



I Believe Her

TEXT
Luke 24:1-11

April 28, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

Every church I've served, there's something uniquely different about the ways we celebrate Easter. And here, with you, it's the kids who rule the day.

On Easter morning, your little ones all come in here bursting with excitement. Otherwise quiet kids come bounding up to me perfectly happy to have conversations about bunnies and candy and things they would not have been inclined to talk about the week before. And you brilliant parents, you put them in suspenders and dresses and bowties, ensuring these conversations are as adorable as they could possibly be.

And this year, we had the special privilege of baptizing two little sisters in our 5:00 Gathering service. The older of the two (she's about two and a half) walked right up to the front of the worship space, looked at the congregation and said, "Happy Easter!"

When it came time to baptize her, I lifted her up to the font, and she just stuck her own hands right down into it and began to splash her face with water. I proceeded to baptize her anyway, but this was the first self-baptism I've ever been part of.

For me, here, it's your kids who win Easter every year, maybe this year especially.

And this is important for me. We know kids are important in the life of our church, to Jesus himself; but for me, how we treat our youngest when they come into the church, it's important, and it's personal.

My earliest memories of the church are positive ones — largely because the older people around me asked me about the Easter Bunny and snuck me candy under the pews. They just smiled whenever my brother or sister made too much noise, and most importantly, they encouraged my curiosity. The easiest memories of church for me are of it being a place that nurtured my abundance of questions.

I was a curious kid. Really, I was a really annoying kid. I was quiet, painfully shy, but when I got on a topic, I would not give it up easily. My parents were thankfully very good at this. They never let my questions go unexplored. If I wondered about the stars, we went camping, out into the deep dark, so we could look at them.

My dad is an artist, a photographer, and when I began my own fascination with art and painting, we spent days at our

small town art center, looking at artists' work and scrutinizing every detail, and then would go home to try it ourselves.

But then we started going to church. My parents hadn't been church-going people. But my grandma successfully shamed us into going to the local Presbyterian Church most Sundays. And it was there that my questions expanded. These were questions that were harder to take an impromptu field trip to figure out.

If you're here in these pews fairly regularly, this can be harder to remember. But this story we have, all the things we do here, these are very weird things.

As a child, I was very concerned as to where the dinosaurs were in Genesis. And I was frightened, for a longer period of time than I'm comfortable admitting, of the idea of angels. I was very concerned that one day I might just be going about my business, and an angel might show up and tell me I'm having a baby.

And Easter? Forget about it. I learned to ride my bike in a local cemetery, which makes resurrection a terrifying concept, until someone finally assured me it was Jesus — just Jesus, who came back, at least for now.

My parents learned to tell me to go ask the pastor. God bless that man. He took my questions in stride, answered what he could, and when he couldn't come up with something to satisfy me, he told me to keep asking. He encouraged my wondering. He explained to me that there's a lot we just don't know; that some of the missing pieces were part of the mystery of our faith. But that also, some missing pieces just haven't been imagined yet.

He passed away some years before I knew I was called to seminary, but I have no doubt he planted those seeds.

My wondering hasn't stopped as I've grown in this faith. But it changes. I think you know what I mean.

Through college and then seminary, I was introduced to worlds I didn't previously know existed: these names and ideas and professors in their tweed jackets who looked like the Google images for professors; and these big, beautiful libraries with too many books to ever consume. I was introduced to these worlds — as if they had all the answers for all the things.

I didn't stop asking questions, but I have spent some time trusting that the answers exist, that I just needed to read more, look farther, find someone in a tweed jacket to ask. In a lot of cases, that is true.

But it was also true that those big buildings and beautiful libraries, they might have seduced me into accepting some answers I've never been quite satisfied with — answers that were just not enough; maybe none so much

as the ones I stumble through every Easter season.

The resurrection stories are one of these wondering places for me. Luke's account is my least favorite. It's just not that interesting. Not like Mark, with multiple endings to keep us wondering. Not like Matthew, with earthquakes and stricken soldiers. Not like John, with a weeping Mary Magdalene, a holy moment with the risen Christ.

Luke's account is boring, really, as the author pushes the drama to the next scene, with disciples walking to Emmaus. But rereading Luke's account in these days, I found myself struck with all kinds of questions.

The women, Mary Magdalene, who appears in every resurrection account, at the cross and at the tomb, she and Mary, the mother of James and Joanna, go walking to the tomb on the first day of the week. They find the stone rolled away. Two messengers ask them, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was with you, that he must be handed over, to be crucified and on the third day rise again?"

