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John 20:11-18  
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“A Woman’s Place”

Grace and peace...

I could tell some of you saw my sermon title and wondered, “Well, this should be interesting.” I see that no one has organized a march of protest or taken to Twitter yet so I appreciate the chance to explain. Throughout Lent, we’ve been looking at the Twelve Disciples and it just so happens that all of them happen to have XY chromosomes. They were men! But Jesus had women disciples too. That’s a big deal because it very much was a man’s world. In order to appreciate how Jesus interacted with women, we need to understand a few things about society way back then—back before Oprah reigned.

First of all, matters of spirituality were the man’s job. He prayed aloud. She did not. He was required to read the Scriptures but she wasn’t even allowed to study the Scripture at all, not even with other women. There was no LWML back then! Rabbi Eliezer lived in Jesus’ day and he said it was more appropriate for the Torah to be burned than to have a woman learn it! He also said, “If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery” (to be promiscuous) (m. Sotah 3:4). So a father couldn’t teach even his own daughter spiritual things! Jose ben Johanan of Jerusalem had taught, “He

who talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna” (m. Avot 1:5). Gehenna meant hell. In the eyes of many Jews, not only was teaching theology to a woman not necessary; it was downright wrong.

Why this unjust bias? How did it come to this? According to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, women were responsible for all of the evil in the world. Why? Well, don't you know Eve was the first to sin. So in their mind, she started it all, she was responsible for this mess in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3 is true, but they twisted it to justify depriving women of spiritual standing as well as legal standing. Women weren't allowed to testify in a religious court. And in civil matters, Jewish rabbinic law taught that the testimony of 100 women is still inferior to that of one man. The daily prayer that a Jewish man would say included the line, “Praise be to God that He did not create me to be a woman.” That doesn't spell R-E-S-P-E-C-T now does it?

So that's the social context that Jesus blatantly defied. Do you think the Twelve were OK with how Jesus was turning that hierarchy upside down? I saw a clip of the movie Mary Magdalene that just came out in the US. It would have shown earlier but they had problems getting it distributed. The company that was going to distribute it fell apart. The distributor was run by Harvey Weinstein

and you might have heard he's had some troubles lately. So ironically, this movie that shows a strong Mary Magdalene meant to garner respect and appreciation for all women now wasn't going to show at all here. But they just got a distributor a few days ago so we can go see it. Anyway, on the preview, there's a clip of the disciples muttering about Jesus allowing Mary to also follow Jesus, "People are talking." They didn't like being talked about. Jesus' opponents ridiculed the notion of teaching women the Word. Even talking to a woman in public was a big no-no as we've heard.

Jesus went even further. He not only spoke to them, He coined the phrase "daughters of Abraham" bestowing on them equal spiritual worth and status as men. That meant women belonged to the covenant and promise made to Abraham too. In every interaction with women throughout all four gospels, women are always portrayed as spiritually capable, respectable, faithful and obedient. Let's just say the men are not cast in so well a light.

In part because of Genesis 3, women were regarded as inferior and unteachable, and Jesus took that common notion and proved it all wrong. How? By simply affirming Genesis 1 and 2. "Male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). I guess they had forgotten that they should uphold and affirm the equal worth and dignity of men and women. How could an entire society forget

something so basic? Believe me, it happens from time to time—including our own time! The worth of men and women are equal because they both bear the image of God. Jesus brought that truth back to the forefront. Not that they function in the same way—because they don't. Men and women are different and have unique strengths. But they are equal in terms of worth and preciousness to God.

The fact that he chose a woman, Mary Magdalene, to be the first witness of the resurrection was utterly astounding. But we should have guessed bringing people on the outside in, exalting the humble, making somebody out of what was considered a nobody...well, that's just how Jesus works. He chose a woman as a way of restoring women everywhere. He gave Mary Magdalene that privilege of being the first to know that all of humanity, male and female, was now reconciled to God.

Think of that! A woman who was once held captive by, not one, but seven demons is chosen to announce the message of victory and salvation. She was there all along—a whole group of women. *All the single ladies*, all the single ladies, except they're not all single. Luke 8:1-3, "And the twelve were with him and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife

of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna and many others who provided for them out of their means." Some of them had connections and the financial means. That's what we know for sure about her—the other stuff, whether she was a prostitute or the woman caught in adultery, the Scriptures don't say. Frankly, the disciple aspect is more significant and provocative. Of all the women in the Bible, Mary Magdalene is mentioned the most frequently.

In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene lingers because she is distraught. Jesus' body is gone. I love how she has this conversation with the angels in the tomb, but it's not enough to break her out of her grief. She says to them, "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him" (v. 13). She sees then someone she thinks is the gardener. Note the way he addresses her, "Woman..." in the fullest sense of that word—as in womankind, as in Genesis. I think it's telling she thinks he is the gardener because Jesus is in Garden Mode! It's like He's going back to the Garden of Eden, recalling it, reclaiming it, and making things right. When Jesus says her name, that's all it takes. She knows exactly who it is. It's her Lord, her teacher. She clings to his feet. She touched Him!

I know some of you may think otherwise that she didn't touch him because of Jesus' command "Do not cling to me." But Greek has two ways of giving a

negative command—one is prohibitive (don't even think about doing it) and one is redirective (stop what you are already doing). Jesus' command is the latter type. It means she was already clasping his feet. This a significant action, not only of reverence, but of discipleship. The proper place for a disciple to be is at the feet of the rabbi. It's scandalously righteous—to talk to, to touch. He's saying, "Look, I'm not done yet, and neither are you." Her time of discipleship has reached a point where she is now sent with a message. Mary Magdalene becomes an apostle. In fact, the Church Fathers called her "the apostle to the apostles." She was sent with authority to bring a message. Jesus is encouraging more "forbidden" dialogue with men. She ran from the tomb more alive than she had ever been and sang out to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

In short, her strategy was to cling it, bring it, wing it and sing it!

But would people believe this woman, whose testimony wasn't recognized or affirmed? Would the disciples believe her? And the answer is, "No!" They still have to see for themselves. The message was, "Tell my brothers and say to them, "I am going to my Father and your Father, my God and your God" (John 20:17).

A woman who was forbidden from knowing spiritual matters was in sole possession of the greatest truth this world has ever known! Not only was Jesus alive, but now His Father is our Father. His God is our God. What a stunning

proclamation. There was never a relationship like this before. That Jesus is the Son of God but now our Brother. This is new!

When it comes to Jesus, a woman's place, as well as a man's place, is to follow Him. This is discipleship. It's a whole new, old paradigm. He created us in His image so that we would become more like Him and grow in the fullness of Christ. Do you know what that looks like in your life? Do you want to find out? There's something more to score today than free breakfast. This is a relationship with the risen and living Lord. What do you want to see happen in your relationship with Him? Maybe you didn't know it could be so close, so personal, so real, but it can be this way because He is risen and He is calling you to follow Him and follow in His footsteps. To know and be known, to love and be loved. To live to the glory of God is what we are made for!

In Jesus name, Amen.

We thank you that Easter is not about one woman, or one people, but all people, that your love and your salvation are for all who confess with voices, hearts and lives that the tomb is empty because Jesus is risen, that we might know forgiveness, that lives might be reborn and your name glorified now and for eternity. Amen.

