

Sermon: Carol-Ann Chapman

Easter, April 1, 2018

Women...Messengers of hope

“If this is a man’s world, like the late James Brown told us, then God certainly didn’t get the memo. We find in all the Gospel stories women being the first to encounter the empty tomb and risen Jesus. Women, those whose testimony would be the last to be believed in that day, *are the first preachers of the gospel, the first to tell the good news of the risen Lord.* Mary Magdalene stands front and center in John’s account of the resurrection. We know very little of her background except that she was a faithful follower of Jesus, she even provided financially for Jesus’ ministry.”¹

So here she is a woman, in what was very much a man’s world, with perhaps the most important duty of this Easter narrative, to announce that she has seen Jesus, that he is alive...he has been resurrected and according to him it is only a matter of time before he will ascend to heaven. Jesus could have released this news to one of the chosen disciples, but instead he gives this honour to a woman, to the one who remains distraught, in tears outside of his burial place. Jesus trusts this woman and in this trust he demonstrates that he believes that women are equally capable. Jesus gives an opportunity for Mary to be an example that women can make wonderful messengers of hope.

It was 1974. A mother and her daughter are walking down the aisle toward their favourite pew to sit in on a Sunday morning. The young girl looks towards

¹ <https://theblackburnhouse.com/2015/04/07/inspiration-for-beloved-community-series-easter-why-are-you-crying-oh-mary-dont-you-weep-brandon-wrencher/>

her mother and says. "Mom, I think when I grow up I'd like to be a nun." The mother looked puzzled...why a nun? Well, I think I'd like to grow up and work for God, says the little girl. The mother looks down at her child with a smile and says, "Well you know...now they ordain women in the church and you could become a minister. The child thought about it briefly and continued on toward her seat. It wasn't until several years later that she was reminded of this conversation. The mother became a messenger of hope that day. Planting a seed that said the door to ministry was open to women...that women and men could have equal opportunities to serve God.

That little girl was me at 8 years of age. Up until that time I had only encountered men in the role of minister and my experience of women of faith was limited to the Nuns on the Sound of Music and Sally Field in a television series call the "Flying Nun." That day my mom gave me a message of hope that has brought me to this moment today. I believe that day my mom was just one of the women who God has used to offer hope of the future.

Perhaps it is because of the limited time that we have on a Sunday morning that we rarely seem to focus on the stories of women in the Bible...but there are many. Esther and Ruth managed to get their own books in the Old Testament. And although there are no books named after women in the New Testament, Jesus was notorious for including women in his life, at a time when women were under the protection and authority of their husbands without any rights. Women were thought of as having value only to bear children and take care of the home.

In fact in the daily prayers of first century Jews, the men would recite “Praised be God that he has not created me a woman.”²

And yet Jesus who was radical for his time, went out of his way to include women, he went out of his way to speak to women, to heal women, to have compassion for women during a time that women were considered nothing more than chattel. And Jesus did not just include, but brought them into his inner circle. While Jesus was travelling with the disciples he brought with him Joanna, and Susanna...women we never hear about and yet are there in the story of Luke are their names along with Mary Magdalene. Mary, who remained with him until the very end...and to what was to be a new beginning. Mary Magdalene who has the distinction of being named the resurrected Jesus’s messenger of hope, a woman whose message was delivered to the disciples, the men. A woman whose very presence in the resurrection narrative suggests that women are equally important in God’s plan for the redemption of the world, and after Mary Magdalene, there have been other women who have been a part of creating a better world. A world filled with hope.

Last week, over a million people marched for their lives and at the centre of much of this was a young woman, Emma Gonzalez. Emma Gonzalez, who offered both a message of remembrance and one of hope. Before the shooting at Marjory Stone Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, Emma Gonzalez was relatively unknown. She was the president of the gay-straight alliance at her school, she enjoyed creative writing, was a daughter, a sister...a young woman with dreams.

² Barbara Leonhard. Jesus Extraordinary Treatment of Women. <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/jesus-extraordinary-treatment-of-women/>

And then the day came when the world around her came undone and she took refuge in the back of her school's auditorium because a gunman came in and took the lives of 17 people...people she knew.

Emma Gonzalez has been compared to a 15th century Joan of Arc, another woman of determination and hope. Like Emma, for years Joan too was a simple girl. This daughter lived on a farm, feeding animals and doing chores. Perhaps it is because of her young age or perhaps it is because of her appearance that people see similarities between Emma and Joan, but I think it is more. Both Emma and Joan of Arc were messengers of hope. Joan's message was for the people of France. Her message was that there was hope in ending a senseless war...a war that was based in a division of a dynasty. Emma also has a message of hope. One that says there need not be bloodshed. That there need not be division in the world...that the evil of guns need not be the end...that there is more...there is hope, and she is not giving up the idea of a hopeful future. Two women, with a message that says the world can be better, that there is hope in the future.

When Mary Magdalene announces that she has seen Jesus, she is the messenger of the hope for the future. Jesus had come in to the world to redeem it. Jesus came to erase evil, to let the world know that we can do better here and that this is not the end. Jesus resurrection represents hope. Hope of a future where we live in a world without violence, wars, division. A world where the needs of all are met and we love one another. One where men and women are equal partners in God's world. On that Easter morning at the tomb, Jesus was giving Mary, Joan, Emma, myself and all women a message. A message that says,

you are worthy, you can make a difference in the world... you can be a messenger of hope to the world.

So here we are on the most Holy day of the Christian Calendar and like Mary, and the women who have come before me, and the many women who stand in the pulpit today and those who will come after me, I have a message.

Jesus is Alive....Christ is Risen...Hallelujah...Amen.