

WOMEN FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

(Bobby Kelly)

The Gospels present women as central figures in the ministry of Jesus. The fact that Jesus included women in such vital and varied roles marked a stark contrast to the status of Jewish, Greek, and to a large extent, Roman women. While one must be careful not to overstate the situation in the first century, it is safe to say that women had limited opportunities outside of domestic roles and had little control over their own lives. When viewed in this context, the revolutionary implications of Jesus's proclamation for women come more fully into view.

Mary, the mother and future follower of Jesus, dominates Luke's account of Jesus's birth. Mary's song (Luke 1:46–55) is the ultimate celebration of the "birth" of a revolution that will turn the current structures upside down, or perhaps more appropriately, right-side up (Luke 1:46–55). In this revolution the proud and wealthy are brought low and go hungry, while the humble and poor are elevated and filled. The song also infers that women, like Mary, will stand alongside men in the revolution. The presence of Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–7, 24–25, 39–45, 57–60) and Anna the prophet (Luke 2:36–38) provides confirmation. Men and women will participate equally in God's coming reign.

The Gospels present women as models of faithful discipleship, some of long-standing nature who support the mission financially (Luke 8:1–3) and who often succeed when the male disciples fail miserably. The list of such women would include Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Jesus, Salome, Mary the wife of Clopas, Joanna, Susanna, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and a number of unnamed women. While the Gospels depict these women as faithful followers of Jesus, nowhere is it more evident than during Passion Week. It is the women who remain with Jesus to the end. The unnamed woman who anoints Jesus "beforehand for burial" emerges as one of the few, if not the only one, who seems to understand Jesus's prediction that he will die but on the third day arise. Thus she anoints him on Tuesday since his body will be gone on Sunday. The Twelve remain completely in the dark. Furthermore, it is the "daughters of Jerusalem" who weep for Jesus as he is led away to crucifixion (Luke 23:27–31). In the Synoptics, while it is true that men stand alongside women as witnesses of the crucifixion, the emphasis is clearly on the women who "were watching from a distance" (Mark 15:40; par. Matt. 27:55–56; Luke 23:49). John highlights the women along with the Beloved Disciple standing by the cross (John 19:25–27). Similarly, the women alone observe the place where Jesus was buried (Matt. 27:60–61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55–56). While each Gospel highlights the women a bit differently at the empty tomb, it is clear that women are the chief witnesses, the first to be commissioned "go and tell," and in general display faith in strong contrast with the confused disciples (Matt. 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18).

Modern interpreters should resist the urge to make Jesus a thoroughgoing egalitarian. Jesus made little if any effort to overturn traditional domestic expectations of women in the first century. While women did constitute part of the outer circle of Jesus's followers, he did not include a woman among the Twelve. Jesus does, however, work within the structures of the day in order to elevate the status of women both in the larger society and certainly in the coming rule of God.

