



## ***“Trust the Witnesses”***

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*Luke 24:13-24*

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It was Sunday evening. Two companions traversed the dusty path to Emmaus, a seven-mile walk lengthened in perception by the weight they carried in their hearts. *Jesus was gone.*

As they walked, they recounted their feelings at witnessing the death of a dream. The fear that gripped them when Jesus was arrested. The anxiety that they might be next. The fleeting hope that his trial might be merely a show of force meant to send a message. The nausea they felt seeing him whipped and bleeding. The despair as he was nailed to the cross. The despondency that rose within them when he refused to fight back or stage a last-minute miracle. The shame in seeing him publicly executed like a common criminal. The disenchantment that the movement they dedicated themselves to came to a sudden and violent end. The confusion as reports came back that his body was missing.

Suddenly, a stranger appeared with them. Where had he come from? They hadn't heard his approaching footsteps – perhaps they had been talking too loudly or too intensely to notice. His presence and his words disrupted. “What were you talking about just now?”

They stopped in their tracks. *Is he serious?* The grief they had barely been keeping at bay welled up again as they faced having to recount the story for this newcomer. “Where have *you* been? All Jerusalem is buzzing with the news. How can you not know?”

Cleopas, always quick to speak, began to lay it out for him. “We were talking about Jesus of Nazareth; you know, the one people thought was a prophet because of his powerful teaching and the amazing things he did. We were sure he was sent by God to redeem Israel, to win our independence from Rome. But the religious leaders had him arrested and put on trial. They executed him by crucifixion. He died right in front of us. That was three days ago.

“But there's more. This morning, some women brought shocking and disturbing news. They went to visit his tomb, but the body was gone. Now, they claimed that angels appeared and told them Jesus was alive. Some of the others went to the tomb to see for themselves. Sure enough, it was empty. But they didn't see anything else. No angels; certainly not Jesus.”

Over the next several verses, this story will unfold, the mysterious stranger revealing first the meaning of scriptural prophecy and eventually his identity. But for now, the two on the Road to Emmaus didn't believe – in Resurrection, certainly; maybe, in any of it. Not yet.

Why not? It was, in fact, Jesus himself who appeared to them on the road that day. But verse 16 tells us “they were prevented from recognizing him,” either by an act of God or because they were blinded by grief or because they never expected to see him. They had seen him die; dead people don't just show up on the road. But had they not been paying attention to his teaching or his miracles, to his own predictions of his death and rising? Jesus would say in the very next verse that it was their “dull minds” that kept them from understanding.

To be transparent, I'm reading into the text in my telling. Luke never explicitly says that the two on the road that day didn't believe. But the cues in the surrounding verses suggest that was the case. Verse 11 says that the report of the women was regarded as “nonsense” by the disciples. When the stranger encountered them, they appeared dejected. They described their hope in the past tense: “*We had hoped* he would redeem Israel.” All these details signal a high level of skepticism, at very least. But the most incriminating piece of evidence is this: Jesus was rumored in Jerusalem to be risen from the dead...*and they went home.*

Why didn't they trust the witnesses? They weren't alone. The other disciples didn't believe them, either. Was it because the story was so unbelievable? Was it because they didn't want to get their hopes up? Or was it because the first witnesses were women?

We have a long history of not trusting women in our culture and our institutions. The vast majority of religious leaders throughout Christian history have been men, men who assumed a privileged status as men and established a patriarchy in the church to protect that status. Biblical translators and commentators have been overwhelmingly male

(and Eurocentric). The interpretive history of scripture has passed on to generations of faithful Christ-followers an unconscious gender bias when it comes to how we read the Bible. Let me give you an example. Picture the story I just retold from Luke 24. What is the sex of the two people walking to Emmaus that day? One is named Cleopas, which is a Roman male nickname. The other? Neither their identity nor their sex are ever identified. The fact that these two travel alone and arrive at their destination where they lodge together might lead us reasonably to deduce they are a married couple. And yet, I'm willing to bet that most of you who knew this story already, like me, assume that they were both men.

Every senior pastor to serve this church has been male except for one, and she was only appointed in a temporary, transitional role. Women weren't afforded full clergy status in the United Methodist Church until 1956, but we've been even slower to respect their calling and leadership and even their personhood. I've listened in tears and heartbreak as my female clergy colleagues have shared stories of undermined authority, sexist comments, and outright verbal abuse by congregations they've served. Women couldn't vote in this country until 1920. The Equal Rights Amendment was written in 1923 in an attempt to have our constitution affirm that all men *and women* were created equal. It still hasn't been ratified by the requisite 2/3 majority of states nearly a century later. Why? *Because we don't trust women.*

Harvey Weinstein abused at least 30 women and likely many more because we don't believe women's stories. Bill Cosby is a sexual predator who acted with impunity for years because he was a beloved cultural icon *and because we didn't believe the women he abused*. Scores of actors, athletes, politicians, and other public figures have been openly accused and subsequently excused because *we don't believe the women who are brave enough to tell their stories*. Rape kits sit on shelves untested, backlogged in crime labs all over the country. Many perpetrators are finally answering for their crimes thanks in large part to the rise of the #MeToo movement. But how many millions of other victims have been shamed and silenced by our collective unwillingness to trust their stories?

