

Are We Amazed?

Luke 24.1-12

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Easter 1C

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Mrs. Joseph is the first one I can remember, though I'm sure there were others. My recollections of her are splashed with primary tempera paint in old orange juice cans, dressed in a 1970s pastel, poly-blend suit, soft with laughter, and dancing to Ella Jenkins "Play Your Instruments and Make a Pretty Sound" as we moved with rhythm sticks and castanets. I didn't know how radical Mrs. Joseph was for believing in the power of play and the full humanity of all children. I didn't know she was a pioneer in racial equity before we had language for such a concept. At 4- and 5-years-old, I also didn't know Ella Jenkins was a force of nature, graduating with a BA in Sociology in 1951! A woman! Of color! in 1951! And she learned interfaith multiculturalism from her Jewish roommates. And cherished musical diversity learned through Puerto Rican and Cuban friends. Then the beats she learned and the messages she inherited were infused in that music that my little body moved to with those rhythm sticks and castanets. Mrs. Joseph was telling us stories at the cellular level with music and art and play—telling us a story of how big and high and wide the love of God is.

Mrs. Conley taught us bible stories and made a birthday cake for Jesus. I remember going to her house for that Christmas party more than I remember almost anything else. Being in her personal space. She was an actual woman! With a real house! And a kitchen! And she didn't just live at the church for Sunday School! If you asked me how old she was when I was an 8-yr-old in her Sunday School class, I would have surely guessed she was 97 or 103. Yesterday, my mother confirmed she was actually no more than 80—born around 1905. I don't recall how the structure of her classes went, but I remember her gathering us in a semi-circle and telling us stories. She told us the stories of Jesus healing the sick and feeding the poor. The ones of him getting in trouble for loving tax collectors and sex workers and not casting stones in bogus trials with trumped up charges. She had us memorize verses of sacred text about loving our neighbors as we loved ourselves. And I took her seriously because why would you NOT?!

Mary Beth was a high school senior when I was in Mrs. Conley's class. And she was an Acteen Queen Regent in service with crown, scepter, cape, and pin. Professor Eileen Campbell-Reed says reaching that level in Acteens made you, "as close to a Baptist debutante as one can get without the actual social manners, lessons, or debutante ball."¹ The ceremony masked as a worship event took place in a Sunday night service in Bush Auditorium (which was bigger than the chapel but smaller than the sanctuary), and the high school girls wore prom dresses and long gloves and received their crown and scepter and cape and pin right there in the middle of church. It was surely the most glamorous thing I'd ever seen. And not only was Mary Beth an Acteen Queen Regent in service, but in time, she became my friend. She was one of the first ones to call out my giftedness. To see something in me that I surely didn't see in myself. To embrace me as a peer when I was no more than 16 and she could have been off doing much more exciting things than investing in me. She played Eli to my Samuel and called me into a fullness of self that I'm sure neither of us could have imagined as she told me a story about myself that was bigger than I knew was possible.

Colleen was the first one I heard preach, though. She's creative and fiery and complicated and passionate. She's my kinda woman for sure. Five nights in a row in 1995, this woman walked onto a stage in DeLand, Florida, and talked about what it meant to follow Jesus. And she didn't use any of that old, familiar guilt. She didn't mention a single thing about a blood sacrifice to an angry God. She didn't try to make us cry or feel deep shame for our shortcomings and the lessons we had not yet learned. She played the Indigo Girls and spoke of our inherent goodness and told us that loving Jesus might look like painting someone's house or making a turkey sandwich or playing with a child in a park. She was so good up there. I'm sure she was the very best preacher I had ever heard by the time I was heading off to college, and the fact that she was a woman wasn't lost on me. She held a space I'd never seen before. She held it for me. She held it for so many others. She drew us into this story she was telling.

¹ <https://bwim.info/this-is-what-a-minister-looks-like/this-is-what-a-minister-looks-like-eileen-campbell-reed/>

Sarah was the first one I watched do it every single day, up close and personal, a steel magnolia if ever I knew one—strong and soft, bold and delicate, tender and tough as nails. I watched her move effortlessly and lead instinctively. I listened to her sing and watched her dance and heard her bring the stories alive. The ones we'd danced to with Mrs. Joseph and memorized with Mrs. Conley. She put this trust in me that 23-year-old me and 25-year-old me surely had not earned. She knew I had no idea what I was doing but that something in me would know how to anyway. And she called me one step further and one step further until she placed me in the pulpit and sat down to hear me preach for the very first time. Because she knew I could. And knew I was called. And knew there was a story in me to tell.

