

“The Road Ahead”  
Luke 23:44-56

In her book *Women in the Bible*, Dr. Jamie Clark-Soles tells of a favorite stop when she leads a tour to Israel. “If you were to visit the relatively new Duc in Altum church at Magdala,” she writes, “you would enter first into a round structure call the Women’s Atrium... Inside are eight columns. On each of seven columns, you will find the names of women who appear in Jesus’s ministry, including Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Joanna, the sisters Mary and Martha, the mother of James and John, the mother-in-law of Peter, and Mary wife of Cleopas, and the many other women in Jesus’s ministry (not named individually in the Gospels). The eighth column is an unmarked pillar with no names, for this column honors all of the unnamed women in Jesus’s ministry of all times and places. It is my custom to gather together all of the women with me to take a photo by this column. It is always a moving experience.” (Clark-Soles, Jamie. *Women in the Bible*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020, pp. 200-201).

During this season of Lent, we have focused on the impact of women in Jesus’ ministry. Five of the ones that professor references have been part of our reflection, as have others who went unnamed in the narratives. Today, we hear of women who were present to the very end.

Our two readings offer Luke’s account of Jesus’ final moments. Around noon, a darkness falls over the land and lasts for three hours. The curtain in the temple, a tapestry that separated the Holy of Holies from the place of humans, is torn in two. Jesus cries out “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” and then takes his final breath. An officer in the Roman army, both enforcer and eyewitness to what has occurred, declares, “Certainly this man was innocent” while many in the crowd begin to return home beating their breasts. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, asks Pilate for permission to remove the body and soon takes down that lifeless form, wraps it in a linen cloth and places it in a tomb. Those verses are the only ones to specify men as part of those traumatic events. Women, however, are present throughout.

After the crowds have departed from Calvary, Luke says “But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.” While we might be inclined to think that the phrase “acquaintances...watching” included men, yet the Greek is in the feminine, making clear Luke’s meaning that only women remained behind. After Jesus’ body is placed in the tomb, the gospel writer says, “The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid.” With that final act as eyewitnesses, they return home and prepare spices and ointments for Jesus’ remains. Only women are identified as taking those steps, too.

Luke doesn’t give us their names, but in speaking about a group who had “followed him from Galilee” or “had come with him from Galilee,” he is pointing the reader back to a moment when he used similar language and identified three of the women. Earlier, in a passage that was our focus one Sunday last month, he writes that Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna were among those who traveled with Jesus through Galilee providing financial support for his ministry. Thus, even without repeating their names here, Luke is making clear that those three women—and perhaps others—not only traveled with him then, but stayed with Jesus to the end.

Their witness inspires me. It’s hard to fully imagine the chaos and horror of that day, yet while others fled as it unfolded—including the men who had been called by and traveled with Jesus those same years—these women remained steadfast. While other onlookers to the crucifixion expressed dismay as they returned home, only the women stayed and saw the painful day to its conclusion. Both the centurion and Joseph took a risk in speaking up and acting, but

amidst those hours after Jesus' death when it was unclear if others associated with him would be the next to die, only women are identified as planning to offer one final act of devotion.

I'm grateful for Luke's account of their faithfulness and while their witness gives hope that I could have been strong enough to do the same, I'm not so sure. Instead, I can recall amidst far less threatening settings when I was silent instead of speaking up, times when I blended into the crowd instead of step forward, and times when I worried too much about what others would think to act with such boldness. Perhaps you recall similar stories about yourself and thus find the account of those faithful women to be a source of encouragement for your challenging moments. At the same time, I'm glad they are not only ones Luke describes from that day.

One of the more haunting songs found in our hymnal will be sung before the end of this service. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord" it opens. Verse-by verse that hymn poses other questions to us: "Were you there when they nailed him to the tree...when they pierced him in the side...when the sun refused to shine...when they laid him in the tomb?" In powerful fashion, that African-American spiritual follows the Biblical narrative of those final hours in Jesus' life and invites present-day believers to find themselves in those events. Not literally, of course, but to recognize how things played out on that Friday of long ago with the same human tendencies and choices that can surface within us. After each question, the refrain declares about such pondering that "sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble."

Part of what I love about that hymn is how it invites us to look at our own humanity with candid eyes. To know that there are times when we can be like the women in those events who remained steadfast to the end and times when we are among the first to flee. To know that there are moments when like that centurion we speak a word of truth that will be unpopular with some and times when our silence allows an injustice to go unchallenged. And to recognize that there are times like Joseph when we can act in a way that demonstrates the dignity of all people and times when fear keeps us from doing anything. As such, that hymn and the Biblical events it recalls are an invitation for humility as we look at the actions of others and our own.

One of my favorite journalists is Jason Gay. He writes for *The Wall Street Journal* and his usual topic is sports, but I enjoy his columns not only because of the subject, but also due to his creative and humorous style of writing. A recent article modeled such traits, but on a different subject as he wrote about how we might best reemerge from the impact of COVID-19.

"This column," he begins "is for people like me who didn't write the Great American Novel during these past 12 months, or even 10 pages of a mediocre one, or attempt to build a castle from Popsicle sticks, or bother to teach the dog a word of conversational French. I'm assuming this is almost all of us, because those sorts of achievements are hard to pull off in any year, and this past year has been stressful and scattered, and on most days, it's felt like a sizeable human accomplishment to pull on slacks and plod to the grocery store." With that opening, he goes on to describe his longing for life once we are on the other side of this pandemic.

"I'm hopeful that a year sequestered will turn us into more empathetic listeners," he says. "A little humility is advisable, because a little humility is always advisable...The news is full of hopeful predictions about recovery—when we're going to feel better about getting out in the world, going on an airplane, heading back to the office, resuming the old, hectic patterns we'd taken for granted. I would be thrilled to get there. Sign me up for all of it. Nothing would make me happier than being safely stuffed on a plane full of sunburned people, coming back from somewhere fun. Even if it lands at LaGuardia.

"Still, it's not going to be instant," he notes. "It's not going to feel like flipping a switch. Hidden traumas abound. I presume we're all a little different now. How can we not be? This

past year has challenged everyone in unforeseen ways, and a lot of us are just coming to terms with it. There are probably changes still imperceptible. Hopefully, some of the change is for good. How lovely would it be if we all got a little more forgiving of each other, and of ourselves, too? How beautiful it would be if we all became better neighbors? Patience remains important. So does grace. The road may be opening up, but the road remains long.” (Gay, Jason. “As a Window Opens, a Plea for Patience and Grace,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2021)

As we continue along the final steps on this Lenten road may it be a time when we allow the events of a Friday long ago to change us for the better. To acknowledge how that story makes clear there will always be times we fall short of what God would have us do. But instead of stopping there, to find encouragement and inspiration in women of long ago who “followed him from Galilee” and never stopped, revealing the better and the possible in all of our travels, too.