

starters for Sunday

Women and the Resurrection Stories

Rev MaryAnn Rennie, Minister of The Abbey Church, Dunfermline, offers her thoughts on Women and the Resurrection Stories.

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Brief Introduction

When I agreed to take on this topic, I did so with a little bit of fear about not being able to do it justice, and I suspect that fear continues. The more I have read the more I felt that there was much that I would miss as I tried to pull a few things together for people to think about and use in worship.

My other fear is that I would not want to undervalue any other person's life experience through what I would offer. My personal experience of call and ministry is extremely positive. I am the eldest of four children and one of three girls. All of us were encouraged to follow where our gifts lay and to see no boundaries on what we might do, so from childhood I have never felt that there were specific tasks for men and women. Born after the date when the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland agreed to the ordination of women, my earliest experiences of church include women as ministers. My own encounter with discrimination happened outside church life in the job I had before training for ministry. In each of the charges I have served there have been those who have voted against a woman being a minister, but as I firmly believe that we are called to the tasks we do in life because of the gifts we exhibit and not because of gender, perhaps naively. It is an issue with which I have tended not to wrestle as minister. Instead like many ministers, I have hoped that once people begin to engage with the Holy Spirit at work in the community the issue of gender will no longer be over-riding.

My positive experience of life is not however the experience of all, and in what follows I hope that with imagination and others' personal experiences there will be ideas that can be lifted and used, or fleshed out to offer worship that speaks of the presence of Christ risen in the lives of all people.



[Matthew 28: 1 - 15](#)

[Mark 16: 1 - 8](#)

[Luke 24: 1 - 12](#) ([Luke 24: 13 - 33](#) - the road to Emmaus)

[John 20: 1 - 18](#)

Commentary on the Texts and the Women Involved

Matthew

Matthew's story of the resurrection mentions Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. If we read back to the story of the Crucifixion then we discover that the other Mary referred to is most likely to be Mary, the mother of James and Joses.

In Matthew's account, the two women are the first two people to go to the tomb. As they are making their way, there is an earthquake as an angel of the Lord appears at the tomb, rolls back the stone and sits on it. The angel is dazzling and the guards at the tomb are so frightened that they shake and become like dead men. The angel tells the women not to be afraid, and then that Jesus has risen and heading to Galilee. They are to go and join him.

There is no story of the women telling the Eleven Disciples. Instead we have a story where the guards, chief priests and elders establish a story about the disciples stealing the body while the guards were asleep. Then finally we encounter the disciples heading to Galilee.

Mark

In Mark we encounter Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome.

In what is considered the earliest form of the Resurrection story in the Gospels the three women make their way to the tomb with spices just after sunrise. They are concerned about who will roll away the stone, but when they get to the entrance it has already been moved. As they enter the tomb there is a young man dressed in white sitting on the right hand side. He calms their alarm, shows them that Jesus has gone, and then tells them to go and tell Peter and the other disciples that Jesus has headed to Galilee just as he had told them. The women are afraid, run away and we are told that they tell no-one what has happened.



Luke

Luke's opening verses introduce "the women", and we have to read as far as verse 9 when the women have returned to the disciples to discover their names. There we encounter Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and unnamed others. If we were also to include the story of the Emmaus Road, then I would like to suggest that perhaps Cleopas's companion might be his wife.

The spices have already been prepared as the women make their way to the tomb very early in the morning. They find the stone has been rolled away, and when they enter the tomb there is no body. As they wonder what has happened, two men in gleaming white clothes stand beside them. The frightened women bow, and the men ask why they are looking for the living amongst the dead. They tell the women that Jesus has risen just as he had told them in Galilee. Once back from the tomb they tell the disciples what has happened, but the men do not believe them because it all seemed like nonsense. Peter goes to check, and he too finds an empty tomb.

As I said I would like to include the Emmaus Road as well, as I have often wondered about Cleopas's companion. In the women at the Crucifixion in the gospel of John there is a mention of a Mary who is Clopas's wife - are Cleopas and Clopas the same person? Potentially Cleopas's traveling companion could be his wife, and potentially this woman called Mary. Is that too big an assumption to make? Maybe not when we consider that women were not always named in a patriarchal society. Equally the traveling companion could be a child, but there is a little play in the unnamed person - and I think it should invite us to ask questions.

John

John only mentions Mary Magdalene.

The story begins with Mary making her way to the tomb, discovering that the stone has been removed, and then running to Peter and the other disciple Jesus loved (John) to tell them that Jesus's body has been taken. Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb, with the other disciple getting there first. He looks in and sees the strips of cloth. It is Peter who goes into the



tomb and sees the strips of cloths and the cloth that had been round Jesus's head. The cloth is folded and lying separate from the strips.

