

“THE WOMEN IN JESUS’ LIFE”  
(Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; Matthew 27:55-56)  
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-I-

1. [BOTH services:...] Read NRSV Text: Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; Matthew 27:55-56 and Pray.
2. Mother’s Day is, of course, a day for us to give thanks to God for our mothers, and for the important role and influence that they’ve played in our lives.

A–But in addition to our *mothers*, it’s also a day to honor ALL the women of our lives, who’ve helped to shape us into who we are today.

B–So as we’re considering this today, I’d like us to take time to briefly look at “*The Women of Jesus’ Life*,” and how (like us) he was who he was – in large part – because of them.<sup>1</sup>

C–Now to understand this, we first have to appreciate the cultural context of first-century Judaism in which Jesus lived and ministered, and how women in that culture were both **Revered** and **Scorned** at the same time.

3. For example, on the one hand, a man of that time would go to great lengths and pay almost any price to attract a good woman as his wife.

A–And once she was, He provided protection, guidance, identity, and treasured her to the point of even being willing to give his life for her.

B–This attitude is reflected in Proverbs 31:10 which says, “*A good wife who can find; she is far more precious than jewels...*”

4. But on the other hand, women were *not* considered to be equal with men, either. Quite the contrary: in both the secular and religious culture of Jesus’ day, women were considered *inferior* in all respects.

A–For instance, they were generally viewed as ignorant, immoral, and as a source of evil because they represented the sexual temptation that was passed down from Eve.<sup>2</sup>

1–In the legal system of the time, women were considered little more than property.

2–They weren’t allowed to own homes or businesses, and because their testimony wasn’t considered trustworthy, they weren’t permitted to testify in courts of law.

B–Whenever they were out in public, their heads had to be veiled, and the only males to which they were allowed to speak were their sons or husbands.

C–They no outward or visible ritual designating them as part of God’s covenant people (like male circumcision),<sup>3</sup> so they weren’t allowed in the inner courts of the Jerusalem Temple,<sup>4</sup> nor were they allowed to be Priests or Rabbis.

1–In fact, they weren’t even allowed to be *disciples* of Rabbis, or to have the scriptures taught *to* them *by* Rabbis.

2–The first-century Rabbi Eliezer once wrote, “*Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman.*”<sup>5</sup>

D–The bottom line is that in Jesus’ day, a woman’s place was in the kitchen, or by the well, or in the fields, and their primary job was to birth and raise the children, and look after the household – they had no business learning (much less teaching) religious things.

–II–

5. And it was against this patriarchal and sexist backdrop of Jewish society that Jesus came preaching a radical message of social elevation and equality between men and women,<sup>6</sup> and today’s three scriptures in fact represent merely a *sampling* of this message – so, let’s look at each of them in turn:

A–In Luke 8:1-3, we have an example of women who were part of Jesus’ entourage who *followed* him from place to place just like a disciple would (which is *not* what women were supposed to do back then!).<sup>7</sup>

1–Some of them (like Mary Magdalene) had been healed by Jesus, and at least the ones described here (Joana and Susanna, and “*many others*”) were women of importance and financial means, because (Verse 3 says) they “*provided for [Jesus and the 12] out of their resources.*”

2– What’s the old cliché? “*Behind every successful man is ... a surprised mother in law*” right? (well that too!) But no... “*...A women*” ( or in this case *many* women!)

3–And interestingly enough, the Greek word translated here as “*provide*” (*diakoneo*) literally means “*to minister*,” revealing an early biblical example of women in “*ministry*” based upon the literal meaning of the word.

B–Consider also the Luke 10:38-42 story of Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha:

1–The very fact that it was a home owned by Martha is interesting in itself, because women in that day weren’t allowed to own property.

2–So what’s even more remarkable is that Jesus would dare accept an invitation to come to the home of someone who so blatantly defied Jewish custom.<sup>8</sup>

3–What’s more: Verse 39 says that Martha’s sister Mary was “*sitting at Jesus’ feet.*”

(a) Now, more than simply describing a *physical* posture, this was a technical phrase that referred to a disciple / pupil being taught by a Rabbi.

(b) But again, since women weren’t permitted to *be* disciples, it’s remarkable that Jesus not only allowed Mary to do it, but then also chided *Martha* for *not* doing it!

