

In Whom Do We Believe? : A sermon by Emily Richards, April 20, 2025

In the story of Jesus' resurrection as told in the Christian bible it is the women who are the first witnesses to the miracle. This is true across all four of the gospels, although the accounts vary between each one. And in every one it is Mary Magdalene who is named first.

And you might wonder at this choice for this particular story, especially considering the social and cultural norms of the time. This was a time when most women were viewed as property. When their word was regarded as so unreliable that they could not be witnesses in a court of law.

In Antiquities of the Jews Josephus wrote: “ *But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex. . . .* ”

There are those that use this fact to point to the veracity of the story of the resurrection, because who would choose to hang an already unbelievable act on the word of women?

Why not change the story to make it more credible? After all, the gospels were written 30-70 years after Jesus' death. And all of these texts were written by men, who could have written the women's roles right out. But all four books agree that, not only were they there, but they were the ones to whom the angels appeared, the ones to whom Jesus spoke and told to spread the good news, the joy of his return.

And perhaps it was honesty that spurred them all to document the events in

this way and include the women. But, it may also have been that by the time they wrote it down the story was so widespread, that so many people had heard it, that to change it would invalidate their words with the people. It means that they could not refute it.

And yet this apologist view doesn't sit well with me because the women were not believed, even by the disciples themselves.

In fact, the response of the men when the women told them what they saw and heard as written in Luke was, "*but these words seemed to them an idle tale (or nonsense), and they did not believe them.*"

Which was after the women had to go and find them by the way, since the men weren't even there. It was the women who stayed by Jesus as he died on the cross, who stayed when his body was carried to the borrowed tomb, who were still there, or had returned, when the time came to anoint his body.

In this passage the word from ancient Greek - *ap-is-teh'-o* that is translated to mean "did not believe" has other possible translations as well. It can also mean to be unfaithful to or to betray a trust.

So this line could be understood as, by the men dismissing their words they were being unfaithful to the women. They were betraying their trust. Or

possibly even that they were being unfaithful to the very miracle of the resurrection itself.

And I think it's important to note here that the author didn't write the women were not believed, but wrote, they did not believe them. It puts the onus here back on the men for their lack of faith.

And how many of us, regardless of our sex assigned at birth or current gender identity, have experienced someone in a position of power or authority not believe us? Not listen to, or give credence to, a truth that we were trying to tell them? Have had our words and experiences discounted? Our expertise ignored?

And this happens at work, in school and educational settings, and even within our families.

And how often have we been the ones who have been unfaithful?

But that isn't the only place in this story where the women were not believed, just the most explicit. In the Gospel of John he and Peter went to check the tomb themselves after hearing that it was empty from the women, not even believing that much.

Now Mark I find to be a little bit tongue in cheek about the whole thing. The original text ends with "*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and*

fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

Other verses were added later but the original ends there. I see this as a kind of sly wink to the reader, because of course people found out about the resurrection, so obviously these poor females who were too frightened and weak to even speak of this, must have spread the news.. Just women, doing the work. Getting things done, like we always have.

And remember it was joyous news that they were speaking.

Jim Wallis said, *“Hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense.*

But hope believed is history in the process of being changed.”

The story of the resurrection brought hope. It changed the course of history. There was joy in the good news that they carried. Even in the midst of tragedy, even while living in a society that was attempting to suppress them, not just for their gender, but also for their religion, the women spread the good news. And, in fact, it was Mary Magdalene who did so and many argue that it was she who gave the first Easter Sermon. Mary Magdalene is mentioned 13 times in the Christian bible, the only other woman who is referenced more is Mary the Mother Jesus. Mary Magdalene is mentioned more than some of the apostles.

There is a second, and perhaps more intriguing question, which is why in this story did Jesus, whom many Christians believe to be a part of their

God, an extension of that holy presence, choose to show themselves to those that they must have known would be viewed as unreliable witnesses? Why not appear to Peter, who is often mentioned first among the disciples? Or John, who likes to refer to himself as he who Jesus loved the most? Why lift up these voices, who were so infrequently trusted?

This seems like a purposeful choice for the followers of an individual who was known for his radical anti-establishment agenda. Jesus spoke out against corrupt political and religious organizations. And his followers went on to break multiple laws and spend time in prison.

