

## “The First Female Apostle”

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Lawrence Park Community Church  
March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
[John 4: 5-30; 39-42](#)

It was International Women’s Day on Wednesday, so it seems appropriate that the lectionary has chosen this famous story of the woman at the well. This story is revolutionary in its message, although the Christian church has tried very hard to tell us otherwise. This story could have changed the history of the church, for the better. And maybe it still can. So let me walk you through why this story is so inspiring, and so dangerous to Christian churches.

Today’s passage finds Jesus and his disciples making their way home to Galilee. Jesus has just met with Nicodemus in Jerusalem, which we heard about last week. To get back to Galilee, they need to walk through Samaria.<sup>1</sup> It is always a risky part of the journey. The Jews and the Samaritans don’t get along – the Samaritans believe in the one God, but they disagree about how to worship. When you walk into a Samaritan town, it is always possible they will tell visiting Jews to get lost, to keep moving (e.g., Luke 9:53).

The scripture tells us that the disciples have gone into town to get some food. They’ve left Jesus behind, at high noon. This is the Middle East, so this is the time of day when it is hottest, and the sun is strongest, being right over head. No one wants to be doing hard labour at this time of day. Yet, this is when a lone woman approaches the well to get water. Water is heavy. Carrying water is very hard work. Not something you want to do at the hottest time of day. But here she is. She’s come later than everyone else. This well is usually busy at the beginning of the day<sup>2</sup> before it gets hot, with lots of women and children with their jugs, a time for talking and laughter. But this woman hasn’t come with them. She comes alone.

As we hear later, she is an outcast. She has been married five times, and now she’s with a man she isn’t even married to. Is she infertile, divorced by one husband after another? Or perhaps she has been part of a Levirate marriage, which was common among Jews at the time. If your first husband dies, you have to marry his brother to keep the family name going. And if he does, the next brother marries you.<sup>3</sup> There were many ways of having multiple husbands: divorce, death, infertility. We can’t know her exact circumstances, but we can be sure she has had a hard life, and now she has to get her water alone, when no one else is around.

But this time, she’s not alone. Jesus is there. He’s a Jew, she’s a Samaritan – they shouldn’t talk. He’s a strange man, a drifter, talking to a lone woman. She has no chaperone. He shouldn’t talk

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.jesuswalk.com/john/08\\_well.htm](https://www.jesuswalk.com/john/08_well.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2561-the-woman-at-the-well-2>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2561-the-woman-at-the-well-2>

to her until he has permission,<sup>4</sup> from her husband or her family. He's a loner, someone who could assault her and disappear. She is probably praying that he won't say a word, that he'll ignore her, so she can just get her water and move on right away. This could end badly.

Jesus knows all of this, and he talks to her anyway. She's shocked. Jesus says things she never thought she would hear from anyone. He treats her with respect. He offers her the greatest gift anyone can receive – the living water that grants eternal life. At first, she thinks this is literal water, she doesn't get what he is talking about. She's like Nicodemus, who couldn't understand what being born again meant.

So, Jesus gives her an out. He says, go back to town and get your husband. This is her chance to run away, under the fiction that she has protection from a husband. But then things get real. She must sense that there is something special, and safe, about Jesus, because she tells the truth. "I have no husband." This is the turning point. You don't get spiritual awareness without brutal honesty about yourself. It's hard, but it's necessary. If you want big "T" truth, you have to come ready with your own truth. Since she's gotten real, Jesus returns the favour. He shows that he has the powers of a prophet, he knows her life without ever having met her before. he tells her that she has five husbands, and isn't married to her current man.

Now she realizes he may be the messiah. They talk theology for a while, getting deeper and deeper into the Truth. In the gospel of John, she is the first person Jesus tells that he is the Messiah. Nicodemus didn't get that, but she does. She is so excited by this that she leaves her jar at the well, and she goes back to town. She tells everyone about him, saying that he could be the Messiah. She has become an Apostle. It's a Greek word that means someone who is sent. Jesus had told her to go back to town, and she did. She arrived proclaiming the news about Jesus as the Messiah. That's what Apostles do. And she's done it before any of the male disciples who travel with Jesus. She preached the good news first, sent by Jesus, serving as an Apostle.

By rights, this woman should be in stained glass windows all over the world. She should have a name, just like Peter and Andrew and James do. She should be remembered as the first woman preacher.

In the East, the Greek Orthodox church does see her as equal to the male Apostles. They gave her a name, Photini, which means the enlightened one.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.jesuswalk.com/john/08\\_well.htm](https://www.jesuswalk.com/john/08_well.htm)



Here is one of her icons. They have legends about her, preaching in Africa, and travelling to Rome to try to convert the emperor Nero.<sup>5</sup> She is revered, not forgotten.

