

*Apostolorum Apostola*

*Matthew 28:1-10*

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Have I told you this story before?

I was in seminary, studying for my master of divinity degree, when one of my classes hosted a ministers panel. The panel consisted of a hospital chaplain, a seminary professor, an executive director of a faith-based non-profit, and a local church pastor. The panel was meant to help us see the variety of ministries available to us after graduation.

Each of the panelists introduced themselves, shared how they came to their particular vocation, and shared a bit about the unique aspects of that vocation – first the hospital chaplain, then the seminary professor, then the executive director of the faith-based non-profit. And then it was Rev. Betty Pugh Mills turn. At that time, she was the pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Richmond, VA.

Grace Baptist had a reputation in town – a reputation for having a very formal worship style, a very high liturgy, and an incredibly well-educated congregation. In fact, about a half of my seminary professors claimed Grace Baptist as their church home – including the entirety of the biblical studies department. Many of us students stood in awe of Betty *because* of that fact. I mean, each week she had to preach to the very people who graded sermons for a living.

Well, Betty spoke for a good bit about her call and serving as a senior pastor in a local congregation, and then she opened the floor to questions. We threw a bunch of lame duck questions her way, but none of them were really of much interest to us. We didn't really care how she went about securing nominations for ministry teams or who picked the hymn selections for worship or whether she said "debtors" or "trespassers" in the Lord's Prayer.

The question we all wanted to ask, but none of us had the courage to was: how do you preach to seminary professors each week?

Finally, one among us just blurted it out: "Betty, how do you have the courage to preach to seminary professors each week? Don't you get intimidated with Dr. Biddle sitting in your congregation?"

Dr. Biddle was our brilliant and renowned, but rather grumpy Old Testament Professor. And you could tell from her reaction that this was not an original question. She sat sort of stoically for a moment and with a shrug of her shoulders, said, "Seminary professors need Jesus, too."

And that was it. No further explanation, no clarifying remarks. Just, "Seminary professors need Jesus, too." And with those words, Rev. Betty Pugh Mills reminded a

room full of future ministers that we came to seminary to follow Jesus, and not Dr. Biddle.

What would the Church do if it didn't have faithful women constantly pointing us back to Jesus?

Matthew's version of the Easter story is unique in lots of ways — there's an earthquake and a glowing angel and guards fainting in fear — but in all of the ways in which it is unique, it is absolutely unoriginal in one critical fashion: like Mark, like Luke, and like John, in Matthew, it is not the apostles, but women who go to the tomb early on that first Easter morning and come back telling the others what they have found.

In all four gospels, women are the first to preach the good news of the resurrection — which is worth pondering, especially as we get close to wrapping up a series about the Twelve Apostles.

All summer long, I have been preaching on those twelve men that Jesus called out and set apart as his inner circle of disciples. But do you know what occurred to me last week? As I was preaching on James and John, it occurred to me that all summer long the lessons that we get from the apostles in scripture are all about what *not* to do.

- Peter, who time and again puts his foot in his mouth, teaches us to think before we speak. And through him, we learn that Jesus will not abandon us, even when we're slow to learn.
- Judas Iscariot — the betrayer — warns us that it is possible to live a half-inch from Jesus and somehow never be transformed.
- The sons of thunder, James and John, try to call down fire on the Samaritans, and thus teach us that it is possible to do evil things in Jesus' name — something we ought not do.

What kind of models have we been given? Over and over and over, these apostles who litter the pages of the gospels, trip all over themselves and, in the process, teach us what *not* to do if we want to be faithful followers of Jesus.

But the women? The women consistently give us positive examples.

In theological parlance, there are two words that are often used as “disciplines” for discussing the nature of God. There is *apophatic* theology and there is *cataphatic* theology.

*Apophatic* theology is theology that obtains knowledge of God through *negation*; by saying what God *is not*. For example, God *is not* American. What does that negation tell us about God? God *is not* Baptist. Shocker, I know. God *is not* dead. You see, each statement tells us something about who God is by telling us something God *is not*.

*Cataphatic* theology obtains knowledge of God through *positive* affirmations; by saying what God *is*. God *is* love. God *is* faithful. God *is* just.

I say all of this to make a point, and it is simply this: so often in scripture, the Twelve Apostles serve as the *apophatic* models of discipleship, because they teach us what *not* do as followers of Jesus.

And *women* serve as our *cataphatic* models in scripture, because over and over and over again, they model faithful discipleship to Jesus.

Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:24-25). Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:38). The woman who was healed of her twelve years of hemorrhaging by touching the hem of Jesus' garment (Mark 5:24ff). The Syrophoenician woman who challenged Jesus' teaching for the sake of her daughter's life (Mark 7:24ff). The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Matt. 26:6ff). The widow who put in her offering of two mites, which was all she had to live on (Luke 21:1ff). Joanna and Susanna, who helped to fund Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:3). Mary and Martha – who hosted Jesus in their home (Luke 10:38). Mary, the mother of James, and Salome who brought spices to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body (Mark 16:1). Mary Magdalene – who in every one of the gospel accounts became the first person to preach the good news of the resurrection.

But Mary Magdalene wasn't just there on resurrection day. She didn't just show up for the good part.

Who was there when darkness came over the whole land and Jesus breathed his last? Not Peter. Not James and John. But Mary Magdalene was (Matthew 27:55-56).

And, who was there when Jesus' dead body was laid in the tomb? Not Peter. Not James or John. But Mary Magdalene (Matthew 27:61).

And, on the morning after the sabbath, who was up and headed to the tomb before the sun had even dawned? Not Peter. Not James, nor John. But Mary Magdalene (Matthew 28:1).

