

RESURRECTION JOY: THE WOMEN AT THE TOMB

I Corinthians 15: 3-5, 12-20; Luke 24: 1-12

Since we're still in the season of Easter, let's reflect on the resurrection of Jesus, and what it means. What did it mean to the folks back then, who first proclaimed it? And what does it mean to us?

We may ask: Why should it matter to us that someone allegedly rose from the dead 2000 years ago? What difference does it make today?

Is this just a dogma that we think were supposed to believe? Or is the resurrection of Jesus really a source of joy to us?

Certainly the event of the raising of Jesus was an enormous joy to the people who first proclaimed it, and Easter has always been, down through history and around the world, an occasion of great celebration.

I suggest it might be interesting to consider why the resurrection should have been such a joy to the women who discovered the empty tomb and encountered the risen Jesus on that first Easter. Let's try to see it through the eyes of a woman, one of the followers of Jesus way back then.

Take Susanna, for example, a woman mentioned just once in the New Testament, in Luke chapter 8, where she's one of the "many women" who went through the villages of Galilee with Jesus and the twelve disciples, proclaiming the Kingdom of God. We may guess that Susanna was also one of the nameless "other women" mentioned in this morning's resurrection text from Luke 24.

Luke tells us that they had come early on the first day of the week to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body, only to discover that the tomb was empty.

They had come out of devotion and reverence for Jesus, so that his body, viciously brutalized by crucifixion, might be treated with love, dignity and respect.

If you read the different accounts of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, you'll find that in all four gospels it's women who first discover the empty tomb and announce the resurrection of Jesus to the men.

If you compare the four resurrection stories you'll see that the details differ, as to who was there, whom they met at the tomb, and so on. Since all these details can't be accurate, we may guess there are some elements of legend in these narratives.

In John it's Mary Magdalene alone who discovers the tomb empty, and then meets the risen Jesus. In Mark it's three women: Mary Magdalene and two others; In Matthew it's just Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." In Luke, as we've read this morning, it's a

number of women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “the other women.”

A kind of committee, a small group of women, go together to weep over him, to say a final farewell, and to anoint his body, with special spices that they had prepared.

No surprise that the details differ. The four gospels were all written from different word of mouth sources, as events were remembered by various people in various places.

But they’re all agreed: Jesus was alive, and the women were the first to know. And for them, it was a reason for sheer joy.

When they told the men they dismissed the whole thing as an “idle tale” told by mere women – just a bit of silly gossip, until they too met the risen Christ.

We note, though, that the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, offers an account of the resurrection which omits the women altogether. According to Paul, it was Peter, then James, and then all the apostles, who discover the tomb and to whom Jesus first appeared.

So Paul forgets the women, and tells the story from the male perspective. I suppose we have to see this as a reflection of the swiftly developing dominance of men in the early Jesus movement.

It reflects the general marginalization and secondary position of women in that society, who were not taught to read, were not taught the scriptures, who did not count as witnesses in a court or law, did not count in a quorum for the gathering of a synagogue.

A woman only counted inasmuch as she belonged to a man, first a father, then a husband, then perhaps her sons. Her primary purpose in life was to bear children. It was so not only for the Jews, but among most ancient peoples, including the Romans and Greeks, and our own ancestors.

Now we know very little about any of these women. But who is this Susanna who was among the “many women” who accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem? This in itself was extraordinary: that women should be traveling about with a rabbi, together with twelve men.

We’ll come back to Susanna, but first, as an aside, we might note that in the gospels we encounter quite a number of women in the company of Jesus. You’re familiar with all these stories about Jesus with women. They give us a clue about why these women were devoted to Jesus, and what his resurrection meant to them.

There's the woman at the well, who is surprised that Jesus, a Jewish man, is talking to her, a Samaritan woman; he has a lengthy theological conversation with her about the right way to worship. Unheard of in that time, that a rabbi would be conversing with a woman, on an important subject, in a public place.

Then there is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha, who sat at Jesus' feet and talked with him. Mary was accused by Martha of leaving the kitchen work to her, to talk theology with the visiting rabbi, expecting to be waited on. It was not her place to do that.

But Jesus defended Mary's right, to depart from her limited female role, and to claim a man's prerogative.

Then, there's the woman taken in adultery, about to be stoned to death, a brutal, bloody form of execution. Jesus rescues her from the mob with the words: "Whoever is without sin, cast the first stone."

Jesus must have thought: "Where is the man with whom she committed adultery?"

And, remember the so-called "unclean" woman, (perhaps a known prostitute?) who enters the house of a Pharisee, and washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair, and anoints his head with precious ointment.

Jesus must have done something wonderful for her, to inspire such love. He defends her too against the harsh judgment of the Pharisee.

