

No Better Place Than the Tomb

In the Gospel of Mark, a group of women are mentioned for the first time at the crucifixion of Jesus. Which breeds the question: why were these women mentioned at all? It is known that women have always played a cardinal role in the Bible, but the details of their doings are hard to come by. The author of the Gospel of Mark, along with the other synoptic gospel authors, including a specific mention of a group of women is a rare instance among the stories we have about Jesus. Not only were these women mentioned by name, but spoke, risked their lives, performed special rituals, and even had the responsibility of reassembling the disciples.

Before diving too deeply into the discussion of the women at the tomb, it is important to understand some patterns that occur within the book of Mark. Prior to Mark 15:40 no women are mentioned directly by name (Munro 226). There are multiple significant stories including women that create a literary pattern leading up to the crucifixion, but alas, none of the women's names are included. There is the raising up of the mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31), the healing of the menstruating woman, the raising up of a young dead girl (Mark 5:21-43), and the exorcism of a daughter (Mark 7:24-30). These stories, when analyzed, hold deeper messages than just that "Jesus can heal," exposing the future message the author is trying to convey. So, if these women are so important to the development of Mark's Gospel, then why aren't they named? This anonymity of women is partially due to the audience that Mark's author is writing for. It is important to remember that part of the reason the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) differ is due to the audience that would read each of them (Ehrman). Mark's original readers were a part of a culture that viewed women only in correlation to the men in their lives. Deeming the inclusion of names in this situation unnecessary due to the fact that no men were present, (Munro 226). A notable point to include here is that the Greek plural pronouns used by

the author of the Gospel of Mark are in masculine forms for common gender. So, when a large group or crowd is mentioned, it can be assumed women were present even if the masculine term for crowd or “they” was used.

Each of the synoptic gospels holds a different presence of women at the tomb of Jesus, but all four commonly mention at least the presence of Mary Magdalene. This consistency is important for the historical aspects of this discussion, in light of the fact that parts of the gospels are historically inaccurate (Ehrman). For the purposes of this context, I will focus on the Gospel of Mark, which mentions that Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome were present at Jesus’ last moments (Osiek 104). Not only were these women present at the tomb of Jesus, but at his actual crucifixion, and the two Marys were present at his burial (Osiek 105). In the fleeting moments of Jesus’ life, the Twelve Disciples had abandoned him, but not these faithful women. They risked their lives by being present as he hung on the cross, and especially by revisiting his tomb to anoint his body. The women’s original distance from the crucifixion is thought to have been due to the political indifference of a woman’s role in the mourning process. Women participating in the anointing of the dead caused men at the time to feel threatened due to the ideology that this made women closer and more connected to the dead. This coincides with the closer connections women had to giving birth, which was culturally linked to “the unclean” and “the unknown” (Osiek 111). Therefore, the actions of these women attempting to anoint the body of Jesus was politically dangerous in more than one way—making their presence within this gospel that much more important.

As I mentioned briefly when discussing the patterns, the author of Mark creates, vocabulary is very important to the discussion of women in this gospel and at the tomb. As Winsome Munro, a scholar and feminist, mentions, there are multiple statements made by

“Jesus” that include references to mothers and sisters, helping to debunk the arguments that women were not immediate followers of Jesus. It would make no sense for statements like this to be made if women were not present among the crowds and followers he preached to. In fact, women were the first people to be recognized to be servants of the Lord, according to Jesus. The Greek words ‘*diakone*’ and ‘*diakonos*’ are used within the Gospel of Mark to describe the mother-in-law who was released from her fever by Jesus’ healing. These Greek words translated to “to serve”, in reference to Jesus and the church. To be exact, “... the only person in the i tire gospel to be described as “*diakonos*” is a *woman*. In terms of Markan narrative, she is the first to act like Jesus himself” (Sabin 151). Mari Sabin, the author of *Women Transformed: The Ending of Mark is the Beginning of Wisdom*, also discusses the way that the author of Mark uses the three named women to emphasize the importance of loyalty and faith over labels. It would be assumed, and ideal, for the Twelve Disciples to be present every step of the way during Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection process, but alas, they are not. But who is? The women. They may not earn the label of ‘disciple’ or be a part of the twelve, but that does not take away from their presence at the crucifixion and the tomb. I believe Sabin puts this concept well when saying, “The woman is a model of the faith the disciples lack” (153). This shows that it does not take a label to be a devout follower.

