

WOMEN'S WOUNDS . . . WOMEN'S WISDOM

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But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. (Luke 24:1ff)

Let me begin by saying how much it means to me to be here with you today. As a retired UCC minister, I look back over a lifetime of remarkable experiences and relationships in the church. For me, one of the most remarkable took place in the space of a few years in the middle 1990's when I got to work side-by-side with Kevin Cameron, your pastor. I remember Kevin's second Sunday at our church in Connecticut. He was to give the Children's sermon, and when all of the kids came forward to the chancel, probably twenty of them, *he already knew each one by name*. After one week! I still don't know how he did that. I also remember that his way of showing respect to me as his supervisor was to rib me endlessly and to promptly puncture every pretension I ever had as a Senior Minister. All these years later, I've almost forgiven him. Seriously, what I came to learn was that this smart, very funny, engaging man also possessed the true heart of a pastor. I knew that wherever he served, his congregation would be a fortunate one . . . and I trust that you know that, too. So, thanks for letting me come visit my dear friend and be part of your worship service. As we begin, will you pray with me?

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

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If you found yourself wondering, a few moments ago, why we were reading the Easter narrative mere days before Thanksgiving, two weeks before Advent, and only six weeks before Christmas, you're probably not alone. I know. It seems an odd choice, and I apologize if it strikes you as unseasonable. The fact is, I asked to have this text read today because one line in it – a fragment often overlooked – has been dogging me recently. It's been rising up in me like a recurring dream.

It's got hold of me. It won't let me go. It's a line that comes right at the end of the resurrection story, and I'm haunted by it. When I tell you what it is, I think you'll understand why.

You know the early part of the story, of course. Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, along with some other women (it's significant that we don't know all of their names) go to Jesus' tomb early in the morning. Against all expectation, they find it empty. Instead of a body, which they had intended to anoint with spices, they encounter two men in dazzling clothes who ask them this poignant question, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" And then these angels (for that is what they appear to be) go on to say, "He is not here but has risen . . ." It takes a moment for that to sink in. Risen! And with that word, the world splits open with possibility for these women. Their hearts begin to pound. They hurry away, amazed, full of wonder, full of power, full of hope. There's so much to tell; their hearts are brimming over with joy. Do you know this feeling . . . when you have some important news to tell, and you can't wait to find someone to tell it to? You can feel a crescendo at this point in the Gospel narrative. These women want to share what they've seen. They're imbued with good news, and they can't contain it! So, they seek out the eleven remaining disciples – the men – and, breathless, the women pour out their astonishment, the jubilant, spilling-over account of what they have experienced. Here is where you expect the disciples' jaws to drop open, their eyes to grow wide with wonder, their hearts to leap. *Good news*, after all! Earth-shattering, life-changing news!

But no. *No!* These plodding men, dull of both ear and heart, addled by doubt, hamstrung by logic, mired in condescension, just won't take it in . . . *can't* take it in. What follows in the narrative is the verse that has been on my mind in these recent weeks, the verse that won't let me go. In describing how the men responded to the women's report, Luke writes: ". . . *these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.*" Another translation has it this way: ". . . [the women's] words seemed to [the disciples] *so much nonsense*, and they did not believe them." Thud.

Men not believing women. Men not taking women seriously. Men discounting what women say. Does any of this sound familiar? Do you recognize this phenomenon? I'm sure that the reason why this little piece of scripture has been hounding my heart lately is that, with all of you, I've been reading about all the women who have reported – for years – the boorish, vile, and criminal behavior visited on them by the likes of Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and Roy Moore – and yes, Al Franken and Bill Clinton – only to have their claims ignored. Literally, it took years for some of them to be believed. And, in the meantime, their own reputations were at risk, their lives disrupted. This is how it is when women challenge powerful men. They have seldom really been heard. For too long, they have not been believed. Women's stories . . . women's lives . . . women's wounds . . . women's wisdom: too often discounted, devalued, denied. And not only by men, by the way. Inexplicably, sometimes the deniers are other women. In any case, the bottom line is this: there have always been women with something important to say – good news in some cases and alarming news in others . . . *important* news – and who has given them credence? Too few . . . and too late. That is why we feel the stinging resonance of the line from Luke's gospel with our current situation: "[The women's] words seemed an 'idle tale' – 'so much nonsense,' – and no one believed them." Of course it resonates! It's what we live with today. Despite the advances of feminism, despite the undeniable stories, anecdotal, about women coming into their power, - and, tellingly, despite the fact that in recent weeks, the claim, "Yes, we believe the women

...” has come somewhat in vogue . . . despite all of this, we still live – spiritually, psychologically – in a world where the fullness of women’s truth is not heard and where the pain of women’s wounds is overlooked and where the great well of women’s wisdom is too seldom tapped. And here is the underlying tragedy: this fault in our culture has cut us off from much of God’s power. More about that in a bit. For now, think of some of the examples of women’s truth being overlooked.

