

The Women Who Proclaim the Good News are a Great Army
Sunday, July 18, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

Today we celebrate The Feast of Mary of Magdalene – which is officially July 22nd and falls on a Thursday this year -- but here at All Saints Church we've been transferring her feast to an adjacent Sunday for many, many, *many* years now.

Here's how former All Saints staff member Anne Peterson told the story of how that came to be in a piece from our archives written in 2006:

The celebration of Mary Magdalene at All Saints began years ago when task forces exploring inclusive language and images of God were at work. Women's Council went looking for women in the New Testament.

Not many were to be found, but there was Mary -- a leader of women who supported Jesus' ministry out from their resources, a faithful disciple who stood at the cross when others had vanished, and the first to experience the risen Christ.

We celebrated this amazing woman starting out with an evening service. The fact her feast day, July 22, was in the summer months when the liturgical calendar encouraged experimentation, was helpful.

The first services, sponsored by Women's Council, experimented with inclusive language and feminine images of God. Anne Howard and I composed a Eucharistic prayer for these occasions. We invited a variety of women priests to preside.

After the services participants were invited to gather and talk about what it felt like to be in such a service. Having this opportunity to focus on a woman in our traditionally patriarchal church was back in those days highly unusual – and moving to men and women alike. And eventually the celebration made its way to Sunday morning.

And so here we are – all those years later – and once again we hear the story of Mary's encounter with the Risen Lord. And once again, I feel honor bound to contextualize her story in the resurrection narratives. So here we go:

Mary's is the first resurrection story in John's Gospel. The second is when Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room when Thomas is out running an errand.

The third is when Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room when Thomas is BACK in the room.

The fourth is when Jesus appears to the disciples on the lakeshore.

And yet the conclusion of the lakeshore story reads: “This was now the third time Jesus appeared after he was raised from the dead.”

So either John couldn’t count ... or the appearance to Mary -- the woman known in the first century church as the “apostle of the apostles” -- didn’t count because she was a woman.

I’ll let you do the math.

It is an irrefutable data point that the biblical stories we inherit as our scriptural family album came to us predominately from our male spiritual ancestors who too-often ignored the work and witness of women because for them they didn’t count.

Historically that is how the voices of women have been silenced, marginalized, and devalued not only in our church but in our world.

It is a story as ancient as the disciples who dismissed the women who first proclaimed the resurrection and as recent as a conversation I had with a male colleague about unexamined male privilege.

It was a conversation that ended with him saying defensively: “I’m not privileged. My parents were working class people.”

That is how privilege works to maintain its power: abusing the power of that privilege by refusing to acknowledge that privilege exists. And of course it doesn’t stop with sexism.

It is a process as old as the sin of racism that has been part of our DNA even before we were a nation.

It is as current as the blog posts and twitter feeds tearing down those who dare to speak the truth that Black Lives Matter and those who remind us that unless we are indigenous Americans we are ALL immigrants – or descended from them.

And most recently, it is being used by those who are attacking what scholars call “critical race theory” because it dares to challenge us to teach our children all of their history – not just the parts that make their white ancestors look good.

All of this is at least part of the reason here at All Saints Church we have been using Dr. Wil Gaffney's “Year W” lectionary ... a churchy word for “schedule of lessons” ... this year: because it centers the often-neglected stories of the women in our biblical family album and gives us all a chance to hear them in a new way.

For as the words of the Psalm appointed for today reminds us:

**The AUTHOR OF LIFE gave the word;
the women who proclaim the good news are a great army.**

We stand this morning here at All Saints Church in Pasadena on the shoulders of a great army of truth telling, justice seeking, Jesus following women whose stories bear telling and re-telling lest we lose them to the mists of time.

One of those women is Margaret Sedenquist of blessed memory, who we lost in February to COVID-19. In the 1970's Margaret began keeping track of gender-oriented words in the sermons and liturgy here at All Saints. During her first recording period, 100 gender-oriented words were used; 97 were male oriented and the 3 female terms used were mother, daughter and wife. Her persistence in sending these tallies to then rector George Regas -- and having meetings with him to discuss them -- led to changes in our liturgies that put All Saints in the forefront of the inclusive language movement.