It says they remembered. They went to tell the rest of the disciples. But it says that to the rest of the disciples "these words seemed to be an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

The set of commentaries I have in my office were a gift from my first boss, who retired while I worked with him. They're the "Interpretation" series. I find them mostly helpful.

They have informed generations of preachers.

And the commentary written on the gospel of Luke is by the great Fred Craddock. Dr. Craddock literally wrote the book on preaching for my seminary class — and countless others before and after. His exegesis is inspired, helpful.

But on in his discussion of this resurrection story, Dr. Craddock says: "That the apostles did not believe the report should not be explained by saying it was because the report was given by women. There has been too much of such flippancy; no doubt men bringing the same report would have met the same unbelief."¹

He's not wrong. We remember the women are talking about life from death here. But his commentary is one of a person who has never walked this world in female skin. It dismisses the cultural context of his time, their time, our time, always bent on not fully trusting the words of women.

It doesn't make his interpretation wrong, but it makes it incomplete. And I worry that incomplete interpretation has prevented us from finding new ones. And we live in a day when we can no longer settle for incomplete.

It's in these days ...

... when people of power, people who I previously thought knew a lot of things, sat on national television for days, in front of a woman who told a story that sounds a lot like some of mine, only for them to mock her, dismiss her, not believe her.

... after it has taken 25 years

to convict a “good” man, a doctor for gymnasts, of the abuse he was guilty of, because 250 young women were not believed.

... when the price for women’s silence is known, purchased at \$130,000 by the highest office in our nation.

... that words of Luke’s resurrection story come to us with offense, and should leave us wondering what 2,000 years of the male disciples not believing the women’s story, and our inability to interpret more completely here, has done to our collective understanding.

In days when the forces bent on silencing women are parading around in power, we have to wonder how much of their parading is due to the majority religion of our nation excusing their power, submitting to their influence, accepting their limited interpretations of our holy text for all of our history.

So I have spent this year trying to reclaim my wondering — because I desperately don’t want to hand these dangerously incomplete answers down to all the curious kids who show up here Easter mornings.

Thanks be to God, we are living through a time when alternative interpretations the world of biblical interpretation has expanded, with feminist and womanist scholars who are helping us to read our holy words in new ways. Really, faithful women have been at this since Mary Magdalene’s first sermon, but for the first time in our faith’s 2,000-year

history, the Spirit has cracked open the church just enough that alternative interpretations are available, if we are brave enough to keep wondering.

So wonder with me. Forever and ever, Mary Magdalene has been seen as the penitent sinner. We see her that way because since the sixth century, Mary Magdalene’s identity has been cemented as a prostitute. It was in the year 594 that Pope Gregory the Great preached “Homily 33” on Easter Sunday and forever cast Mary Magdalene into the identity of a harlot.

There is no scriptural reference for Mary being a penitent harlot. The only scriptural reference for Mary’s “sins” comes from a single verse in Luke that mentions seven demons. There is no mention of what these demons are.

It wasn’t until 1969 that the Catholic Church formally repealed that original teaching and confessed that Mary Magdalene was probably not a prostitute, that her sins are likely not of a sexual nature. But for 1,300 years, her image was painted, enshrined in red with clothes that always revealed a little too much skin — her feast day consecrated, forever the saint to those who struggle with sexual temptation.

So forever, when wondering crops up about Mary Magdalene, the outcome is something like Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Our questions have been co-opted by the idea of Mary as a sexualized figure, which limits

our interpretation of her to one of scandal. We can reread her stories all day, but we’re always using some kind of lens. And the lens we’ve been using forever is busted. So we have to wonder farther.

Names are never just names in our biblical text. I was first taught that Mary was a woman from a town called Magdala. It’s a small fishing town on the Sea of Galilee, three hours north of Tiberias, named for a tower that overlooks the sea. It seems a reasonable and right assessment based on her name.

But remember how Jesus reinterprets Peter’s name in the gospel of Matthew to be “the rock?” “The rock on which I will build my church.”

What if, similarly, Mary’s name isn’t geographical, but functional? Literally translated, *Magdala* means “tower,” or alternatively, “pulpit.”

Like Peter, the rock, what if Mary is named Magdala, the tower, the pulpit from which the first words of resurrection will be preached?

But maybe we’re getting ahead of ourselves. A curious person might first ask, “Why in the world are there so many Marys?” It’s not just because they all think it’s pretty. It’s because the most famous woman in all of Hebrew literature is Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, first prophet of the Old Testament (not first female prophet, first prophet). Translated into Aramaic and Greek, Miriam is “Maria”; in English, “Mary.” They’re all named after Miriam. The fol-

lowing of Miriam is strong in this community.

