

Mary, Joanna, Susanna and Many Others

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Readings

Luke 8: 2-3

And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Mag'dalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joan'na, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

from *Women Remembered: Jesus' Female Disciples*

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In the early churches there was enormous diversity, and female leaders are found in most traditions. . . . Their claims to authority could not have sprung from nowhere, and the evidence of important women disciples of Jesus and their role as (at the very least) witnesses to the resurrection suggests that they functioned as role models for centuries. . . . One of the problems is that surviving literature has been selected in a way that promotes a type of Christianity that triumphed in the 4th century under the auspices of the Roman emperor Constantine, a military leader who adopted Christianity with a view to conquering land and defeating his enemies, given that one branch of the faith had become increasingly popular with his soldiers. Despite the dominant discourse that would marginalize women at this time, fragments of texts, inscriptions, art and archaeology can enable us to catch a glimpse of women still exercising leadership roles, on the basis of the precedents they knew, through to the 6th and 7th centuries.

Recently, I looked over a list I made last October as we were beginning our co-bridge ministry here at CCC. It was a list of possible sermon topics. I was surprised that I have covered most of them with the exception of two ideas. One was a sermon on the Book of Jeremiah, a book forty-four chapters long written by a brilliant but cranky prophet, a prophet who asks the question *how can God be benevolent and loving, and at the same time be angry and vengeful?* The second idea was to explore the question of who the women disciples were that joined the Jesus movement. From the readings, you know which ones I chose. We'll save Jeremiah for another time (or maybe not).

From the beginning, women have been oppressed, abused and written out of history. Their contributions to art, politics, education, medicine, and religion ignored. But thankfully there are scientists, historians and theologians who search out and disclose the hidden histories of women. Two such women, Helen Bond of the University of Edinburgh and Joan Taylor, Professor at King's College London, have searched for evidence of Jesus' female disciples and their legacy. The results of their research and investigations

were the subject of a 2018 documentary entitled “Jesus’ Female Disciples: The New Evidence,” and also a book published in 2022, *Women Remembered: Jesus’ Female Disciples*. During their research for the documentary, they went to Naples, Italy, and examined a large catacomb under the city that had been excavated in 2009 revealing a series of wall paintings, one of which depicts a woman with outstretched arms holding the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in flames. Bright red flames can be seen coming out of the corners of each book. During the service of consecration of a bishop at that time, a bible was held over the head of the person to symbolize the entry of the Holy Spirit into the person’s ministry. The painting is dated near the middle of the fourth century. Its significance is that it shows that for the first three hundred years of Christianity, women were bishops in the church, as well as holding a number of other roles such as deacons, conveners of house meetings, and teachers.

Let’s begin with the women who were disciples of Jesus, women who walked the dusty roads of Galilee, women like the ones named in the reading from Luke 8:2-3: Mary Magdalene, so named because she came from the fishing village of Magdal, which means Tower of Fish, located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There’s also Susanna and Joan’na, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, which means she was a woman of influence and wealth. Also named in the gospels are Mary the mother of James and Salome. Mary and Martha appear in both the Gospel of Luke and in the Gospel of John as key female disciples of Jesus. These are just some of the women who, when Jesus was in Galilee, served him, and there were many others who went up with him to Jerusalem.

When we look at the first fifty years of the church, we learn from the Book of Acts that there were women like Lydia, a business woman who sold purple fabric, and who led house churches where Christians met for a meal, prayed and discussed the teachings of the Apostles. Many women were deacons who managed the distribution of food to the community. Researchers Taylor and Bond glean from the small number of references to women in the Gospels and in Acts that women made up a significant number of disciples and played important roles in Jesus’ ministry. They also turn to a surprising source for more evidence on the role of women in the early church, the writings of St. Paul. They say:

Sometime in the late 50s CE, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome. This was one of the most important letters that Paul would ever write, setting out his beliefs and hoping that the church would welcome him when he came to visit . . . [H]e finished his letter with a list of important people he knew there. Many of them worked with him. What’s fascinating about this list is that it’s the closest we have to a snapshot of the early church . . . And the surprising thing is that, of the twenty-nine names in the chapter, eleven – more than one-third of them – are women . . . Most significant of all is the fact that the letter itself was delivered by a woman, Phobe, [who] was not just Paul’s deputy, but also an able teacher, envoy and negotiator. (*Women Remembered: Jesus’ Female Disciples*, Joan Taylor and Helen Bond, 2022, pg.2.)

Taylor and Bond conclude: “Women disciples of Jesus were a vital part of his movement, and women spearheaded the growth of the mission in the decades that followed.” Women’s indispensable contribution was nearly erased completely, and the leadership roles of women in the Western Christian Church were eradicated by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, when three centuries

after Jesus, Christianity was remade to fit comfortably with Roman imperial rule as the religion of the rich and powerful. However, as we learned from our second reading, “Despite the dominant discourse that would marginalize women at this time, fragments of texts, inscriptions, art and archaeology enable us to catch a glimpse of women still exercising leadership roles on the basis of the precedents they knew, through to the 6th and 7th centuries.” In other words, women refused to be silenced and continued to preach and teach. Women persisted in being leaders and refused to obey a pope’s edict that women could not be ordained as bishops.

I wanted to share this important research into the woman disciples with you for two reasons. First, as a reminder that throughout the long history of the Christian Church, men in positions of authority, both secular and religious, have tried to silence women and deny them their rights, such as the freedom of choice. But women have resisted and fought against those barriers. We need to support those efforts today. Secondly, I hope to help us appreciate the United Church of Christ’s history of being a justice-seeking and radically inclusive denomination. The Congregational Church, which became the UCC, was the first Protestant denomination to ordain a woman, Antoinette Louisa Brown in 1851. Currently, 52% of UCC clergy are women, and with 51% of UCC clergy being over age 60. and the majority of those entering seminary being primarily women, the percentage of women clergy will continue to increase.

In 1971, the Golden Gate Association ordained Rev. William Johnson as the first openly gay man. I was the moderator of the Golden Gate Association at that time and had the honor of placing the traditional symbol of ordination, the clerical stole, on Rev. Johnson. Today, as we have seen in our Loomis UCC congregation and across the country, LGBTQ+ folks are experiencing hate-filled violence, discrimination, and legislative attacks at unprecedented levels. We need to expand our notion of Open and Affirming so that we not only welcome all people regardless of who they are, who they love, or where they are on their faith journey, but that we also are allies and advocates, standing with the LGBTQ+ community in their struggle for justice and safety.

This summer in Indianapolis, Indiana, at the 34th General Synod, the synod will elect the Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson as the UCC’s General Minister and President, making her the first woman and the first woman of African descent to lead our denomination. It will be an historic moment that reinforces our intention to be a radically inclusive, justice-seeking church.

A word here. This summer two of our guest preachers will be African American women from the Northern California Conference. I trust you will treat them to a warm CCC welcome. I also hope you will welcome them with some hearty “Amen’s” while they are preaching. Remember when Rev. Davena Jones, our interim Conference minister, was here last January, and we sat politely quiet as she preached, until she finally gestured with her hands and asked, “Can I get an Amen?”

In a time when both church and society worldwide still grapple with the full inclusion of women and the equality of women, may we remember that in all the Gospels, Mary witnesses Jesus’ crucifixion and burial, so she is the foundational witness.

In a time when both church and society struggle to achieve justice, equality, and safety for people of color and for LGBTQ+ people, let us remember our UCC heritage of inclusion and justice, and may that memory shape our intention to be their humble allies and fierce advocates. May it be so.