So this choice to have Jesus and the angels appear to the women to me seems intentional, and just another way that this story works to subvert the expectations of the reader.

Some of you might be familiar with The Gospel of Mary. This is an ancient text that was perhaps just a little bit too late to be considered a part of the canonical works of the Christian bible, historians place it somewhere in the 2nd century, but even if it were a little bit earlier its content may have exempted it from that place of status.

This text was found rather recently, as far as it goes, with three fragments found in different places in the world in two different languages, Coptic and Ancient Greek. This means that this text must have been circulated rather

widely at the time. And yet, it is not mentioned anywhere outside the manuscripts containing the text: it is not cited by any of the Church Fathers, and it is not listed in any of the discussions or lists of canonical books

And maybe this is why. Towards the beginning of it the text reads:

“Peter said to Mary, ‘Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of women.’”

Ok, interesting, right? We already know she is mentioned by name a lot, so we know that she held a place of prominence, regardless of the smear campaign against her that came in the 6th Century by Pope Gregory.

The Gospel of Mary is believed to have been words shared by Mary Madgalen about an encounter that she had with Jesus after he died, his spirit returning to her to impart additional wisdom through a vision. A vision which speaks of the journey or ascension of the soul after death.

I’m not going to read the entire Gospel to you, it is long and dense and fragmented, but I want to highlight what happens at the end, after Mary Magdalene has shared her vision with the others gathered.

Andrew responds to her story with the words *“I at least do not believe that the Saviour said this.”*

And, to be fair he says he doesn't believe because it doesn't seem to match up with what he knows of the teachings of Jesus.

Peter answers, in agreement, and says: *“After all, he did not speak with a woman apart from us and not openly. Are we to turn and all listen to her?”*

Has he chosen her above us?"

Now, there are women who are lifted as holding authority within Hebrew and Christian texts, such as Deborah, the only female judge, and fiery woman, but they are few and far between. So this idea here that Mary Magdalen may have been chosen for some special knowledge and therefore authority, would have been pretty hard to swallow. And yet we know the text already lifts up that she was loved most of all of the women. Why this doubt?

This next part is my favorite.

Levi answers, and he says to Peter, *"You have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you arguing with the woman as these adversaries do. If the Saviour has made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely, the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us."*

Ouch. That's a pretty significant claim right there. That not only was she loved first among women, but she was loved first. Full stop.

So here again, we have the story of a woman not being believed. And not just any woman, Mary Magdalene, whom within the text itself says is most beloved of all women, and then states that Jesus loved her more than all the rest of them. More than the other disciples, more than anyone else. And still, still she is not believed. It takes a man chastising the rest of them

for their unfaithfulness, their betrayal of trust, for the grudging acceptance of her words. Her truth.

Whose words do we believe? Do we believe the words of women like Jean Carroll and Christine Blasey Ford, both of whom spoke their truth about the actions of men who are now in some of the highest positions of power in this country? Or Anita Hill? Or Juanita Broaddrick?

Who are we being faithful to? Are we being faithful to immigrants who are being ripped from their homes, trans folk whose identity is being denied, federal workers who are risking themselves to speak the truth about what is happening right now in Washington?

Whose voices are we listening to and lifting up? And who is our faith calling us to believe?

But the story of the Resurrection isn't one of abuse or speaking truth to power, although Jesus during his lifetime spoke a lot of truth to power, it's the reason that he died. No, it was good news that the women were sharing. Joyful news.

They were sharing a tale of hope. Of a miracle, of resurrection. Of the dream of a new world.

And while you might be thinking, but of course they didn't believe them, what they're saying is unbelievable. But so too is turning water to wine, and healing the sick and blind, and feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread.

What is your good news? What truth do you need to share? To have others hear, and believe? What joy are you holding in your heart right now? What miracle have you witnessed, or been a part of, that you need to have known?

Beloveds, I invite you to take a moment to ground yourself, to breathe, and to bring to mind a joy in your life. Maybe it's the joy of a garden blooming, a connection made, a success, a new opportunity, or a child thriving. And then I invite you to turn to your neighbor and share with them this good news.

Knowing that here, we are faithful. Here we not only believe one another but we celebrate each other's joys. Once you've turned to the person on your right or left, turn to another person near you, we need more joy in this world. So spread the good news.