Recall the foreign woman, who challenged him that his mission was not only for the Jews, but for all people. She actually persuades Jesus, so that he changes his mind, and commends here for her wisdom. Remarkable!

These women are all nameless, but their stories give us a clue as to why they loved Jesus. He was entirely unconventional in his relationship with them. He taught them, defended them, included them among his followers, even learned from them, and finally, raised from the dead, he revealed himself first to them.

As for Susanna, we know very little about her – only that she was one of the many women among his followers.

Let me speculate, on the basis of what historians can tell us about the life of a woman in a Palestinian village at that time. Let's imagine the life of this peasant woman from Galilee, Susanna, who has joined the Jesus movement.

I suggest that Susanna was a woman of forty or so. She'd been married at 15, which was normal in those days, and her many children are grown up. That's why she's free to travel in the company of Jesus. She comes from Nazareth, that small village in the northern region of Galilee, where Jesus comes from.

Remember that at this time Judea is occupied by the Romans. It's an eastern outpost of the mighty Roman Empire. Nazareth is a little backwater village of the empire, totally at the mercy of the occupying power.

Most of the time the Romans ignore the village of Nazareth, and so the villagers live in peace most of the time, but once in a while, maybe once in a year or two, Roman soldiers appear in their village. They come heavily armed. They demand tribute in the name of Caesar: they bully and threaten the people, and grab whatever coins they can extract from them.

While they're at it, they rob the small gardens and fruit trees from which these subsistence farmers support themselves. They're looking for agricultural products to feed the resident army, who support themselves on the backs of the local peasantry.

On one occasion, when Susanna and her husband are home with their five young children, the dreaded Roman soldiers appear. When they begin to ravage Susanna's garden and fruit trees, her husband argues with them, tries to defend his land. "Go away, leave us alone!"

But it's hopeless. They beat him severely, have their way with Susanna, terrify the children, then take off with the products of a whole year's hard work, leaving them with nothing.

Sometimes the soldiers don't appear in that village for a year or two. But then the villagers may be visited by a Jewish tax collector who works for the Romans. Like the man Zacchaeus - you remember him? - the small man who climbed the tree to see Jesus go by, who was rich, because he collected taxes for the Romans.

The people hated the sight of him. Zacchaeus would come to collect coins from the people; if they refused, he would threaten that he would have to report them. "Better to pay me, it will be worse for you if the Romans come!"

This is the way colonialism works; by merciless exploitation of little local people, sometimes with the help of local traitors.

At root it's not only economic, but racist. To the Romans, the conquered people are "others," something less than human. It has worked that way with empires, and foreign occupiers in countless places around the world, all down through history.

Not unlike our own British colonialism with indigenous populations here in North America.

And let's face it, things like this still happen today – especially in places like Yemen, Afghanistan, Congo....

As for Susanna's situation: Within a few weeks, after the soldiers beat him, her husband has died of his wounds. Susanna is left a widow, grieving for her husband whom she loved, mother of five, struggling to feed the children, struggling just to exist.

Her life seems meaningless. She works so hard to make a life for herself and her children, but it all seems futile and hopeless. She wonders if her hardship is a punishment from God for her sins. She also wonders why she's alive at all. But she loves her children, and so she keeps on, keeping on.

One day the rabbi Yeshua, Jesus, comes by, visiting his hometown. He is strong and gentle and compassionate. He assures them that God does not condemn them, is not punishing them, that God loves them and is with them through all their suffering.

He teaches the people to live in solidarity with each other, to share what they have, to reach out to neighbours, especially those who have been excluded from respectable society, and widows and orphans, who are suffering so much.

Susanna learns that Jesus has inspired Zacchaeus no longer to extort tax money out of them. Because of Jesus, Zacchaeus has changed his life, and given money back to people that he had cheated. Zacchaeus no longer plagues them.

So things had improved since Jesus' visit. The people were pulling together, supporting one other, including the sick and the lame and the outcastes.

The next time Jesus came to the village, he was accompanied by his twelve friends, but also by a number of women who had joined them from various nearby villages.

Susanna thinks: "I can join them too." Her eldest daughter is old enough now to look after the children for awhile. "I'm going to join Jesus. It will be exciting!"

Together with the other women, she busied herself providing provisions for Jesus and his followers. They rounded up food, put it all on donkies, and off they went. Susanna even learned to speak out and to share Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God.

Eventually they ended up in Jerusalem at the time of Passover. Susanna is there waving palms on that first Palm Sunday. Then she saw him in the temple court attacking the money changers who were cheating and exploiting the people. She loved Jesus for his courage, but she knew this would get him in trouble.