This lack of trust pervades almost every element of our society, including the examination room. Women's physical and mental health needs are routinely misdiagnosed or dismissed by doctors.<sup>1</sup> Men reporting abdominal pain when visiting an emergency room in the U.S. wait an average of 49 minutes to receive an analgesic for pain. For women, the average wait is 65 minutes, 33% longer.<sup>2</sup> The word *hysteria* is derived from the Greek and Latin root word for *uterus* because the ancients didn't trust the accounts of women who described physical pain or mental anguish; to a certain degree, we still perpetuate that bias today.

Is this just the way it is? Is there no faithful response Christians to change it? Or worse, does our faith actually *encourage* misogyny and gender bias? Many suggest it does. But thanks be to God, people of faith are pushing back on such egregious distortions of God's Word.

In the very first chapter of the Bible, we find the testimony that:

*God created humanity in God's own image,  
in the divine image God created them,  
male **and female** God created them. (Genesis 1:27, CEB, emphasis mine)*

The Apostle Paul, often mischaracterized as establishing an exclusively male leadership hierarchy in the church, insists in his letter to the Galatians that "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:27-28, CEB)

Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament bear witness to the leadership of women and the high level of trust accorded to them. Miriam was a prophet and a leader among the Hebrew people in captivity and as they made their way out of Egypt. Deborah was a judge and a hero of Israel. Hannah was the mother of Samuel who dedicated her son to become prophet and kingmaker. Ruth demonstrated the power of familial love and perseverance. Huldah was a prophet who guided the people in reclaiming their identity. Jesus honored women and elevated them in a society that did not. He spoke with the woman at the well, whose testimony led many people to believe. His encounter with the Syrophenician woman brought healing to her daughter and a moment of clarity to Jesus. Jesus found comfort and encouragement from Mary and Martha. He and the disciples were supported by Joanna and Susanna. And, of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.northwell.edu/katz-institute-for-womens-health/articles/gaslighting-in-womens-health>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18439195/>

course, the first witnesses to the resurrection were women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others. After Pentecost in the early days of the movement, women continued to play critical roles in the church. Phoebe even led one.

Of course, the scriptural record of the treatment of women isn't always liberating. The Bible is filled with episodes of violence toward women, wanton disregard for their wisdom and their personal safety, and marginalization of their lives and experiences. Let's not fall into revisionism in our eagerness for a more enlightened heritage. We must reconcile the bad with the good. And when we *know* better, we should *do* better. Does the Bible include terrible accounts of treatment of women? *Yes*. Does the overall narrative of the Bible support treating women as lesser than men? *Absolutely not*.

One of the most high-profile figures to shed light on the role of women in Christian leadership is evangelical author and speaker Beth Moore. Moore is a megastar whose Living Proof Ministries netted assets close to \$15 million in 2016. But that changed after she criticized then candidate Donald Trump's behavior toward women. She was dismayed by support Trump received from Southern Baptist leaders – not just as a political figure, but as a *de facto* hero of the faith. Her support for victims of sexual abuse and bold stance on women's leadership made her a pariah. Last month, Moore announced that she was "no longer a Southern Baptist" and can no longer be part of a church that is so dismissive of women and their experience.

The United Methodist Church has its own checkered past and plenty enough moral failures to go around. I give thanks for the work of the Commission on the Status and Role of Women which carries out a prophetic role in holding the church accountable in matters of gender equity. I celebrate the United Methodist Women and their long track record of leading the church. They were outspoken abolitionists, partners in the fight for women's suffrage, and advocates for ordination and equal status for women in pastoral leadership. They have been the conscience of the church, cajoling and prodding the denomination on civil rights, immigration, economic justice, healthcare, and missions. It is my firm conviction that the United Methodist Women are directly responsible for much of the difference-making ministry of the United Methodist Church as we know it today.

But let's not be naïve. The struggle for equality is far from complete. Too much of our society is still structured to benefit men. Too many women are held to an impossible standard we would never apply to men in leadership. And too many women are still not trusted, their stories not believed – by both men *and* women. *We must do better*.

I give thanks for the women who faithfully serve in leadership in our church, in ways both highly visible and less visible. I rejoice in the leadership of our Bishop Tracy Smith Malone. I celebrate those who have served in pastoral ministry in the past and who will in the future. And I honor the women in my own life who have taught me the meaning of strength, determination, and hopeful endurance.

Without women, the Easter story wouldn't have been told. Even so, it almost wasn't. That God chose women to be the first witnesses to the Resurrection shouldn't escape our attention. Let's learn from God's instruction and the faithfulness of women. *Trust the witnesses*.