But Western Christianity went in another direction. She was dismissed as a sinful woman, promiscuous, with five husbands. We don't even know her name. She was not considered an apostle, that was a man's job.

And that cast a long shadow on the faith. To this day, there are many denominations of Christianity where women are not allowed to preach. Women still can't be priests in Roman Catholic Churches, even at a time when there is a dire shortage of male priests. Worldwide, 60% of all churches do not allow women to be ministers or to preach.<sup>6</sup> In Canada, half of all Christians attend churches where women can't preach.<sup>7</sup> Within the United Church of Canada, it is better - 40% of our ministers are women.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://womensordinationcampaign.org/blog-working-for-womens-equality-and-ordination-in-the-catholic-church/2020/2/26/0lxuekybneo4kr4naxadcjicgeidag>

<sup>6</sup> 50% of the world is Catholic, 11.9% is Orthodox. Major Christian Traditions pie chart: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

<sup>7</sup> Catholics make up 10.9 million Christians, out of a total of 19.3 million Christians overall.

<sup>8</sup> <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/united-church-statistics-dec2019.pdf>

Why are women not allowed to preach? Jesus let Photini preach, and he came back and stayed for two days in that town. He wasn't offended, he was delighted with what she had done. So why did the church decide that women can't be preachers and apostles?

The answer lies not in the gospels, but in the letters of Paul. In one of his letters to his colleague Timothy, he wrote:

**<sup>34</sup> Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. <sup>35</sup> If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35)<sup>9</sup>**

### On me

If you want to understand the schisms in modern Christianity, many of them can be traced back to whether we listen to Jesus or Paul. Paul is critical of homosexuality. Jesus never mentions it. Paul is against pre-marital sex. Jesus never mentions it. Paul is a consistent defender of traditional patriarchal values, whereas Jesus explicitly attacks the family. He tells us that if we want to be faithful followers, we should leave our families behind. \* When the Pharisees ask Jesus about heaven, they mention a woman who has been widowed seven times – which of those men will be her husband in heaven? Jesus replies none of them – women aren't subject to family rules in heaven ( Matthew 22:30). Heaven is meant to be an escape from the burdens of earthly life, which for women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, meant arranged marriages and being treated like property.

Jesus very clearly sees beyond the patriarchal family, he's interested in human freedom and thriving. Family brings you into the world, but you don't need to be tied down by it for ever. Paul, and the patriarchal men who wrote the gospels did not agree with Jesus on this. So, when Jesus does radical things like converting a shunned woman at a well, John the gospel writer is in a bind. This woman founded the Christian community in this part of Samaria. Her story cannot be left out. But John can steal her name. Make her anonymous. Make Jesus seem like the hero of the story. Wasn't it nice that he spoke to this sinful woman on this hot day?

More and more Canadians are leaving Christianity behind, frustrated by its rules and old ways. Much of that is because so many churches have embraced the traditional values in Paul's letters. The radical message that Jesus embodied and preached is watered down and ignored. We're still not ready to drink his living water, where even the most despised woman in the town is whom he chooses to speak to. If Jesus were at a well today, it is likely that he would wait for a woman of colour, perhaps a queer woman of colour; someone waiting on tables, or cleaning an office late at night while everyone else sleeps. Perhaps an undocumented woman. Someone whom society oppresses in multiple ways. Someone invisible. Just like the woman who came to the well when no one else was there.

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<sup>9</sup> See also 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

And here's one of the radical messages of this story. It is the woman everyone else has rejected who is the one who gets saved first. But she doesn't keep this secret to herself. Instead, she goes back to the town where she is shunned, and she spreads the good news. Not for herself, but for everyone's benefit. She came to the well to be alone, but now she wants to talk to everyone, to save everyone, to share this good news. She must have been some kind of preacher to get their attention, for them to listen to this woman who had been passed around like damaged goods. This woman, the enlightened one, was the one who convinced the whole town to come see this Messiah at the well. And then he came back with them, and stayed, for two days. Jews and Samaritans together, a rupture healed. The impossible suddenly possible.

This story tells us that the liberation of the one can bring the liberation of everyone. Especially if that person is the most oppressed. When we see the humanity of those we have pushed away, everyone's humanity is enriched. We have a long way to go before we will catch up with Jesus and his revolutionary message. Our churches have a long way to go before women can preach and tell their truth in every pulpit on this planet. But we can be thankful that the bravery and honesty of this unnamed woman is still with us, despite the prejudices of the gospel writers, her message is still here, still, by the grace of God. Calling us to wake up, to start drinking and sharing this living water.

Amen.