4–You see, Jesus was signaling here that he had come to call not just men but also women to be his disciples & followers – & that was radical for his day & time! <sup>9</sup>

C–Then, too, consider Matthew 27’s description of the women who remained at the cross when all of the (male) disciples fled (Verses 55-56) . <sup>10</sup>

1–Verse 55 says that these “*many women... had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.*”

2–Again, the Greek word “*follow*” (*akoloutheo*) is the term usually used in the four Gospels for “Discipleship” in its fullest sense of one who both *learns* AND one who *tells/shares* with others. <sup>11</sup>

–III–

6. Now, in addition to these three, there are plenty of *other* examples of how Jesus’ response and ministry to/with women was revolutionary for that day, <sup>12</sup> and you can read about some of these in the endnotes of my sermon transcript (find in Narthex or online). <sup>13</sup>

A–But in these three we see just a glimpse of how Jesus consistently elevated women *above* the traditional Jewish stereotypes of the day, and in fact empowered them to be *partners* (equals!) in ministry for his kingdom.

B–So my question is: if Jesus encouraged women to learn FROM him, to minister TO him, and to be preachers and teachers FOR him, then shouldn’t we do the same?

7. Now, I know that some of you have been raised in Christian traditions in which women were not (and still are not) allowed to preach, or teach, or be leaders in the church.

A–And no doubt some of you can even quote to me certain scriptures that (on the surface) seem to support that view <sup>14</sup> – well, I’m not going to belittle your upbringing.

B–But I *do* want to lovingly challenge *all* of us to explore the *whole* Bible in this regard, and not just a few “pet texts” which are often misunderstood & read out of out of context –...

C–...Because it’s my belief that when we understand the Bible as a *whole*, what we find is *not* a God who *limits* women (OR men) to certain roles or positions in life (or in the church), but who instead elevates both sexes to being *equals* in His sight. <sup>15</sup>

8. So, if Jesus' mission, ministry, and message had this kind of result for the people of *His* day, then shouldn't the gospel *we* preach and proclaim do the same for people *today*?

A—And if the “*Women of Jesus' Life*” help us understand God's power to *overcome* human boundaries and stereotypes,...

B—...Then isn't our role merely to claim that power, offer it to others, and then thank Him for His presence among us through our mothers and all women?

9. [PRAY]

### **ENDNOTES:**

1. After all, our desire as Christians should be to know Jesus and to do the kinds of things that he did. So, by understanding how Jesus responded to women and what role they played in HIS ministry, I believe we can begin to catch a glimpse of how we as men and women are meant to relate together today.
2. This is illustrated in the fact that if a woman gave birth to a boy, there was *great* celebration. If she gave birth to a girl, there was *some* celebration, but *nothing* like that of a boy.
3. This would be the equivalent of us not baptizing girls today, for Baptism (like Jewish circumcision) is the Christian's outward and visible sign of God's covenant. Judaism later developed a corollary ritual practice for girls, but in Jesus' day it was assumed that females would be covered and included in God's covenant only under the circumcision of the males to which they were attached.
4. You may recall that the Temple was configured so that there were several spaces: (a) The Court of the Gentiles where anyone could come and worship God; (b) The Court of the Women where women were allowed; (c) But closest to the “Holy of Holies” (where God supposedly dwelled), there as a Court where only men were allowed.
5. Rabbi Eliezer, cited in J. Lee Grady, 10 Lies The Church Tells Women, p. 10. Along this same line, in the synagogues of the day the men and women were segregated -- the men sat in the main room where they could hear the Rabbi, but the women had to sit in a separate ante-chamber, where they may or may not hear what the Rabbi said. After all (so the logic went) it didn't really matter if the women couldn't hear, because since they were basically ignorant anyway, their husbands could explain things to them when they got home.
6. One Bible scholar has noted that “*All four gospels represent Jesus as accepting women to an astonishing degree, and in ways which contrast sharply with [most] of his Jewish contemporaries*” (Ruth B. Edwards, The Case for Women's Ministry, p. 40). Of course, because women's rights are so important today (imperfect as they may be), we often take for granted the revolutionary aspect of Jesus' bold efforts to elevate women in a society that degraded them.
7. Although in the Bible the term “disciples” is sometimes used to refer only to the inner twelve who left their homes and literally followed Jesus (and who WERE all men), biblically the word “disciple” also referred to a larger group of others who “followed” Jesus by remaining in their own towns and villages, patiently waiting for the reign of God. Granted, this latter group also consisted mostly of men (like Lazarus, Zacchaeus, and possibly Joseph of Arimathea), but it almost certainly also included a number of the women here mentioned. In fact, this scripture (Luke 8:1-3) seems to imply that there WERE women who were even part of the FIRST category of “disciple” -- those who went against tradition and left their homes and children

to literally follow Jesus and became his entourage who “provided for him.”

One biblical scholar summarizes it this way, “*Although these women do not preach in synagogues like the men, they are clearly disciples in a real sense of the word: they are taught by Jesus, they serve him personally, and they bear witness to him*” (Ruth B. Edwards, The Case for Women’s Ministry, p. 46).

8. In some Jewish circles, Jesus’ very act of accepting this invitation and going to Martha’s home could have been considered immoral and unethical.

