

The Women Who Followed Him
Luke 23:44 – 56; Luke 24:1 – 12
Sunday, May 12, 2019

Three weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, Nancy Arico stood up here and shared with you the story that I just read of Jesus' resurrection on that first Easter Sunday 2,000 years ago. And then right after that, she led you in the Call to Worship, in which she proclaimed, "Christ is risen!" This is something that we do every single year. We start worship on Easter Sunday with a *woman* telling the story of the resurrection and announcing that Christ is risen, because when you look at *every account* of the resurrection in scripture, *women* were the first ones to announce that good news, and so we *honor* and *continue* that tradition here.

We *do* this because seven years ago I was reading a book by an author named Rachel Held Evans in which she said this, "Too many Easter services begin with a man standing before a congregation of Christians and shouting, 'He is risen!' Were we to honor the symbolic details of the text, that distinction would always belong to a woman."¹ I read that, and it just made sense to me. Women were the first ones that Jesus charged with sharing the news of his resurrection, so *why wouldn't we?*

That author, Rachel Held Evans, grew up in East Tennessee, in a denomination and a faith tradition that did *not* honor women as being equal to men. And yet, she says that she always felt like there was this expectation placed upon her, this impossibly high standard of faith that she as a woman had to live up to. It was *hard* for her, growing up in an environment that placed so much *pressure* on her to be the ideal, virtuous woman of faith.

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, pg. 145.

So in 2012 she wrote the book in which I read that quote, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, in which she spent an entire year trying to live out all of the Bible's instructions for women as literally as possible. She did not cut her hair for a year, because the Bible instructs women not to cut their hair short. She *covered* her head, because the Bible instructs women to do that. She learned how to cook and make her own clothes. She spent a month obeying her husband and calling him, "Master," which made *him* just as uncomfortable as it made *her*. She tells one story about how she had to sit on the roof of her house reading a list of her transgressions after she had an argument with her husband, because Proverbs 21:9 says, "It is better to live in a corner of the roof than in a house shared with a contentious woman." It's a great book, very funny, but also very deep, because she learns a lot about herself and her faith.

She's written several other books, all of them telling the story of her journey from the faith she grew up with that she experienced as rigid and oppressive, toward a new, living, loving, abundant faith that she sees modeled in Jesus Christ. We have used her words *a lot* here over the years. Her quotes have been on our bulletin covers, like today. I have recommended her books to people who were struggling with their faith. I use her words as a part of the confirmation liturgy when our Confirmation Class joins the church. Whether you have heard of her or not, read any of her books or not, you have *heard her words* here with us. She has helped shape *our* journey of faith as a congregation.

And just over a week ago, at 37 years old, Rachel died. She had gone into the hospital in mid-April with a UTI and the flu. She had a severe allergic reaction to antibiotics, and her brain started experiencing constant seizures. She was placed in a medically induced coma for two weeks. She never came out of it and died last Saturday, leaving behind her husband and two children, a 3-year-old son, and a daughter who will turn 1 next week. In the days after her death,

there were countless stories posted online by people who said that Rachel had helped them come *back* to their faith or *stay* in the church or come to new understandings of faith. So many stories from women who said that they were *pastors* because Rachel helped them see that they *could be*; that they were just as called by God as any man. She helped transform the lives and faith of countless numbers of people.

So in light of her death and with today being Mother's Day, it seemed fitting to talk about the women who have nurtured *all of us* in faith. And that starts with the women we see in our readings from Luke. Because we would not *be here* if it were not for the women who followed Jesus.

All the attention is always given to the *male* disciples of Jesus – Peter, James, John, Thomas. But as we saw in the first reading this morning, the story of Jesus' death, when all the *male* disciples had run away and abandoned Jesus, it was the *women* who followed him to see where his body was laid. It was the *women* who returned to the tomb early on Sunday morning to care for his body, only to find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. It was the *women* to whom the announcement was first made that “he is not here, but has risen.” It was the *women* – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and unnamed “other women” – who went back and told the *male* disciples everything that had happened. And of course, as happens so many times, the men didn’t *listen* to the women, didn’t *believe* them. But it was the *women* who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. In the other gospels, it was the *women* to whom Jesus first appeared. It was the *women* who were the first to proclaim, “I have seen the Lord!”

Without the *women*, would anyone have bothered going to the tomb at all? The *men* simply followed the *women* who followed Jesus.

But somewhere along the way, scripture makes a shift from women being the first evangelists of Christ's resurrection to women being told, "You must remain silent and have no authority over a man." Now, all of this *happened* and scripture was *written* in a patriarchal, male-dominated society where women had no voice and no rights. And things continued that way for most of the next 2,000 years. Women of faith were told, "You can teach Sunday School, but you can't preach. You can play a supporting role, but you can't be a pastor."

Even though we know that women served as Elders as far back as the 2nd or 3rd century, and Paul praises women as leaders in the church in his letters, it wasn't until 1853 (just 166 years ago) that the first woman – Antoinette Brown – was ordained to pastoral ministry. But her ordination wasn't even recognized by her denomination, and she left 10 months later. In our own denomination, the first woman to be ordained as an Elder was in 1930, and Margaret Towner was the first female minister, ordained in 1956 (that's only 63 years ago, in the 2,000-year history of Christianity). Many denominations still will not ordain women as Elders or Ministers.