Margaret was also a delegate to our Diocesan Convention, and it came to her attention that the Canons of the time were made up of exclusively hierarchical male language. In 1976, Margaret took the microphone on the floor of convention to move that the Canons be rewritten to give equal consideration to women. The logistics of the undertaking would be massive, but Bill Rodiger, then Chair of the Commission on Canons, promised that his committee would work over the next year to have a recommended version ready for adoption at the next convention.

"Does that satisfy you, Mrs. Sedenquist?" Bill Rodiger asked from the podium.

"I'm not seeking satisfaction, Mr. Rodiger" Margaret famously said. "I'm seeking justice."

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Another of those women was Lydia Wilkins ... long time member of All Saints and a feisty voice for inclusion and equity until her death at the age of 106 in 2010. As an African American woman born in 1904 when women couldn't vote, and it was difficult or impossible for black men to cast a ballot, Lydia saw momentous changes in her lifetime ... and was a dogged participant in being an agent of those changes. Until she was 101 she drove herself to the polls -- finally giving in and letting daughter Marjorie drive her to cast her vote for the first African American President in 2008.

A life-long Episcopalian, Lydia was also an agent of change in the church she loved -- telling this story in a video interview in 2006:

"In 1946 Bishop Stephens called a meeting and so I said "Bishop Stevens, what about our girls going to that camp you're starting up?" And after that meeting my friend called me and said

"Lyd, when you asked the bishop about our girls going to camp he just about swallowed his cigar!" But I'll tell you what -- the next year those little girls went to camp. All four of them. And he was at that camp that year to see to it they were taken care of properly."

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Today we celebrate the Feast of Mary Magdalene. But every day we have the opportunity celebrate the great army of truth telling, justice seeking, Jesus following women whose stories bear telling and re-telling lest we lose them to the mists of time.

And we have arguably never needed their inspiration more. as we face challenges in our polarized and divided nation moving out of a global pandemic back to a future we have yet to imagine in a world simultaneously threatened by the climate crisis attacking our planet and the rise of authoritarian oligarchies attacking our democracy.

So in conclusion, here are some words of wisdom and inspiration from Bishop Steven Charleston -- words that spoke to me the minute I read them as the marching orders for that great army called to proclaim that good news:

*Those who need hope cannot see us if we are bent over with worry.
They cannot find us if we are hiding from conflict.
They cannot join us if they cannot see what we are doing.
As people of faith, we must take the risk of being visible.
Even if our hearts are heavy we must stand and be counted.
Each one of us is a sign someone else is searching for.
We are the inspiration they have been needing.
Our role is often nothing more than being present,
visibly, actively present in reality.
Not offering sympathy from a distance
but offering a hand up close and personal.
It is not always easy for us to do.
It takes courage and commitment, but consider this:
Who do you remember seeing standing tall that touched you in your own life?
And who moved you by doing nothing more than being seen to do the right thing?*

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Mary Magdalene was part of that great army.

So was Anne Peterson and the women who worked to bring her story out of the shadows into our Sunday worship;
So was Margaret Sedenquist who was not seeking satisfaction but justice for the women of our

diocese;

and so was Lydia Wilkins whose feisty challenge to Bishop Stevens just about made him swallow his cigar -- and opened the way for integration at our diocesan camp.

And so are all those who labor today to dismantle oppression in all its forms as beacons of God's love, justice, and compassion in our beautiful and broken world.

And so on this Feast of Mary Magdalene – the first to witness the resurrection, whether John counted her or not – let us give thanks for that great army of women who have proclaimed the good news down through the centuries.

And let all of us – no matter where we fall on the continuum of gender identity – continue to be part of the good work of amplifying their voices and telling their stories as we take our place on their shoulders – proclaiming in our generation as they did in theirs the good news of the indestructible power of God's inexhaustible love. Amen.