As Matthew tells it, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb first thing in the morning on the first day of the week (28:1). In Matthew, their motivation isn't to prepare the body, but simply to *see* it. It seems to be the same motivation we have when we visit the tomb of a loved one – just to be near the place where their body is, because being near the tomb somehow makes us feel near to the person we've lost.

When the Matthew describes the tomb, it isn't a garden full of lilies and tulips, with pastel duckies and little chicks, and a few brightly colored eggs. The tomb is on a fault line where an earthquake cracks the ground. An angel who looks like lightening drops from the sky, rolls back the huge stone and perches himself on it.

Security apparently wasn't expecting anything either, because when the earth shook and the angel dropped like lightening, they fainted dead away.

The angel spoke to the women: “Don’t be afraid.” Yeah, right...

The angel went on: “I know you’re looking for Jesus, who they crucified, but he isn’t here.” Then the angel said this, “Come and look at the empty place where they thought he’d stay. Then go and tell his followers” (Matthew 28:5-7).

*Come and look.* Then *go and tell.* Those are the words of commissioning.

And if that weren’t enough, as they ran to tell the Twelve about what they’d seen, Jesus met them on the road and his first word was, “Hi.” Well, he actually said, “Greetings,” which in Greek is *chairete* – which was their way of saying, “Hi.” Granted, “Hi!” is no great message from beyond the grave, but it is so human that it almost tells us enough.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary fell on his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus himself endorsed their commissioning, repeating the angels words, “Go and tell my brothers” (Matthew 28:10).

By what ruler do we measure what it means to be an apostle?

The word, apostle, literally means “one who is sent.” Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sent by both the messenger of God and by Jesus, himself: “Go and tell.” And the most intriguing part is that they were *sent to the apostles*. They were sent *to the sent ones*. It’s what inspired Thomas Aquinas to give Mary Magdalene the title *apostolorum apostola* – “the apostle to the apostles.”

Of course, the Church hasn’t always been as faithful to women as women have been to the Church. Eve, and thus all women, have been blamed for the Fall. In his book, *The Confessions*, St. Augustine (who, by the way, kept a mistress most of his life) points at women and their irresistible allure as the root cause of all of man’s downfalls.

Even Mary Magdalene – the apostle to the apostles – is remembered not for being the first person to ever preach the good news of the resurrection, but for being a prostitute – which, by the way, is not supported in scripture *anywhere*.

Thankfully we are in an era when the contributions of the most neglected apostles are finally being recognized. But I hope it’s not too late.

Eugene Peterson, one of the most renowned pastors in North America over the last century, used to tell the story of coming home from his first year of college all mixed up and out of sorts. Something was off kilter deep in his spirit. He was wrestling with what would end up being the early churning of God’s call on his life, but he didn’t know that then. He just sensed a deep unrest. So he did what any person would do. He went to his pastor to discuss what he was experiencing.

He said that he told his pastor how he was feeling and asked if he could help him. The pastor launched into an extended lecture on... sex. (He must have been influenced by

Augustine!) Peterson returned for a second visit, and got another diatribe on young men and the temptation of sex. Peterson said it was the last time he sought that pastor's council.

The second source he turned to for spiritual direction was a man named "brother Ned." Forty years earlier, brother Ned had been shot during a robbery in Cleveland. The wound had left him paralyzed and in a wheelchair. He had the reputation for being saintly — a wise and holy fixture in the church.

Brother Ned invited Eugene for a visit. "We'll talk about the Bible," he explained. For several Wednesdays that summer, Eugene visited brother Ned. His bible splayed open across his lap, he talked through Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. But Peterson says that it was more like "he talked *at* me." He looked at Eugene like someone who didn't know anything, and so he was just going to shovel truth down him. Of those nights, Peterson said, "He talked the whole time. He bored me to death. I had no idea the Bible could be so dull."

So he cancelled his Wednesday nights with brother Ned and was lamenting about his situation to a childhood friend. The friend suggested that Eugene go talk to Reuben Lance — a coarse man with huge outcroppings of bristle for eyebrows and a wild red beard. The man just looked mean.

Reuben was a tradesman known in his small community for his ability to fix anything... and known for his surly disposition. Peterson said Reuben was the kind of guy that you wanted on your side when you confronted hooligans in a dark alley — but he was not a man you thought of going to when you had an aching heart.

Surprisingly, Reuben agreed to meet with Peterson twice a week after supper. And with that Reuben Lance, a man who never smiled, never prayed aloud in church, and was scornful for most of what passed as religion, became Eugene Peterson's first spiritual director.

For the remaining weeks of that summer, they met twice a week. No pious language. No heavy theology. They just talked about life — and Peterson said it would be years before he had another spiritual director as effective as Reuben Lance.

Decades later, someone shared Reuben's contact information with Peterson. He dialed the number and Reuben, then in his 80s, answered. Peterson explained to Reuben his profound influence, with only long awkward silence coming from the other end. Eventually Reuben's voice broke the stillness:

"You know, I'm just sitting here in my bed. I'm very old and can't do much. You're telling me that those Thursday nights at the church changed your life? No one's ever said anything like that to me before. They like me to fix things for them. But they never seem to want me for much more than that." Then Reuben cried (Winn Collier, *A Burning in My Bones*, chapter 5).

Like Reuben Lance, the faithfulness of women for too long has gone unrecognized in the Church — but they just won't give up! They keep showing up, keep proclaiming the good news, keeping hoping to find Jesus, or for Jesus to find them.

We have a lot to learn from you women. Thank God for you, because you just keep pointing us back to the empty tomb and saying, "Seminary professors need Jesus, too."

Amen.