

Eyewitness to Easter: The Women

Today is Palm Sunday, the day Jesus fulfilled Messianic prophecies and rode down the Mount of Olives and into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt. The narrow road down the hillside was lined with people, pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover. It was the perfect time for the Messiah to reveal himself. Among the disciples and others lining the road that day were women who were devoted followers of Jesus and that's who we are talking about today in our Eyewitness to Easter series.

Women had been followers and supporters of Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. Luke mentions some of these by name in his gospel. **“Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.” Luke 8:1-3**

The role women played in the final week of Jesus' life is often overlooked. Many aren't mentioned by name, but you'll find them at key moments and points all along the story of Jesus and the events of this week. For instance, it was during this final week that Jesus was having dinner in Bethany at the home of a man known as Simon the Leper. Mark tells us a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, broke open the jar and poured the perfume on Jesus. When some protested, Jesus said “She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.” Mark 14:8 While the men were yet to understand that Jesus was headed to the cross, it was a woman who understood and showed this extravagant love for Jesus.

It was a woman, an unnamed servant who confronted Peter in the courtyard of Caiphas as Jesus was being interrogated. She wouldn't allow Peter to get away with hiding, forcing his hand. He denied the Lord, but it was I think a turning point for him as afterward Peter had to confront his own pretension and pride and his denial. It meant a change in Peter's heart and life.

It was a woman, the wife of Pilate who warned her powerful husband to have nothing to do with sentencing this innocent man Jesus to his death. Women followed Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem to the cross. Luke writes, **“A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned to them and said to them, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your**

children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’” Luke 23:27-29

The gospel writers record that among the Twelve disciples, only John was present at the cross, but the women were there. **“Many women were there [at the cross], watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.” Matthew 27:55-56** They followed him all the way to the cross.

John, along with Jesus’ mother, her sister, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross as Jesus made provision for the care of his mother with the apostle John. They watched him die and watched his burial. Luke tells us, **“The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.” Luke 23:55-56** Luke continues, **“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...the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!’...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.” Luke 24:1-10**

The women were the last to leave the burial site after Joseph of Arimathea rolled the stone in place and they were the first to return after the Sabbath, the first to see the empty tomb, to hear and deliver the message from the angels that Jesus had risen from the dead. John tells of Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus, mistaking him for the gardener until he spoke her name and then she ran to tell Peter and John, “I have seen the Lord. He is risen!” As I said, women play a crucial role in the events of this Holy Week. How extraordinary that women were given the task of announcing his resurrection. The testimony of women was generally not accepted in Jewish courts, they were marginalized by society, but never by Jesus, and not by heaven. Instead, they are integral to the story, from beginning to the end and beyond. I think it’s fair to say “Ladies, young and old, God has a place and a plan for you in his kingdom. Don’t doubt it.”

In the remainder of our time, I want to talk specifically about a couple of the women who followed Jesus all the way to the cross. Notice the diversity we find among the women following Jesus. We spent an entire sermon on Mary Magdalene. Jesus cast seven demons out of her and changed her life forever. We don't know the details as we pointed out in that message, but it is certainly fair to assume that her life was broken and shattered before she encountered Jesus and he set her free. From living in bondage to demonic forces, her life out of control, to this woman of faith, so devoted to Jesus she was the last to leave the tomb and the first to arrive the morning of the resurrection. What a difference Jesus makes in the life of those who come to him. He wants to make that kind of difference in your life as well. He can change you!

Think about Mary the mother of Jesus. Consider her incredible journey of obedience and faith. From that morning as a young teenager when the angel Gabriel visited her and told her she had been chosen as the one to bear the Son of the Living God, the Messiah, to the extraordinary birth in Bethlehem heralded by angels and witnessed by shepherds, Mary's yes to Gabriel and to the will of the Father, **"I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you have said."** **Luke 1:38** changed everything, for Mary and for the whole world!

Remember the words of Simeon to Mary as she and Joseph brought the infant Jesus into the temple. **"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."** **Luke 2:34-35** Luke tells us in that same chapter that Mary treasured all these things in her heart. It's what any mother would do, what any mother does, treasuring all the hopes and dreams for what your child will be, what he will become. Imagine Mary as she watches Jesus, her son, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, make the lame walk, raise the dead, but now imagine what she experiences as she stands helpless at the foot of the cross, what grief and pain she bears as she watches her innocent, perfect, sinless son die on that cross. Indeed, a sword pierces her soul.

Mary, is there regret? Would you change anything, do anything differently if you could do it all over again? I don't think so. It was her relative Elizabeth who said to Mary, "blessed are you among women." But sometimes blessing is accompanied by pain, by sacrifice, like the blessing of childbirth and labor, like the blessing of surrender as Mary once again has to say in her heart at the cross, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Jesus's story doesn't end at the cross, and neither does Mary's. She is there at the empty tomb, marveling and rejoicing. We see her again in Acts 1. Luke tells us the disciples and other followers of Jesus gather in the upper room to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as Jesus instructed. **"They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers."** Acts 1:14 Mary, the one who bore the incarnate God, is filled with His Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Mary, chosen of God, blessed among women, full of grace, still needed and desired the anointing and presence and power of the Holy Spirit in her life. We do too! Like Mary, let's stay hungry for more!