Once the disciples have headed back to their homes, Mary is left at the tomb crying. There she meets two angels seated inside the tomb, sitting at the head and feet of where Jesus had been lying. They ask why she is crying, and she explains that it is because Jesus has been taken away. As she says this she turns round and sees a man she does not recognise who also asks why she is crying and who she is looking for. Mary thinks this is the gardener, and asks him where they have put Jesus. As he speaks her name, she recognises him, and calls him teacher. Jesus tells her to go and tell the disciples that he is returning to his Father, and Mary does so, telling the disciples all she has been told.



Commentary on the Role of Women in the Resurrection Stories

It is generally accepted, and the Gospel stories suggest, that women were the first to find the empty tomb. As those who had witnessed the Crucifixion at a distance, and who had been with those who took the body to the tomb, they would have played a significant role as eye-witnesses to the presence or not of a body being there.

The variety of names mentioned in the stories and the seeming inconsistency as to who was there possibly suggests that there were a variety of different stories and traditions about who had been at the tomb. Mary Magdalene seems to have been a key figure and appears in all of the Gospels, either as the only name or the first in the list.

While we might be comfortable with the notion that women were the first witnesses, it is perhaps worth noting that in [1 Corinthians 15](#) Paul makes no reference to women being at the resurrection. As this text is thought to be earlier than the Gospels, some commentators question the authenticity of the presence of the women at the tomb. Those who argue in favour of the Gospel tradition would suggest that Paul may have been aware of the tradition of women, but preferred not to highlight this for fear of supporting women prophets. There is a hint that the tradition of the women's presence at the tomb was known from the works of an anti-Christian historian, Celsus, writing in the second century. His work is only known through quotes in Origen's work. Celsus refers to the words of a "hysterical woman," trying to suggest that the stories were not true.

The naming of women as witnesses is important not least because from a Jewish source (Josephus) we know that the testimony of women was not permitted in court because of the belief that their gender was not reliable. By naming them, the Gospels gives the women right to exist and that what they say is of value to those who will follow.

Dominic Crossan suggests that naming the women is not necessarily to highlight the strength of their faith over the disciples. Instead he says that they may have been named to highlight their unbelief, for Jesus had told them he would rise and head for Galilee. Had they trusted that promise they would have made the journey to Galilee to be ready to meet Jesus there.



Introducing the Women

Mary Magdalene

Mary is first introduced in [Luke 8: 2](#), where readers are told that she has had seven evil spirits cast out of her. From Magdala, she is often confused with the story of the sinful woman in the previous chapter. In chapter 8 though we discover that she is one of a number of women who support the work of Jesus and the disciples out of their own means. Given the agreement in all the Gospels that she was present and that she is listed first, perhaps we could assume that she has a prominent position amongst the women that followed Jesus.

Mary, Mother of James (and Joses)/the other Mary

It is assumed that this is Mary, the mother of Jesus because we know that Jesus had brothers, and that one of them is named James. Given that his earthly father is called Joseph, it would be a fair assumption to think that one of his brothers would have been named after him. There are a number of stories in which we encounter information about Mary, although perhaps at his point in the year we should shy away from the Nativity stories. Instead we encounter her as she watches her son grow into his task in representing God amongst people; so the story of the young boy at the temple, the wedding at Cana; [Mark 3: 21](#), where she questions his sanity; before finally being a witness at the cross, the Resurrection and the Ascension.

Salome, the mother of Zebedee's sons

She is the mother of James and John. Salome had dared to ask Jesus if her sons might have a prominent place in heaven. Jesus had rebuked her for this. Her presence at the cross and at the Resurrection suggests her humility in accepting the rebuke, and her willingness to continue to follow accepting Jesus's love of all people.

Joanna

Also one of the women who uses her own means to support the work of Jesus and the disciples. We are told that she is the wife of Chuza, who manages Herod's household in [Luke 8](#).



Mary, wife of Clopas (Cleopas)

I suggested earlier that I was making an assumption that Clopas and Cleopas were perhaps the same person. This woman is mentioned nowhere else in the Gospels, nor is her husband. She is mentioned as being at the cross, and while she is not mentioned at the tomb, if Clopas and Cleopas are the same person then she has an early encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus.



Sermon Idea

Resurrection Gossip: The older spelling of gossip gives a clue to what its original meaning was, and rather than being for passing on cruel comments it becomes something more positive. Originally 'God sib' meaning 'relating to God,' it suggests that it was considered the way in which women passed good news.

