

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 20, 2025

Showing Up

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the start of this liturgical year, back in Advent, I decided I was going to forgo my usual biblical commentators and theologians and focus instead on perspectives on Scripture outside of the white, male, western perspective. I understand that God created us with a diversity of perspectives and experiences that all contribute beautifully to the tapestry of interpretation of God's Word. Though, of course, I still utilize the Lutheran traditions of Scriptural interpretation, especially the "gospel within the gospel" and seeking the "plain sense" of scripture.

I must confess, I wish I had done this sooner. The wealth of understanding and meaning that these different perspectives have opened for me in Scripture has been staggering! It has been an important reminder to me that the most reliable path to growth is leaving your comfort zone; even just leaving the comfort zone of your usual information sources! I highly recommend that whatever your field of interest or study, you make a point of seeking a diversity of perspectives. You will be amazed at how possibilities can open up when we aren't locked in one way of seeing things.

One of the different perspectives I have been intentionally seeking out is that of feminist theologians. And our reading this morning, the first resurrection appearance, is a key part of a fascinating and (I find) compelling argument around the erasure of women in scripture. And it all centers on who shows up!

The Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the gospels, then comes Matthew and Luke, and lastly John. The feminist point regarding the erasure of women focusses on the differences in these resurrection appearance accounts. Mark names “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome”¹ as the ones showing up. Luke mentions “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women,”² while Matthew names “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.”³ John, the latest written gospel only mentions Mary Magdalene.⁴ So, as time progresses, we see a de-emphasis on the presence of the women in this important narrative.

I’m sure this comes as no great surprise to the women gathered here this morning! There is a long history of not acknowledging the importance of the leadership and work of women, inside the church and outside it. And its unfortunate, because the witness of Scripture (and certainly the lived experience of this cradle, life-long church go-er) is that the church rests squarely on the “invisible” labor of women. The labor that is so often glossed over or minimized...or even erased. And what is the heart of this labor? Showing up!

While the increasingly patriarchal nature of the early church seems to have led to the minimization of women, they were unable to erase them completely from the first resurrection appearance. Why? Because they were the ones that showed up! I wonder if John tried, as the latest writer of a Gospel...you think he wrote a version that had Jesus appearing to the beloved disciple instead of Mary Magdalene? But then he had to backtrack when everyone corrected him immediately? Probably not, but it’s the sort of thing I’ve seen the fragile male ego attempt plenty of other times!

¹ Mark 16:1b (NRSVue)

² Luke 24:10 (NRSVue)

³ Matthew 28:1c (NRSVue)

⁴ John 20:1c (NRSVue)

Where were the men at the crucifixion anyway? All four gospels attest that the women were at the crucifixion, even if they were off at a distance; but we only hear of a few men there, Peter and John, perhaps Judas. But most of the male disciples had scattered to the wind after Jesus' arrest.

Here we are three days later at the empty tomb and, once again, where are the men? If we look around in Matthew, Luke, and John we hear of their fear; they are hidden away behind locked doors or fleeing to the surrounding villages (like Emmaus). The men are hiding! Meanwhile, the women show up at the burial site.

The women show up...as they so often do. They show up to take care of things. To see that important things, like preparing a body for burial, are taken care of. They show up to engage in one last act of love and service to their Rabbi. They come to the tomb, in the midst of their fear and anxiety, ready to do what needs to be done. Meanwhile, the men are paralyzed. No wonder there may have been this attempt to erase these women, they certainly show up their male counterparts!

But perhaps that should come as no great surprise. Let's consider those male disciples. Hot-headed and impulsive Peter is an excellent example of the male proclivity to anger and thinking without speaking. James and John are all concerned with competition and comparison, asking to be seated in places of honor next to Jesus. Judas betrays Jesus for wealth and influence. These are not great examples of discipleship from the men. But these women, showing up in the midst of fear and grief...they are!

To be honest, much of the work of faith begins simply by showing up. Showing up in the places of brokenness in the world. Showing up in the places of death in the world. Showing up in the places of oppression and injustice in the world. And you don't need much of a plan to show up either.

The women showed up planning to do what they knew, grieve death and prepare a body for burial. That mission changed, as the work of the Spirit can often make happen; and their showing up meant that instead of grieving and embalming they became proclaimers of the most amazing Gospel news ever, Christ is alive!

Now, don't hear me as being entirely anti-male this morning. The male disciples did powerful and important work too. But in this instance, they didn't show up. The women did. And the church needs to acknowledge that. Just like it needs to acknowledge the importance of fully welcoming and valuing women, femme presenting folk, and non-binary disciples too.

And let's also acknowledge that it's often the women and other vulnerable people who are left behind and therefore forced to show up after violence. The women of Ukraine are showing up to grieve and bury their dead today. The women of Gaza are too. Women the world over are showing up, even when they may not want to, to pick up the shattered pieces of families and communities. To grieve and do the necessary work of processing and venting emotion.

This probably doesn't sound like much of an Easter sermon. But at the end of the day, Easter is about God showing up in our broken, limited reality. It's about God showing up and meeting us in the ashes of fear and loss and then working in us and through us towards healing and wholeness. Easter is about God showing up for us and inviting us to show up for others.

So let's celebrate when we see people showing up! Let's honor the female disciples who showed up at the tomb: Mary Magdalene, Salome, Joanna, the other Marys, and the other women. Let's lift up their example and follow it!

Where might you be called to show up today? Whose life might you help heal and restore by showing up for them? What broken part of the world are you feeling called to show up at? Do it!

Don't worry about planning or scheduling. If there's someone in need and you can show up for them? That's easter. That's serving your neighbor. That's centering love. Showing up is how we being to walk the Way. So follow the example of those named, and unnamed women, in Scripture and out of it, and show up! Amen.