And you might say that progress has been made, but it's not exactly "progress" when the whole thing *started* with women bearing witness to the resurrection, and then we took that ability *away* from them, only to give it back very slowly and with much resistance. And we're not just talking about *ordination* and women serving as *Elders* or *pastors*. The Church as a whole does not exactly have the best history when it comes to how women have been treated.

I think it's important that we talk about this. Because while, in many ways, we still live in a male-dominated society, that *does* appear to be changing. And how will that change impact the message and ministry of the Church? You might say that it *won't* or that it *shouldn't*, but when

you have generations of Christians growing up with women as pastors (and there are *far* more women coming out of seminaries these days than men); when you have generations of Christians growing up having faith and grace modeled to them by *women*; when you have increasing numbers of people (not just *Christians*, but people in general) being raised by single mothers, for whom the *father* is no longer a strong, reliable, providing, present figure (the *mother* assumes that role), all of that affects the way in which we understand *God*, and it *has* to affect the way in which we communicate our faith. Otherwise we're not conveying a message that matches up with the way that people experience life.

I've shared with you before how, all throughout my life, my faith has been shaped by women. Richard Rohr writes that "most people (though not all) have experienced unconditional love not through the image of a man, but through the image of a woman." And that was certainly the case for me. Growing up, I learned *rules* and systems of *punishment* and *reward* (for both life *and* faith) from my *father*, but it was my *mother* and my *grandmothers* and the women who were my pastors and Sunday School teachers and who sat around me in worship each week who taught me *grace, forgiveness, compassion, acceptance, and unconditional love*. All throughout my life, I have been surrounded by strong women of faith who nurtured my own faith and modeled for me what it means to follow Jesus.

We have to create a culture that shows that God honors and values women as much as men, and that we do, too. Not that one is above the other, but that both are equal in God's eyes *and in our eyes*, because both male and female are created in the very image of God. Scripture tells us that over and over again. That there is something about the nature and essence of God that embraces and encompasses the masculine *and* the feminine; holds *both* in perfect balance. So we have to practice and communicate our faith in ways that honor the image of God in both men *and*

women. And since we *do* still live in a male-dominated world, that means we have to make an *extra* effort to lift up and honor *women*.

There's a part in one of Rachel Held Evans' books where she's looking at Proverbs chapter 31. This is a poem in which the author (who, it should be noted, is a man) attempts to describe the traits of a virtuous woman. Rachel talks about how, in her faith tradition, that chapter is often misunderstood and misinterpreted as being a "job description" for the ideal woman, a list of things that women have to live up to.

It starts off with the line, "A virtuous woman who can find?" And then it lists the things that make for a virtuous woman. But as Rachel studied this text and talked about it with people who are Jewish (because it is a Jewish text), she discovered that the phrase "virtuous woman" in Hebrew is *eshet chayil*, which actually means, "woman of valor." *Valor* is different than *virtue*. *Virtue* has to do with high moral standards and conformity of one's life and conduct to moral and ethical principles. Which *is* important. But *valor* comes from a word that means, "worth," "to be of worth," and it has to do with *courage* and *boldness* and *determination* and *bravery* in the face of *danger*.

She talks in the book about how she and her friends started encouraging and celebrating one another by saying to each other, "*Eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!"

When a friend graduated seminary, they cheered, "*Eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!"

When a friend had a baby, "*Eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!"

When her mother beat breast cancer, “*Eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!”

And as she says in that quote on the front of the bulletin, “Valor isn’t about *what* you do, but *how* you do it.” The *spirit* with which you do *whatever* you do. What would it look like for *us* to celebrate women of valor? We did this several years ago (some of you might remember this), and I think it’s a good time to do this again.

Ellen Moeller, who came to St. John’s over 20 years ago, raised her children here, and has helped raise *our* children through her leadership with Christian Education and Sunday School and being a constant presence at youth fellowship, and has brought to that work a deep wisdom and thoughtful, loving spirit. As she and Doug prepare to leave this week to begin a new chapter of their lives in Indianapolis, we give thanks to God for all that she has brought into the life of this church, and we celebrate her as an *eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!

Cindy Kerr, who throughout her own fight against cancer never stopped making pillowcases for kids who are hospitalized with cancer or other life-changing illnesses, and she has done so with fierce love and determination, never letting her illness slow her down from taking care of *others*, because *she* is an *eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!

Lauren Feldman, who over the past year has faced the hardest thing that any mother could ever face, and she has done it with courage and intentionality and unwavering love, and even though she isn’t here today, she is *still here*, because she is an *eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!

Iris, who as a single woman is fostering three young boys, while still finding time to run her own music studio that sends kids to Carnegie Hall, *and* somehow managing to prepare amazing music

each week that draws us all into the presence of God, because *she* is an *eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!

One woman who I can't even name to you who constantly keeps me supplied with gifts cards that I can discreetly pass along to people who are in need of food or other help, and every year she pays for youth who need help to go on the mission trips, and helps in *so many* other ways that you will never know about, all because someone did the same for her when she needed help years ago. You know who you are, and you are an *eshet chayil!* Woman of valor!

We could go on and on because every woman in here has a story of valor that deserves to be honored and celebrated. And men (just so you don't feel left out), we should be going out of our way to do that; to honor the women of valor in our lives. Because in doing so, we honor the very image of God. And because without the women who followed Jesus, then *and now*, *we* would not be *here*. *We* are *all* simply following the women who followed Jesus.