This article gives a more full explanation of differing ways in which the women at the Resurrection may have spread the Good New story.

http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/10_1/pdf/LDiff110Kartzow.pdf



Holy Week Services or Post Easter Meditations

If you are prepared to abandon the traditional approach to Holy Week, and focus on the differing characters of the women in the Resurrection stories there is a possibility of focus on not just their role within the Gospel context, but women (people) who offer similar perspectives from the world today. Rather than Holy Week services, perhaps you could offer a series of lunchtime prayer services in the week following Easter focusing on the Resurrection Encounters with Jesus

Suggested Themes

Mary Magdalene: People with hidden illnesses. You could focus on mental health, but there are a variety of hidden illnesses that people live with each day. Many of them rely on the support of those in the know, and find themselves disadvantaged because their symptoms are not immediately recognisable to outsiders. How might we respond in offering signs of Christ alive in our world that will allow them to share the burden they carry?

Mary, the mother of James and Joses (Jesus's mother): What does it feel like to watch your child grow knowing that they might not live into an old age? That is a question for a number of parents of children who have been diagnosed with life threatening diseases at early stages of their lives.

Salome: She makes me think of competitive parents. We live in a world where wanting the best for your children can mean pushing them too much and forgetting to allow them to be children. Is her story a reminder to us all, that we all matter and are loved by God, but we have to allow ourselves to recognise we share the world? We should want the best for all, and not just those we want to place first.

Joanna: Does she represent women in places of power? Or maybe she represents standing up for your own opinion. As the wife of one of Herod's household, she may have found too difficult to follow Jesus. Yet she seems to have managed her own opinion, for she follows him to the end and because of that is named.



Perhaps she could also be used to explore those who long for their call to be recognised. Joanna will have had a certain amount of power in her role as the wife of the household manager, but as a woman she would be prevented from holding the role for herself. In the Church of Scotland there are no barriers for the roles women play in leadership, although some congregations and church members still follow a literal understanding of the Biblical texts. However in other churches we have seen within the past year restrictions placed upon the sense of call that some women have while other others do not recognise the potential of women as religious leaders at all.

Mary, wife of Clopas/Cleopas: If the assumption that Clopas and Cleopas are the same person, why does his traveling companion go unnamed on the way to Emmaus. In worship I think we can sometimes take risks, and I would want to explore why this person, perhaps a woman is unnamed. Does her opinion not matter? Where in our world do women still find their voices are not valued? Within the last year we have had the story of the school girl who was shot in the head for standing up for the education of women, while in early February women wearing prayer shawls at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem were arrested.



Liturgy

Opening Responses

Leader: Tell the good news

ALL: THE LORD IS RISEN

Leader: Spread the word

ALL: THAT CHRIST IS ALIVE

Leader: Cast off your fear

ALL: FOR GOD IS AMONG US

Leader: Alleluia

ALL: ALLELUIA.

Prayer of Approach

Risen Lord,

awaiting the scurrying of footsteps

and the tear-filled voices,

You were not surprised

that those who love You would head

to the place

where You were last seen.

Your promises speak

of the burst of life and vigour,

possible when trust is placed in You,

while humanity's courage



crowds around the emptiness
of all that once was known.
So You wait
ready to call to us once more,
and in the tenderness of Your voice,
in the recognition of what is still to be,
enable us to enter the excitement
of living with your Spirit.
Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Lord of Compassion,
who listens to our tales of woe
while calling us to new life,
forgive us for our unbelief
and willingness to live in the past.
Lord forgive us -
when we are not willing to trust others
believing that only we can do the task,
or someone else will not make as good a job;
when we do not believe
the words You have whispered to us from birth
and fail to respond to Your call in our lives;
for trusting only in what we know



rather than taking risks in faith.

As we seek Your forgiveness

may we listen to the Holy Spirit

calling us to Your garden of new life,

and inviting us to fresh paths

in our relationships with You,

Surprising Lord.

Amen.

Prayers for Others

Lord of the Resurrection,

On this morning

we have hurried to the garden

to meet Your risen presence

and be refreshed for all that life still holds.

We thank You

for the relationships

that have comforted us in our sorrow

and offered signs of your inspiring Spirit.

We praise You

for the excitement

of all that we are still to discover of God.



Rising in life

and shining Your light through the lives of women
so that we might hear voices both bold and hidden.

We remember those women
who hold positions of power.

We pray for the Queen,
and her commitment to serve
the people of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth.

We remember women within the corridors of Government
who listen to the voices of constituents
and hope their voices can bring change.

Leader: Do not be afraid

ALL: FOR GOD IS RISEN AMONG US

We pray for those women
caught in abusive relationships.

We think of women who struggle to know kindness,
believing that love is shown in the harm caused by others;
those who have been told they are safe
by those who will use their bodies
as commodities for others.