Another literary element that should not be overlooked in this passage is the term of “remembering” (Sabin 157). Mark 14:9 states, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her”. The key word here is remembrance (which is interchangeable for memory). The Greek word for this is *mnemosunon*, which correlates and should be understood through the Hebrew word *zikkaron* which represents a liturgical reenactment. The reenactment they are referencing here is the

moment of God's saving grace. In more comprehensible terms, this is used to reference the Passover, in Jewish traditions, representing that each year God will free his people. This concept then carried over to the Christian celebration of Eucharist, the last supper, which brings on an important interpretation of a woman. This can be interpreted as essentially saying that she should be connected to the remembrance of Jesus' death from now on, and that her acts of breaking and pouring anticipate the ceremonial remembrance of Jesus (Sabin 157). This passage reiterates the important role that women held and serves as testimony to their presence in the early church.

When it comes to the women present at the tomb, there are two historical arguments made: the women ran from the tomb in fear and told no one and the women did not run in fear and told someone. First, I will discuss the development of the idea that the women did not run from the tomb in fear. Munro makes a very interesting argument for the non-fear argument honing in on a more feminist approach and focusing on the role that women played in the society that these women lived in. Women were not taken seriously and held no power in any social or political circles, other than their own. She uses this perspective to make the point that these women likely ran in fear and amazement, wouldn't anyone if they saw the empty tomb of a man they called God? The more important argument here is that they did speak, and no one listened. On page 237 of *Women Disciples in Mark*, Munro argues that it is probable that these three women fled the scene, telling Peter or really anyone who would listen, about the resurrection. But as mentioned previously, the imposed gender roles in this culture created an extreme disadvantage for a woman's use of public speech. So, it is plausible that the crucifixion and resurrection story originated within communities of women and was passed down that way, until it made its way into the Gospel of Mark. This would also shed some light on the abrupt ending of Mark 16:8, which leaves its readers with no clear understanding of what happened.

Now on the other side of this debate, Susan Miller the author of *'They Said Nothing to Anyone': The Fear and Silence of the Women at the Empty Tomb (MK 16. 1-8)*, focuses on the words present in the Gospel of Mark. She discusses that when analyzed through a Marcan lense, it makes sense that the women ran in fear. The author of Mark sets an apocalyptic setting throughout the entire gospel, so news of the resurrection would indicate to the women that the end is coming (78). She also proposes the idea, formed by another historian, that the author downplays the role of the women and depicts them as failures in order to save the ego of men of past and present faith. By making the women run in fear, it showcases that even though they were faithful longer, they could not hold out on Jesus' wishes. There are some commonalities in the language used to describe the women that are used throughout Mark to describe other crowds in reaction to acts Jesus performed. The two most important being 'fear' and 'trembling'. These words hold a negative connotation in the Marcan lense and reflect the lack of faith these women have. Sealing the coffin, Miller also discusses how the lack of knowledge of the women following him to Galilee furthers the idea that these women held up on their end of the deal. Another argument created / formed by Miller is that these women did not speak due to their fear of authority. They were prohibited from any form of public speech, especially without a man present. This is then connected with the idea that these women were not just afraid of worldly authority, but of being entrusted with rebuilding the ministry of God. With this perspective in mind, the ending of Mark then indicates that there is a large gap between the power God holds and the weakness humans cannot overcome (Miller 90).

One part of this discussion that cannot be forgotten, is not just who these women were and why they were there, but what purpose they served in a physical and literary sense. Broadly speaking, historians who believe women visited the tomb, believe they were there for the

common purpose of anointing Jesus' dead body. This is a known practice for women to perform after the death of loved ones, again confirming that these three women were a part of Jesus' discipleship. These women differ from their male counterparts in the sense that they sought to honor and commemorate Jesus, while they ran, hid, and sought power (Miller 88). The discussion of the women attempting to anoint Jesus in his tomb also falls closely along the lines of betrayal he goes through leading up to his death. The cock had crowed three times, the kiss had been placed on Jesus' cheek, and then the women performed the act of honor. In a more historical sense, these women are very important to the factual side of this passage. They stand as witnesses to the major events. These three women are present at the crucifixion, the burial, and then attest to the emptiness of the tomb from which they watched his body be laid (Munro 236). Their presence not only represents the faithfulness of women in association with Jesus but provides a more concrete account of salient events.

As historians continue to dive deeper into the intricacies of the Gospel of Mark, it has become rather clear that the presence of these women is salient. The analysis of the final chapters of Mark not only illustrates the importance of these women in a theological sense but exposes historical gender dynamics. As I have discussed, women served many roles, historically and theologically, that should not be overlooked. Without these women there would be no testimony of Jesus' death, his resurrection, or to his absence.