Think, for instance, of the women of the Million Moms March back in the year 2000: women who were speaking out for reasonable gun controls following the shootings at Columbine High School. The title of their event was not hyperbole, by the way; there were, by most counts, actually a *million* women participating, but even in those numbers, even in such multitudinous force, women’s voices went unheeded, women’s views rejected, women’s power denied. So, as a result we have had Sandy Hook and San Bernardino and Virginia Tech and Charleston and Fort Hood and Aurora and Orlando and Las Vegas and – just days ago – Sutherland Springs, Texas and Tehama County, California. Women have been at the forefront of the work against gun violence. They are following in the footsteps of their great-great-grandmothers who created the original Mothers’ Day in America – which was not, as you may know, a time for flowers and sweet cards for Mom but a day when women raised their implacable cries for peace and disarmament after the Civil War. And those women, in turn were following their fore-mothers in ancient Greece who, as depicted by Aristophanes, withheld their sexual favors in order to force their men to end the Peloponnesian Wars. But, always, women’s pleas for peace, for disarmament, for an end to violence, have been chalked up to emotionality, to sentimentality . . . “so much nonsense.” As Luke would have written of them, “Their words have seemed an ‘idle tale’ and no one has believed them.”

Think of Katherine Johnson, the brilliant mathematician whose gifts were repeatedly overlooked where she worked at NASA, where she was routinely devalued until finally the men were in such a fix that they had to turn to her. For too long, her words seemed an “idle tale” and no one believed her. And how many brilliant female mathematicians and scientists were there before her, about whom we have never heard?

Think of the early proponents of Women’s suffrage who endured decades of being ignored, rebuffed, silenced. You know a couple of their names – Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony – because, after a lifetime of being ignored, they finally broke through. But, again, we don’t know the names of all the women who preceded Stanton and Anthony in the fight to be heard and counted . . . precisely because they *were* silenced and ignored, so their names are lost to us. Think about the opposition to women’s suffrage. What was it but a systematic and fear-driven attempt to silence women, to deny their wisdom, to stifle their voices? For too many people, the Suffragettes’ words seemed an “so much nonsense” and no one believed them. And yes, the Nineteenth Amendment, eventually . . . but why, then, nearly a century later, do women still hold less than 25% of elective offices in the United States?

Think of the middle ages in Europe, when women could not study to be doctors, although many of them had natural healing gifts and accrued healing knowledge passed from woman to woman. Few people could afford doctors in those days anyway, but these women, with compassion and knowledge, treated the sick. Despite the good they did, when those healing gifts became too

prominent, too effective, threatening male power, these same women were branded as witches and were put to death. Their words seemed an “idle tale” and no one believed them.

The list is endless. Think of Milena Maric, Katherine von Bora, Susannah Wesley. If you don't recognize those names, it's no wonder. No one knows them, but we should! Each was a brilliant woman whose only way of being heard, only way of being believed, only way of being taken seriously, was to channel their brilliance through men. Maric was Albert Einstein's first wife who, by all accounts was an accomplished physicist in her own right and contributed significantly to the development of her husband's theories. Similarly von Bora, who influenced her husband, Martin Luther. And without Susannah Wesley, her sons John and Charles would probably not have founded the great movement of Methodism in the Christian church. The point is, we can't list most of the names of brilliant, creative, wise women in history because they weren't connected to men through whom they could pour their power. They are lost to us. Millions of them. Their words seemed an “idle tale” and no one believed them. Here's the truth: this has been a holocaust of suppression . . . a tragic, misogynistic theme stitched through too much of human history. The centuries are strewn with the untold stories of women . . . stories of strength and courage, creativity and passion . . . magnificent stories that were silenced by fearful but powerful men.

Believe it or not, this is not really a sermon about women's rights, though rights are important. It isn't a sermon about feminism, though I count myself a feminist. It isn't a sermon about politics, though some of my examples are political. What I mean to be getting at – what that little fragment of scripture seems to point us to – is the tragic loss to human cultures and societies that happens when we do not draw deeply and freely and fully from that well of wisdom contained in the minds and bodies and souls of women. And here's the thing: it's a *spiritual* problem, even before it is a social one. It has to do with our stubborn rejection of a part of the Divine – a rejection of the kind of wisdom that often overrules logic, the kind of truth that dwells in story and metaphor rather than in fact and empiricism, the kind of faith that transcends creeds and doctrines and feeds instead on compassion and mystery. So, this isn't a sermon about what *women want* or about what *women deserve*. It is a sermon about what we *all need*. It is a sermon about who *God is* – and how we have denied, at our peril, that part of God that is embodied in women's lives. Is there any doubt that if women's wisdom had been heeded, we would not have raped the earth as we have? Is there any doubt that if women's insights had been given their fair weight, we would live in an economy that is more generous to those in need and more just to the poor? Is there any doubt that if women's wounds had been acknowledged that we would live in a world less likely to inflict harm? Is there any doubt that if women's spirit had infused more of the leadership of the church over the centuries that we would be worshipping a God who celebrates our bodies instead of one who teaches us to be ashamed of them? I do not mean to say that women are better than men, or wiser than men, or that women should replace men. Nor do I mean to say that women are invariably faultless. I only mean to say what I believe true faith proclaims: namely, that God can only be understood – and experienced – and loved – in God's fullness: the great principles of maleness and femaleness indelibly wed.

Here's a closing thought: Everyone knows that the church in this generation is going through a rapid and massive transformation. To many, it feels like a disintegration. Membership down. Giving down. Denominations shrinking in numbers and influence. But what if this great tribulation is really the hard labor of delivering a new way of being church, of being people of

faith? If that is so – and I believe that it is – I am certain that the new church, the new religious landscape, the new practices of spirituality will draw again – as human societies did millennia ago – from the great reservoirs of life that women embody. I am certain that religious life will be renewed through the influence of brilliant and faithful women in partnership with loving and thoughtful men. And when that happens, I am certain that God will look upon us the way a long-suffering mother does when she calls from the back door that the table is laid, that the feast-lamp is lit . . . and when she sees her wayward children finally, happily, joyfully, coming home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.