Leader: Do not be afraid

ALL: FOR GOD IS RISEN AMONG US



We pray for women
who take pride in their image;
or in the abilities of their children and others;
and in doing so lose sight of the bigger picture -
the world that You seek to create
where all are recognised,
no matter who they are
or what their achievements might be.

Leader: Do not be afraid

ALL: FOR GOD IS RISEN AMONG US

Lord of life
as we celebrate Your presence
we also mark the passing of old ways and loved ones.
May the faith they have shown
offer markers of Your risen presence
as it transforms our loss
to new patterns of living.
Amen.



Meditation

Running through the garden
with the voices of shared anguish
playing in my thoughts,
I long for Your voice,
Your healing,
to restore the calm and still
it offered
as it cast out the overplayed voices of the past.

Where once I stood alone,
with You I have been offered a place,
a voice,
to speak of the hope of love rising.

Standing at the entrance of the tomb
it feels like I have been taken back in time
to stand at other doors and wonder
what the next stage in life will bring.

The door of the stable
as I waited Your arrival.

The door of the temple
having worried that You were lost.

The door of our home
when we failed You with a false accusation.



Once You were mine alone,
and now as Your life speaks of love
You give voice
to the hopes of the songs
of passing generations.

Caught clinging to the cloth that wrapped Your body
how humbled am I
to be here to share this moment?
How would I feel
if this had been my children?
My foolish pride saw only the crowds that followed,
and longed for them to have a special place in what was to come.
Your voice challenged me
to listen to the words that were being spoken
and discover how each talent,
each gift,
brought a fullness to the picture.
So in this moment
Your love of all
rises in my heart waiting to be told.



Transfixed by the dazzling brightness
of the message bearers,
they are not like those who carry messages to Herod
to tell him of the woes and troubles
of the people he governs.

Their uniforms are dirty
with the battles they begin
and the blood of those they bully.

The purity of the white portrays
the power of the other Kingdom
where strength is shown
in the love that allows another to hold
a differing opinion.

Listening to the fear-filled voices
we too have fled.

I am told that we should not linger,
and while I might want to stay in the comfort of others
and share the grief and lack of understanding,
I must follow social convention
and go where I am led
and do as I am told.

And on the journey as we share our story
with a stranger



who would know that our fearful story would speak of love?

In that love Your revealed presence

would spur my voice out of the hidden corner

and hurry it back to share the news.



Hymns

Pre-Easter

- CH4 383 While Mary was watching, they hung Jesus high
CH4 387 At the cross, her vigil keeping
CH4 399 My song is love unknown
CH4 403 Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Easter

- CH4 406 They crucified my Saviour and nailed him to the tree
CH4 407 Comes Mary to the grave
CH4 408 At dawn the women made their way
CH4 409 Jesus is risen. Alleluia
CH4 433 Haven't you heard that Jesus is risen?
CH4 434 Jesus is risen from the grave

Resurrection Response

- CH4 519 Love divine, all loves excelling
CH4 521 Children of God, reach out to one another
CH4 527 Lord makes us servants of your peace
CH4 532 Lord, you have come to the seashore
CH4 540 I heard the voice of Jesus say
CH4 685 For everyone born, a place at the table
CH4 694 Brother, sister, let me serve you

Restored Living

- CH4 716 Come and find the quiet centre
CH4 718 We cannot measure how you heal
CH4 722 Spirit of God, come dwell within me
CH4 724 Christ's is the world in which we move



Resources

As one of the writers I feel a little cheeky encouraging you to have a look at “Pray Now 2013”, however there are two pieces within the book that would work well within the theme of “Women and the Resurrection Stories”. The first is at Day 12, entitled “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanne and many others,” while the second is at Day 28, entitled “Cleopas and his companion.”

“Six New Gospels” by Margaret Hebblethwaite is worth a read, and offers interpretations of the stories of Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala.

I also found the following internet articles quite helpful.

<http://richardbauckham.co.uk/uploads/Accessible/The%20Women%20&%20the%20Resurrection.pdf>

<http://serene-musings.blogspot.co.uk/2009/10/role-of-women-in-resurrection.html>

<http://backseatwriter.wordpress.com/2010/04/07/the-women-of-the-resurrection/>



Additional Resources

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in Prayers. You may also be interested in looking at our publication **Pray Now 2013**. Please click [here](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine **Different Voices** which can be found [here](#).

Different Voices National Music Event

More information on the Different Voices event, taking place on 15 and 16 March, can be found [here](#).

To register for the event go [here](#).



Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for **what** you might preach this Sunday. If you would be interested in looking at our free materials on **how** you might preach, please click [here](#) to see our

[Preachers Perspectives](#) web page where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[Lent Symbol Sequence w/ Prayers](#)

[Alexander Halliday's hymn](#)

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to Rev MaryAnn Rennie for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