"Did Jesus have any girl disciples?" my daughter asked me in the car the other day. "Well, they weren't in the 12 who were named, but he had lots of women who were part of his group, and I think some of them were definitely disciples even if they weren't in that first group that gets called 'The 12'." Who were the 12? And who were the women? And why didn't the women get named as disciples? And and and and???? My children get a front row seat to the preacher truth that there is a whole lot about this I don't know. Not just my general short-term memory when it comes to the details and historical notes, but also the what ifs. Whew. Resurrection Sunday is a swirl of all of that, isn't it? I don't know. I don't know.

But on this Sunday, here's what we have in our hands. We sit here with just a couple of stories, not a lot of details, and zero historical notes. And we have a list of women's names who are the storytellers and some men who just cannot believe them. Won't believe them. Aren't going to hear the story from **A** woman much less a GROUP of women. Well, I don't want to be in *that* number. I've learned to not just savor the stories of bold women leading me but to take those stories into my life and body.

Today, it is the women who take the lead. It is women who tell the story. It is women who rise at early dawn to care for Jesus' body with dignity. It is women who are *not* hiding after their friend and teacher has been killed as an enemy of the state. It is the women who are *not* afraid to embrace their Jewish practice and step into the light of day as his chosen family even though they may well be arrested just like he was. It is the women who are bold and confident as they risk being associated with this man Jesus. And it is the women who run to tell them

men what has happened and drive Peter to utter amazement even when the rest dismiss them as silly women telling an idea tale. Let's be amazed by their story today.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them [how many others? can we guess? 3 others? 5? 9 would make it 12 of them altogether] who told this to the male apostles. But these words of **all** of these women (at least 5, maybe 12, we don't know) seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. Except Peter. Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

And then later that day, two of Jesus' followers were walking and discussing everything that had taken place. And somehow, hiddenly and yet right there, Jesus came up beside them and asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, **some of our women amazed us**. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it **just as the women had said**, but they did not see Jesus."

Now later in the same day the women have become *some of OUR women*. And these women AMAZED US. And when some of our companions went to check it out for themselves, it was JUST AS THE WOMEN HAD SAID. Oh, that Jesus, first

making us rethink this whole who is in and who is out of God's love thing. And then making us rethink this whole loyalty to the narrative of empire thing. And then making us rethink cleanliness and religion and fidelity to tradition rather than essence. And then making us rethink feeding and tables and community and friendship and affection and health and wholeness and justice and shalom. And then making us rethink even life after death. And then making us think who gets to see it and experience and know it and tell about it first.

On Good Friday, we read the words of Jean Vanier (founder of L'Arche community) who has just entered hospice care at 90-years-old. He wrote these words in response to Peter's balking at Jesus' desire to wash his feet. Jean Vanier who created an intentional community for people of various abilities to live together for mutual care and love. He wrote:

Jesus came to transform
the model of society
from a pyramid to a body,
where each and every person has a place,
whatever their abilities or disabilities,
where each one is dependent upon the other.
Each is called to fulfill a mission in the body of humanity
and of the Church.
There is no "last place."

Jesus, revealing himself as the least one in society,
the one who does the dirty jobs,
the one who is in the last place,
calls his followers to be attentive to the least in society.
God is not out of reach, in the skies.
God is hidden in the "heavens" of the hearts
of all those who are in the last place.
The gospel message is the world upside down.

This is what is happening in the resurrection. It's not just happening *TO* Jesus, it's happening to the order of things. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of

James, and the other women with them are the first ones to see. The first ones to know. The first ones to tell the story. All of these thousands of years later, we are saying their names and talking about how their fidelity and bravery and risk-taking has shaped us and is calling us deeper onto the brave and bold way of the Christ.

Friends, the gospel message is the world upside down. The message of God is always and only drawing us deeper onto the way of love. The message of Christ is always and only expanding our awareness of the full humanity of all people around. The message of Holy Spirit is always and only compelling us to live this thing out in love, in awareness, in bravery, in fidelity. And if we think otherwise, it's because our thoughts that are too small; not God's. We humans are the ones who draw our circles too small. We add limits and ceilings to what is possible in the Kingdom. We ascribe human limitations to Divine imagination. This is a day for hearing stories of the impossible and embracing their lessons as holy truth.

Are we amazed?

Are we amazed by what this bold cohort of women saw and heard that early morning?

Are we amazed by the story of God?

Are we amazed by the work of Jesus the Christ?

Are we amazed by the people who come into our lives, guided by Spirit, inspired by the Holy?

Tell their story today. Embody their bravery and faith. Believe in resurrection. Delight in knowing God will always and absolutely surprise you. Today is the day, my friends. Alleluia, Christ is risen!