On Friday of that week, Susanna was there among the other women, including Jesus' mother, as the twelve men disciples all fled, and Jesus was forced to carry his cross. Finally he was subjected to the terrible death of crucifixion. The women stood at a distance, and wept.

Susanna, and Joanna, and Mary, and the others, were in despair. They had hoped that Jesus was bringing a new kingdom, that a new era of justice and love was breaking into the world with him. He had given them such joy and such hope.

But he had been defeated. Utterly defeated and humiliated. All she could do now was to go back to her village, like the other women, and return to her hopeless, miserable life.

The women, having wept and consoled one another for two days, went to the tomb on the first of the week to say a last good bye to their beloved rabbi and friend, and to honour him by anointing his body.

And that's when the resurrection story began.

Years ago, my wife Pat wrote a poem about the sheer joy of these women. Part of it went like this:

In a clear blue dawn
the women are dancing
down the road,
laughing, arms raised,
fingers snapping,
feet light in the cool morning dust
gleeful that their rabbi
and friend
has escaped the cruelty of Romans,
Sadducees, and Death,
by a shimmering miracle,
a divine sleight of hand,
freed into a future
of God's choosing,
hopeful that where
he has gone
they may one day follow.¹

Consider what this means to a woman like Susanna. She's going back now to her village. The Romans are still in charge. Her life is still going to be very hard.

She's not always going to be exuberantly happy, as she was on that first Easter morning. But her joy will remain. Despite all the ups and downs of life, in spite of tragedies and hardships, her joy remains. It's a steady underlying confidence and hope.

¹ Patricia Wells, "Looking to the Light," in *Singing a Song of Faith*, ed. Nancy E. Hardy (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007), p. 122.

Because Christ is risen, she sees the world now in a whole different light. She has been “freed into a future,” which will often be dark, but in that future she will never be without that light of the risen Christ, never without his continuing strong presence and promise.

Because Jesus has been proved the victor over the evil powers that oppress her. All that he taught has been vindicated. His teaching about God is true. His way is the true way. To be just, and loving, to be generous and compassionate, is not foolishness after all, but the true wisdom.

Besides that, because he has conquered the power of the grave, death is no longer the last disaster, the ultimate defeat, but rather, a door into God’s future.

Susanna’s life has meaning now. Yes, still to work hard to survive and help raise her grandchildren, but now also: to reach out to people around her who are in need, to embrace and include those outcast people on the margins.

She feels able now to love God, who has loved her and reached out to her in Christ, and she feels able now to love her neighbours, and even to forgive her enemies. Susanna has a new lease on life!

It’s no accident that poor and oppressed people all over the world respond to the resurrection faith with enthusiasm. Notably, the black slaves of America, and after slavery, the black church, for whom Jesus, crucified and risen, is truly the Master, on whom they depend, in whom they hope.

No surprise that this faith spread like wild fire among the enslaved and poor classes of the Roman empire. The resurrection gospel gave them dignity and hope. Eventually they helped bring the Empire down.

Yes, the moment of the raising of Jesus has turned out to be, arguably, the most consequential moment in all of human history.

No accident that the church in its many forms still grows rapidly among the poor in what is called ‘the third world’.

But what does the resurrection mean to us, to prosperous, comfortable people like us, all these centuries later?

Well, maybe we’re so used to this old story, it ceases to astonish us. Maybe it’s rather ho-hum. Maybe we find it a little hard to believe. Perhaps we find ways to explain it away: Was it just a kind of wishful thinking, a story made up by the women to console themselves? A false story? A lie? Or a delusion?

There are different ways to interpret the resurrection event; God's self-disclosure is always veiled, not forceful, but gentle. We can choose to believe the witnesses or not.

For the eyes of faith, it's an event of transcendence, the eternity of God breaking into time and history.

But maybe we have some of the same needs as Susanna and the other women, and the twelve men disciples as well.

We're not oppressed and abused like they were, but we all have our own sorrows and tragedies, large or small, we all have feelings of guilt and inadequacy, we all must finally face death, both our own and of our loved ones.

In our time, many of us, maybe especially young people, ask whether life in this world has any meaning at all. Many of us are tempted, at times, to despair about what goes on in this world: the poverty and violence, the pandemic, climate change....

But if we reflect seriously on the resurrection, if we absorb its meaning deeply into our lives, we may find it will change our whole outlook on life and the world. Consider the enormous implications if it's true.

Faith in the risen Christ may save us from a cynical outlook that says: this world is a rotten place, and there's nothing we can do about it. Better take care of Number One.

This faith may empower us to live creatively. It may give us a quiet joy, that deep underlying hope and confidence that, as our creed says:

"We are not alone. We live in God's world...." because "Jesus, crucified and risen," is "our Judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. Thanks be to God!"

Amen.

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April 18, 2021