Some more recent female scholars have pushed us farther: Why are we so certain that these are all different Marys, as we've previously interpreted there to be? What if several of these characters are all Mary Magdalene? What if our early interpreters realized that Mary Magdalene held a little too much sway over our early Jesus stories, and she needed to be diluted with more Marys? We have Mary, sister of Martha. And Mary of Bethany. And Mary who anoints Jesus with oil. But what if, at least those three Marys, are all the same woman?

Mary, in the tradition of the great prophet Miriam, from the city of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus who Jesus brought back from the dead, she who is called "the Magdalene," the tower who will preach the first words of resurrection.

This matters. Mary Magdalene's role in Jesus' life and our faith isn't a female question. Her identity is a Christian question. If we confess to follow Jesus, we should be curious about his closest companion. Knowing her can, and I think does, help us to know him better.

And maybe more imperative for us here and now, allowing ourselves to wonder here, allowing ourselves to peek through the cracks of 2,000 years of androcentric, male-only rule, male-only interpretation, it has the ability to shine some light on all kinds of questions we need to ask of all our biblical text,

of all our accepted, incomplete interpretations.

We need the wisdom of the past. But if we're going to get farther than our past, we need to free that wisdom from the shackles of singular perspectives and dominant power that have held it for all of history. We have to put more voices at that table. And we have to believe them.

Relying on "tradition" as an answer to wonderings about women's role in the Church, it's just not enough. Continuing to hand down the lazy interpretation that Jesus' closest followers were boys, so male leadership is what God has ordered, it's not enough.

The most growing areas of Christianity in this country are in traditions where women are still barred from leadership. We, here, at Village Church, who want all voices in our pulpits, we are the minority of Christians in our nation. And I've met our first ordained PCUSA female pastor. We do not own a long enough history to assume it will bend our way.

If we do not demand some different questions, start repeating new narratives, we risk *silence*, for our little girls who reach into the font and proclaim "Happy Easter."

And this ... this touches every other big issue currently standing in front of us.

Memories of marches walked and won should inform us, inspire us, but the memories of good that has been done will not undo the evil that locks our black children into prison cells today. The words of the Statue of Liberty welcomed our ances-

tors to these shores. But they are not freeing the children we've put in cages at our southernmost border.

The recycling programs instituted by a generation awakening to the death of our planet taught my generation our planet's health matters, but the death has only accelerated, while we demonize the new ideas as idle tales, and fail to believe our newest interpreters, as we protect the industries with the most power who are causing the most harm.

We must be informed by the wisdom of all those big, old, beautiful libraries, by the collective wisdom of life lived. But there are missing pieces. There are scandalized, obscuring pieces. We have to wonder farther than we've wondered before.

And if Mary Magdalene has anything to teach us today, it's that that is not easy. Draped in red, marked as penitent sinner, imagined as wife and lover and anything but wise witness, she warns us that this is a dangerous road; that the forces who threw her in the harlots den 1,300 years ago will continue to undermine those who love Jesus enough to follow him, no matter the cost.

But it might be that her redemption can be ours too. For early in the morning, the first day of the week, the women walked to the tomb. Mary the Magdalene was there. Of course, she was there. They arrived to find the stone had been rolled away. And they entered the tomb and found the body of their beloved was gone. Two messengers appeared, and the women were terrified. They bowed their faces

to the ground. But the men ask them, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was with you, that the Son of Man must be handed over, to be crucified and on the third day rise again?”

They remembered his words. They remembered, because they had been with him then — with him, not outside his circle, but part of his circle of followers. They remembered, and they went to find the rest of the disciples. But their words seemed to be an idle tale, a hysterical story. And the rest of the disciples did not believe them.

Then, now, for the sake of the curious children who come after us, we must stop looking for the living among the dead. We must make space for our new interpretations. We must believe them.

Let us pray: Holy God, free us from ourselves, that we might dare to wonder farther, and believe. Amen.

Works referenced and inspiration gathered from:

Craddock, Fred. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990.

Women’s Bible Commentary. 3rd edition, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. Editors: Newsom, Ringe, Lapsley.

Gafney, Wilda C. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

Bellis, Alice Ogden. *Help-mates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd edition. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*. Boulder, Shambhala Publications, 2010.

King, Karen. *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*. Santa Rosa, Polebridge Press, 2003.

¹Craddock, pg. 283

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.