9. And one important implication of this fact is that if women were invited to *learn* from Jesus, then wouldn’t it also follow that they could be commissioned to teach others *about* Him? Consequently, I believe this to be one (of many) scriptures which affirms God’s call for women to be pastors and teachers in today’s church.

10. This story (Matthew 27:55-56) is also found in Mark 15:40-41.

11. This term is also used in Mark 2:14 and Matthew 8:19-22.

12. Bible scholar Lee Grady summarizes this message by saying that “*Jesus went out of his way to challenge the cultural biases against women that were pervasive in Israel during the New Testament era*” (J. Lee Grady, 10 Lies The Church Tells Women, p. 10). Another author parallels this thought: “*Jesus raised the window for women. He paid attention to them. His manner was inclusive and acknowledged their place in the kingdom He proclaimed. By what He did and what He said He elevated the status of woman.... The final barrier preventing woman from fully participating in the kingdom of God toppled under Jesus’ influence*” [From the article “Women” in the Holman Bible Dictionary].

13. For example:...

(1) Consider the Luke 1 accounts of the births of John the Baptist & Jesus -- accounts which went against tradition by being told from the point of view of the *mothers* (Elizabeth & Mary). These two stories are found in Luke 1:5-24 and Luke 1:26-38, respectively. In that day and time, these stories should have been more properly told from the point of view of the *father*, NOT of the *mother* (Note that in the gospel of Matthew, the emphasis IS upon the father, Joseph, rather than upon Mary).

(2) And what about Anna in the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2:36-38), who defied Jewish custom by prophesying a blessing upon the baby Jesus?

(3) Later in his public ministry, some of Jesus’ most dramatic healings, miracles, and acts of forgiveness involved *women* in a day and time where *men* were the more usual the recipients of such ministry. For example, when Jesus began his public ministry, he began by healing Peter’s mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15, Mark 1:30-31, Luke 4:38-39), and later performs other miracles of healing, forgiveness, and restoration for women: the widow of Nain, who’s dead son was raised by Jesus (Luke 7:11-17); Jairus’ 12-year old dead daughter who was raised (Luke 8:40-42, 49-56); the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years who was healed (Luke 8:43-48); the “sinful woman” who anointed Jesus’ feet with her hair and received his forgiveness (Luke 7:36-50); and the story of Jesus’ forgiveness and restoration of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11).

(4) Consider also the story of the “Woman at the Well” (John 4:7-30): Here, what seems to be a normal action to us (i.e., Jesus talking with her) was really a dramatic, radical act that went against every societal & cultural norm of his day. Not only were Jews not to speak to *Samaritans*, but remember that males were not to speak to *females* in public, period! Yet Jesus did, and after her conversion, when the women went and told everyone in her village about Jesus... they all responded to her message! (John 4:29-30) Isn’t this a perfect example of an effective woman preacher?

(5) Finally, remember that not only were women the *last* to be with Jesus at the cross, but they were

also the *first* to experience and *tell others* about his resurrection! (Read Mark 16:1-8; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1, 11-18). For me, this is even more biblical evidence in support of women pastors – i.e., the first human to literally “preach the gospel” of Jesus’ resurrection was not a man, but a *woman* (Mary Magdalene)! And interestingly enough, the men disciples of *that* day responded to Mary the way some men respond to female pastors today: they didn’t believe her! (Read See Mark 16:11; Luke 24:9-11).

(6) The case for the importance of women in ministry becomes even stronger with the beginnings of the early church. Even with the apostle Paul, despite the few scriptures that seem to indicate him denying women a calling to preach, Paul’s own Letters give even *more* examples in which he not only goes against his own cultural biases against women being in such roles, but assumes that in the kingdom of God such roles for women should and would be perfectly natural, and indeed *expected!* -- that women would preach, teach, be clergy, etc. See for example 1 Corinthians 11:5; Galatians 3:28; Philippians 4:3; 1 Timothy 3:11; Romans 16:3-16 (which refers to a whole host of male *and* female “ministers” that served with Paul, including women such as Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Rufus’ “mother,” Julia, Nereus’ “sister,” and even several “clergy couples” such as Prisca and Aquila, and Andronicus and Junia).

14. For example, some people will point out that some of the apostle Paul’s words seem to disallow women from being in preaching, teaching, and leadership roles (See 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11-12).

15. In the words of J. Lee Grady, “*Jesus came to redeem women from their... [human] condition and elevate them to [become His] true followers*” (J. Lee Grady, 10 Lies The Church Tells Women, p. 13). If you disagree, please make sure that your disagreement is based squarely on what the scripture really *says*, rather than merely on some cultural bias or narrow reading of scripture that you learned while growing up!