

7th Sunday of Ordinary Time
May 20 & 21, 2023

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There is a real sing song quality to the opening lines in today's reading from Acts.

The disciples, having just experienced Jesus going up into the clouds – an awesome event -- hustle back into town and head to the upper room.

And that's where we start tapping our toes.

Luke tells us...

“there was Peter and John and James and Andrew and Philip and Thomas and Bartholomew and Matthew and James and Simon and Judas...”

But then the sing song ends.

When it comes to the women, Luke clams up. We get no more names, except for Mary. Why do you think Luke writes this story in this way? Does he have a keen memory for the names of all the men, but a sudden memory loss when it comes to the women's names, except for Mary?

I don't know about you, but I want to know the names of all the women – those who saw Jesus ascend – those who ran to the upper room and those who hung out with the brothers.

While we hear Mary's name in New Testament more than other women, what you may or may not know is that many of our sisters, our foremothers in faith -- are hidden from view in our Lectionary – the selection of scripture readings that we hear every Sunday and on weekdays and holy days.

Even though the majority of early believers were women and slaves, attracted to the equality they found in Christianity (all are one in Christ Jesus) -- these women of faith are often nameless -- their stories of daring courage, committed faith, bold leadership, and compassionate ministry are left on the cutting floor.

In other cases, important stories of women's accomplishments and faith are relegated to weekdays where just a small number of Catholics hear them. This is true in the case of Mary Magdalene whose full story – our Apostle to the Apostles -- is not heard on Easter Sunday, but the Tuesday after.

And worse yet, some of the Lectionary passages explicitly teach women (and slaves) to be submissive – such as Colossians 3: 12-21 which exhorts women to be subordinate to their husbands, “as is proper in the Lord.” This is the second reading proclaimed for the Feast of the Holy Family during the Christmas season every year. This is assimilated by our daughters and sons.

Repeating passages that make the subordination of women holy -- leaving out stories about women – neglecting to honor their names, their lives, or the ways they served as apostles, deacons, prophets, and disciples may not seem like a big deal to some...but for me -- it is both painful and personal.

My whole sense of purpose and vocation — my passion for social justice and serving those at the margins, especially women, has been birthed and animated by women. Maybe this is true for you too.

And as a mother of seven and grandmother of 21 -- with the majority being girls – I care about the stories they hear — or don't hear — and how that negatively impacts their self-understanding and the way they relate to God and to others.

So when Matthew recounts Jesus feeding 5000 men and then writes: “not counting women and children,” I want to run through the crowd and meet all the women, coo at their babies, and ruffle the hair on their children's heads.

When Luke tells us that Phillip has four unmarried prophetic daughters in Acts, I want to be with them just as I love being with my teenage granddaughters. Phillip's daughters are young. Seemingly boisterous. They have a voice and they use it. I can only imagine smiling as they tell me their names, and chatting it up with them as they confidently tell me how they see the world.

When the Church fails to recognize women, to say their names, to know their stories, or to hear their voices, women suffer -- not only here -- but all over the world.

Catholicism has the biggest membership of any religion in the world. And the Catholic Church is also the biggest provider of education and healthcare around the world and especially in developing regions where women are poor and without political, economic, and social power. When the Church fails to tell the Good News of our foremothers in faith – when it fails to challenge and transform destructive cultural practices that endanger or diminish women – when it fails to be God's vessel for modeling women's full dignity, rights, and equality among all men -- women suffer.

In the face of a clericalist culture that impoverishes us and leaves us starving for, women's voices, women's faith, women's wisdom, and women's love -- throughout our Catholic land...

Women are resisting; women are re-imagining; women are re-building.

We have Mary Magdalene -- so close to Jesus that I dare say she was his co-equal in the work. He relied on her -- her gifts, her support, and her courage in the face of brutality. When others fled, she and the other women stayed. When the church in the West tried to downgrade her to prostitute status beginning with Pope Gregory in the late 6th century, feminist theologians and biblical scholars of the 21st century recovered her and restored her true historical role; a role for which she has finally gained official recognition -- the Apostle to the Apostles -- the title and Feast Day bestowed by Pope Francis in 2016.

Women are rising. They always have. They always will.

We have Phoebe -- who is named *diakonos* in the Romans 16: 1– 2, but she is never mentioned during a liturgy. Even on her Feast Day, September 3, her story has been supplanted by the same Pope Gregory. Although she is never mentioned during a liturgy, her role as a deacon -- equal in status to male deacons -- is also being recovered and celebrated by women theologians, biblical scholars, and faith-filled women who seek to reinstate her authentic leadership and ministry -- for the Church today.

Women are the lifeblood of the Church.

We have women religious who pioneered the establishment of Christianity across this country building schools, hospitals, orphanages and confronting poverty and injustice of every sort. Since Vatican II women religious have shed their habits and “come out” as CEOs, CFOs, heads of Catholic Universities, pastors at parishes, and advocates for the poor and for those whom the church has shamed and excluded.

And, as we witnessed in 2009 and 2012, when the Vatican and the US bishops tried to silence and punish women religious for caring too much about social justice and being “radical feminists,” these women resisted that clericalist impulse -- with style!

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We have Black Catholic women religious who disrupted slavery's ravages, desegregated white religious congregations, confronted racism in the world and within the Catholic Church -- challenging the oppression of their day by educating girls of color, and caring for women of color of all ages. Think of Mother Mary Lange who educated girls of color when it was dangerous to do so. And Sr. Thea Bowman who spoke so boldly to the whole bunch of white U.S. Bishops just before her death.

Since Vatican II, women have entered male dominated fields and become theologians, historians, biblical scholars, canon lawyers, ecclesiologists, liturgists, chancellors and more. They have become educated, often at their own expense, such that, today, 80% of all lay ecclesial ministers in the U.S. are women.

Many of those women are serving right here in this parish and in this diocese. The experience and wisdom they offer is a life-giving lens where we can get closer to God's own heart – her radical way of loving -- and her fierce care for those who are considered the least among us in our world.

Although there have been many bumps along with way with popes seeking to silence Catholics who dissent on the issue of women's ordination, since the election of Pope Francis, significant changes are under way because of the decades-long work of women. Women have taken new positions of authority in the Church joining the ranks of bishops and cardinals in the Vatican offices.

And this year, because of the work of so many women and men around the world, women will, for the first time, vote at important meetings called synods. These are the gatherings where critical pastoral decisions are made about all sorts of issues -- including women's roles in the church.

This Catholic vote for women is somewhat akin to women suffragists winning the political vote for all of us sitting here today.

Because women have not given up, life-giving change is being served up to those who have been starved and impoverished for so long.

So now, circling back to Luke, I want to finish what he left out and expand it. So here is my sing song...

“There was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Susanna and Martha and Mary and Junia and Phoebe and Prisca and Anna and Euodia and Syntyche and Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich and Sr. Martin De Porres Gray and Sr. Jamie Phelps and Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and Diana Hayes and Sr. Louise Akers and Phyllis Zagano and Sr. Nathalie Becquart and Sr. Pat Farrell and Meg and Dale and Maureen and Kathy and Jennifer and Barb and Jackie and Julia and... ..”

Let all of us in this Church -- honor women, say their names, tell their stories, listen to them, make wide spaces for their gifts and vocations -- and love them – fiercely.