it upon herself to do the anointing.

And that role of anointing a priest or a king, well, that would usually be done by one person, by the high priest of the temple itself. That seems to me that in this instance, Mary is asserting her place, asserting her privilege of being able to anoint Jesus as the Messiah because she knows she is valued and loved by him.

[11 : 36] And how do we know she got that confidence of Jesus' love for her? Well, if you recall, it's this same Mary who Jesus commends for sitting at his feet, talking and learning from him as her rabbi, all while Mary's sister, Martha, in the background there, was busying herself in the kitchen.

Mary is a disciple of Jesus. She's not described as such in the Gospels, really because in that culture, women by definition couldn't be described as disciples.

But if she sits at a rabbi's feet, if she anoints his feet, if she declares with her actions, her faith in him as the Messiah, as her saviour, then she's clearly a disciple of Jesus.

A female disciple who joins with the women at the cross and the women at the resurrection as her story is central to Jesus' mission and ministry.

That's Mary. What about her sister though, Martha, in the background? Well, I'd say her sister Martha is also just as much a disciple of Jesus as well.

[12 : 53] You see, although Jesus is initially gently critical of Martha for having a go at her sister Mary for sitting at Jesus' feet, it seems Martha takes this critique of Jesus to heart.

Because the next time we see Martha after this episode here in their home is when her and her sister's brother Lazarus is dying and she and Mary send for Jesus to come.

Now Lazarus dies before Jesus can get there. But when he does arrive, Jesus says to Martha this, words to her in particular.

He says, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. And whoever believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this? And declaring such amazing truth to Martha Martha in asking Martha as an individual that question, I'd say Jesus is treating Martha as someone who has worth, as someone whose voice and opinion matters to Jesus.

[14 : 08] In other words, he's treating her as his disciple. And how does she respond to this validation, this opportunity? Well, she says this, yes, Lord, she replied.

I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. I mean, as statements of faith go, that's blooming impressive.

Now, interestingly though, it's the very similar kind of question and response that Jesus and a male disciple of his, Peter, have on another occasion when Jesus asks his disciples, who do you say I am?

And Peter answered, you are the Messiah. It's a very similar, even the same response, we might say. Although really, Martha's one here, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.

We could argue that's an even better response than Peter gives. You know, she fleshes it out a bit. Martha is just as much a disciple, just as faithful to Jesus.

[15 : 12] And Peter, if not more so, knowing how Peter sometimes behaves. And yet somehow, Martha gets lost in our storytelling a bit.

You know, we've managed to build hundreds of churches which are named after Peter, whilst Martha effectively seems to fade in comparison.

In fact, I looked this up. I think there are only two St Martha's churches in England. One in Surrey and one in Nottingham. And the one in Nottingham is called St Martha the Housewife.

Believe it or not. I know. I know. I mean, is that really her defining role that she's remembered for? Nothing against homemaking as it's a proud and essential role for any gender to take on. But it seems somewhat ironic that this probably single faith-filled disciple of Jesus is defined above all in the name of a church as a housewife.

[16:24] In light of this declaration of faith that she makes, I think Jesus might have something to say about that to us. Since in all of his interactions with women, he was radically counter-culturally affirming and inclusive, calling them to be his disciples and sending them out to be his apostles to bring his good news to others.

And so it's no wonder, I think, that by the time of Jesus' crucifixion, it was the women who above all stayed faithful. And it's no wonder that with his resurrection, it was the women who Jesus chose to appear to first.

And so if that's part of the story of that first Easter, this resurrection Sunday, what might all that mean for us today? Well, a couple of thoughts by way of pulling this together, I suppose.

Firstly, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus point to him being, they point to God being, the one who champions inclusion and promotes equality across the genders.

In Jesus' time, it was women who were often oppressed, certainly held back from being able to fulfil their God-given potential. and yet in ways which radically challenged the cultural norms, Jesus consistently was having none of that, having none of that.

[18:02] He treated women with honour, he gave them the platform to speak of God in ways that their humanity, let alone their faith, deserved. Indeed, for Mary Magdalene to be the first person ever to witness his resurrection and to then be commissioned to be the one who would tell the world the good news of that resurrection.

Given her role in the story, I've got to say, it kind of beggars belief really that some 2,000 years later we're still seeing women hitting glass ceilings or being held back from true equality in our society. What's more, I think it beggars belief that the wider church accommodates such sexism by allowing individual churches to say they don't want women as their vicar or on leadership over them.

Can you imagine how Martha and Mary, how Joanna, how Mary Magdalene would respond to being told that they could no longer teach people about Jesus?

I think, again, they'd have something to say to us today. See, Jesus is not just the resurrection. As he says to Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.

[19:27] And that means that our lives need to reflect both his way and his truth in how we relate to each other and how we follow Jesus and the example he sets for us.

God's but then secondly and connected really to this, I'd suggest I think that in our desire to see people come to know for themselves the love Jesus has for them, in our desire for people to live lives in a way which reflect God's goodness and God's truth, then God will use us most effectively to bring about that when we treat those around us with love.

So these women in particular, they follow Jesus because in contrast to their experience of wider society, he was perhaps the one person that they felt seen and respected by.

They felt known and loved by him, by Jesus. And therefore, both the challenge and the goal for you and me as followers of this same Jesus is for us to be known in our community as people who first and foremost love.

That's the whole point of the resurrection that love wins. Now what does that look like? Well if we take our lead from Jesus, I'd say we demonstrate this love best through inclusion not exclusion, through empathy not judgment, through generosity not greed, through equality not injustice, through unity not division.

[21:15] Now these are the eternal life-giving qualities of love which for me not only reflect the way of Jesus but which will also be the ways through which people discover the beauty of God's affirming love for themselves.

Love is the only way because no one ever came to genuine faith by being shamed or coerced or criticised or guilt-tripped into it.

Now people come to faith and are open to being transformed by Jesus when they realise that with Jesus is life with a capital L life in all its fullness life which because of Jesus' resurrection means that death is not the end and that this world is only the beginning to the adventure with him.

That I would suggest is the good news of Jesus that's the good news of his love his life his death his resurrection that in Jesus in him is life the light of all humankind as we're told.

And so on this Easter morning as the day the week the month the year our lives open up before us from this point I pray that Jesus resurrected life brings light to your life and that that same life shines through you as you live alongside those God has given us to love.

[23:02] Amen. Amen.