



Faithfulness of Women in Passion Narratives

Except for our Lord himself, virtually all of the courageous people in the Gospel narratives of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus were women. The chief priests were traitors. Pilate was a typical hand wringing, hand-washing politician. The Roman soldiers got their kicks out of bullying and beating up a poor, condemned prisoner. The disciples all fled and the chief among them denied his master three times, bringing to mind Sam Houston's assessment of one of his political enemies: "He resembles a dog in everything but fidelity."



But an unspecified number of women were faithful throughout. Saint Luke tells us that on the way to His crucifixion, "A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus, turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your children. For if this happens in the green wood, what will happen in the dry?'" (Luke 23: 27, 28)

There was Veronica, who, according to a tradition not recorded in the Scriptures, wiped the dirty, bloodied face of Jesus, charging right past the Roman soldiers to reach him. Mary Magdalene, from whom Luke tells us Jesus cast out seven demons, was among the women who followed the condemned Messiah to his ignominious death.

At Jesus hung for three excruciating hours, "Many women were there, watching from a distance," reports the apostle Matthew, who must have been at an even greater — and likely safer — distance. "They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Matthew 27: 55-56) Mark tells us the same, adding: "Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there." (Mark 15:41)

One man, Joseph of Arimathea, had the courage to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus, once his death had been confirmed. When the stone was rolled in front of the tomb, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb." (Matthew 27:61)

Then came the Sabbath. On the morning following, the women — Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" in Matthew's account; Magdalene and "Mary the mother of James and Salome," Mark says; "the women," Luke says simply — took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb to anoint the body.

As in many things, John offers a uniquely different perspective. For whatever reason, John has focused on one intriguing and courageous woman who went alone to the tomb at the first opportunity. "Early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was yet dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed." (John 20: 1) The stone had been placed as a seal on the tomb. Mary wondered who could have moved it and why. The stone removed, the empty tomb are for us, with



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our marvelous gift of hindsight, obvious signs of our Lord's resurrection. To Mary, it could mean only one thing: the authorities had taken away the body of her Savior.

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" she cried, as she went running to Simon Peter and "the other disciple" (about whom more later). The two disciples raced to the tomb and found it empty. They saw the strips of linen in which the body had been wrapped and the burial cloth that had been around the head. When the "other disciple" came upon that evidence, "He saw and believed." (John 20:8)

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus would meet two of his disciples who were too busy mourning him — and feeling sorry for themselves and their nation — to recognize him. He showed them through the Scriptures — "beginning with Moses and the Prophets" — that the Christ would have to suffer the things he had suffered and overcome them as he had. Significantly, it was in the breaking of the bread, evoking memories of the Last Supper ("This is my body ... This is my blood") that they finally recognized him. (Luke 24: 30-31)

But these men were, as Jesus told them "foolish" and "slow of heart." The women, whose testimony concerning the empty tomb and the risen Lord the men had dismissed, were the ones who did not waver, even before the awesome and merciless power of Rome. We have seen that many women were watching from afar as Jesus suffered and died on the cross. John alone tells us of those who were standing directly below the cross, fearlessly showing their devotion to the condemned man.

"Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene." And, oh yes, at least one man was there, the only male among the Lord's followers mentioned in any of the Gospels even remotely close to the cross as Jesus was hanging there.

"When Jesus saw his mother there and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby," reports John, who was apparently too modest to name himself as "the disciple Jesus especially loved, "he said to his mother, 'Dear woman here is your son.'" By which we might have understood Him to be referring to Himself, looking very little like the "Son of the Most High" to whom "the Lord God would give the throne of David, his father," as the angel Gabriel had promised at the Annunciation. (Luke 1: 32) But his next few words tell us something profoundly different...

"and to the disciple [He said], 'Here is your mother.'"

It is a stupendous statement, coming as it did just moments before Jesus died. He had given his testimony, his reputation, his back to those who beat him, his face to those who spat upon him and his garment, for which the soldiers cast lots. He had given his life's blood. He had one thing more to give away ... His own beloved mother.

"Here is your mother." To his beloved disciple, the only one at the cross, he made this stupendous gift. We are told elsewhere that when Jesus was arrested, "they all fled." John came back, receiving not only redemption, but the Lord's own mother for his faithfulness. And his Gospel tells us, "From that time on, this disciple took her into his home."

And from that disciple, the greatest of the Evangelists, we have learned the most profound truths about Mary's Divine Son. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was not made anything that was made. (John 1: 1-3) The words come from God, specifically, by the Holy Spirit. But they may also have come to John by the Mother of the Divine Savior, who may well have learned them from the Divine Child she had the privilege to bear.



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When Mary learned she would be the mother of the Savior, she declared God's glory in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Savior!" she declared in the hymn of praise we know as the Magnificat. "For he has looked upon the lowliness of his handmaid and, behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty has done great things for me and Holy is His name!" (Luke 1:46-49)

What pure, undistilled joy! Centuries later, as Christendom was torn apart by feuds over doctrine, Martin Luther observed of the Virgin Mary, something to which both Catholics and Protestants could say a joy-filled "Amen!" "In the Magnificat, Mary teaches us how to love and praise God," Luther said.

She showed it also by the way she lived, bearing patiently and lovingly the pinpricks of seeming rejection, the slights of having her concerns brushed aside as her son's Divine Mission took precedence over his biological ties. The sword prophesied by Simeon would pierce her heart more than once, starting with her Son's staying behind in Jerusalem to be about his Father's business with the rabbis in the temple. Whoever hears the word of God and does it would be His mother and brother and sisters, Jesus said. And who would bear his Word, give it life, believe it more fervently and follow it more obediently than his own Mother? Thus, Saint Augustine would say that despite her unique and almost unimaginable privilege of being the Mother of the Savior, "She was more blessed in believing than conceiving."

Was it a blessing then, as she stood at the cross and felt the full weight and pain of the sword that pierced her soul as she watched her Divine Son die? Did she, even for a moment, reflect bitterly on the cross as the "throne of his father, David," promised by the angel Gabriel? Or did she, more likely, believe and understand before the disciples did what the Son of Man must undergo to redeem the world and conquer sin and death?

We can scarcely imagine the joy of Mary Magdalene when she encountered the risen Christ in the vicinity of the empty tomb. We try in vain to imagine what went through the minds of the Mother of Our Lord and the beloved disciple when the crucified One said with a dying breath: "Dear woman, here is your son, and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'"

In Heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ once and for all offers to the Father his Body and Blood, the eternal sacrifice that atones for our sins. And to us on Earth, he continues to offer the gift he made on the cross: "Here is your mother."



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