Among the women mentioned by name in Luke 8 is Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household. From Mary Magdalene with a troubled past to Mary the mother of Jesus, this innocent peasant girl from the tiny village of Nazareth, to Joanna, this woman of means and influence. Cuza, her husband holds a position of oversight on the staff of Herod Antipas. Joanna no doubt has means and money, access to doctors and medical care, but apparently she has a sickness that money and doctors couldn't correct. She hears of Jesus, the cousin of John the Baptist, the prophet her husband's boss had beheaded. "Would he even see me if he knows who I am and who my husband works for?" As we might expect, Jesus heals Joanna, and this connected, influential woman is brought to a place of belief in and surrender to Jesus. From then on she is a devoted follower. She followed him throughout his ministry in the Galilee, helping to support Jesus and the disciples. She followed him to Jerusalem and is one of the women at the cross and at the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning.

I love the fact she was married to someone in Herod's household. Daniel Darling writes, **"Joanna didn't really belong among the mix of disciples, both because she was a woman but also because she was part of a despised insider ruling class, a dysfunctional and corrupt palace...yet where it seems the message of Christ might least likely take root, in this insulated, ungodly place, is the very place where the gospel had its healing work...Joanna's story reminds us that God seeks and saves in the least likely places, that God's light shines in the most hideously dark places."**...Daniel Darling No one is beyond God's reach and God's grace, not even Herod! Jesus' love reaches from the demon possessed Mary Magdalene to Joanna and the palace of the king. Imagine Joanna sharing Jesus in Herod's household. He can use you to share Jesus in unlikely places like Herod's palace, or your school or workplace or neighborhood. Keep sharing the good news. The darker the night, shine brighter for Jesus!

One last woman I want us to consider is Salome. Only Mark's gospel refers to her by name, but church tradition identifies Salome as the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John. If you remember, James and John were fishermen, like their father, and partners in business with Peter and his brother. It appears the whole family was committed to following Jesus. Zebedee didn't object when his two sons left the family business to follow Jesus. He stayed home to keep the business while Salome was one of the women who followed Jesus and served him and the disciples as they ministered from place to place. Salome is one of the women who was at the cross "watching from a distance" and also one of the ones who went to the tomb early on Sunday morning.

Salome is the mother who went to Jesus along with her sons James and John to ask for a favor. James and John were called the sons of Thunder. Maybe Salome was the thunder in the family! "What is it you want? Jesus asked. Salome said, **"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."** Matthew 20:21 Sarah told us two Sundays ago how well that went over with the other disciples. Jesus said, **"You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"** **"We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup..."** Matthew 20:22-23

They didn't know what they were asking. They were thinking about thrones and glory, not suffering and servanthood. They answered his question pretty quickly, didn't they, without much thought. "Yes we can drink the cup." They didn't know Jesus was talking about the cup of sorrow and suffering as he surrendered to death on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins. But He was right. They did drink from that cup. James was the first of the apostles to be martyred in Jerusalem by Herod Antipas (Acts 12). John lived the longest of all the apostles but was exiled on the island of Patmos for his faith.

Neither James nor John nor their mother, Salome, understood what they were asking that day, but we find John and Salome at the cross. John was standing next to Jesus' mother as Jesus asks John to care for her. Salome is with the other ladies watching at a distance. Thoughts of thrones and prestige and power were all gone that day. Warren Wiersbe writes, **"What were Salome and John thinking about as they saw Jesus hanging there? No doubt they were ashamed that they had asked Him for thrones, for nothing purifies one's motives and clarifies one's prayers like a vision of the cross of Jesus Christ."** ...Warren Wiersbe

Picture yourself with Salome and John. Can you see Jesus on the cross, dying for you, taking your place, bearing your guilt, your sin? What is your response to his sacrifice? “Nothing purifies one’s motives and clarifies one’s prayers like a vision of the cross of Jesus Christ.”

Isaac Watts in his great hymn wrote,

“When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died,

My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it Lord that I should boast save in the death of Christ my God;

All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.” ...Isaac Watts

Thrones and power, dreams and ambition, silver and gold, all our desire for riches, all of our sources of pride fade as we survey the cross, as we watch Jesus, the innocent Son of God suffering, dying, giving his life for us so that we could be saved and have eternal life. Salome understood that day. It’s not about getting a throne for ourselves or our children, it’s about surrendering our lives. There is every reason to believe Salome was one of the women in that upper room along with Mary the mother of Jesus and the disciples when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost. She wanted power for her sons, but it was a different kind of power they all received as they surrendered their all to Jesus.

Inspired by the lives of these women, let me ask, what about you? Will you say like Mary, “I am the Lord’s servant...May it be to me as you have said.” Will you surrender to his will? Like Joanna, will you choose to be a living testimony for Jesus? Will you let your light shine even in the dark places like Herod’s palace? Like Salome, will you look to Jesus on the cross and then surrender your ambition and desire for thrones and earthly power and instead, seek only Him and that power from on high? “Oh Lord, make us more like these women that followed you with such devotion!” If you are ready to surrender yourself to the Lord’s will, would you join me in prayer?