

Revd Ken Graham & City United Reformed Church Members

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So often the Bible gives the starring roles to men so when you listened to the reading from Luke what was the main thing that you heard? Was it the astonishment of the men that women had been to the tomb and rushed to tell the disciples what they had found? Was it the inference that they had no place to be included in this event, the hard-to-believe tale they told or, worse, that they got there first?

Dan Browns book, the Da Vinci Code seemed to fire peoples imagination when he said that Jesus would not have excluded women from his close friends – even from among the disciples and I just loved looked up a copy of the Last Supper, the picture painted by Leonardo Da Vinci and there true enough, is a women sitting next to Jesus, full head of copper coloured hair (not very typical of a Jewish Lady). Didn't you want it to be more like that, more tangible evidence that women were precious to Jesus, and are precious to God – then and now.

Both sections of the reading, the Garden & Emmaus Road have parallels about Jesus being around us and not recognised and then being recognised and the journey continuing with new insight. The Luke passage starts out in a time of need and emptiness that evolves into the emergence of a renewed, fathered community. After all, that community is "the living body of Christ" that we celebrate. Resurrection cannot be separated from discipleship, and what we hear in this passage is about the discipleship of the whole, renewed community.

From a woman's point of view and couldn't help when reading the passage to imagining the crucifixion scene – the women there among a jeering crowd. Jesus giving his mother and best friend a mother/son relationship in the midst of all the loss. The family and friends were hopeless and helpless but were doing the only thing they could – being there for Jesus so that he did not die alone but surrounded by those that loved him.

We are told that Jesus was entombed in a hurry after his crucifixion. The hour was late, Passover was late that year and Luke had an accelerated narrative. The contemporary culture demanded that Christ's broken body should be laid to rest before nightfall and before the Sabbath began. There was no time to embalm the body when removed from the cross, to wrap in clean linen cloths and sweet

smelling herbs and ointments, as would normally happen. The women were going to do it at the first opportunity they had, and they were going to do it together. For me, there is something profound about the sharing of such a task. Facing something dreadful but adopting a practical approach and having the burden shared.

I wondered how the time between the removal of Christ's body from the cross and the Sunday morning was spent – would the women have had to sort out the childcare, prepare food, welcome visitors that came to offer sympathy and support as well as deal with their personal grief? I have this image of that Sunday morning, when still dark, the group of women would have met to go together to the tomb. They would have agreed who would bring what – the spices, clothes, lanterns etc and they would have prepared everything the night before, left breakfast in the oven, then called for each of the group as they made their way through the town. I remember when my uncle died a few years ago, it was so important for my cousin that he be one of the people to carry the coffin into the funeral service. He said it was the final thing he could do for his dad. This was the last thing that the women could do for Jesus, prepare his body for entombment.

The narrative is so familiar to us that it is hard to capture all the elements that lie behind this short passage. The women, and the men, were living in an occupied land and the occupiers, the Romans, just killed Jesus, a rebel. Would his friends, too, be vulnerable to the authorities, Roman and religious, and to the crowds that witnessed the crucifixion. He was dear to the women not just as we become attached to people, family, friends and acquaintances – he wasn't teaching or advocating a political uprising but something more radical than that. He preached a message of love before all else and paid the ultimate price. Difficult to imagine the lack of power this group had at the time, and the women would have even less, what could they do in such circumstances to make a difference? Yet it was the women who first received the resurrection news.

Imagine their feelings when the women went into the tomb but didn't find Jesus' body: surprise, bewilderment, frustration, anger – puzzled to find the body gone, the grave clothes abandoned and downright afraid of the 2 men in shining cloths that were beside them. The angelic men reminded the women about Jesus' teachings and the resurrection penny dropped – so they rushed out to find the disciples, share their excitement and begin a movement of change that spread across the world.

Their return to tell the eleven disciples was a real let-down – we're told the apostles thought the women were talking nonsense – one translation said the women were full of wishful thinking. Stupid, obstinate men! Only Peter needed to check out the women's story and he RAN back to the tomb, saw it empty, saw the clothes.....and then went home.

When Jesus died, his followers became a body with the heart wrenched out, terribly afraid, without hope. They didn't expect a sequel. Yet, within 12 hours, everything changed – empty tomb, Jesus alive, Jesus with them! Despondency and mourning quickly became things of the past. An important part of our witness is the ability to listen for the very different ways in which Christ is already there in the world, where we once thought him to be so absent.

The women ran to tell the disciples, the disciples ran back to Jerusalem to tell others their experience. Leaving the church may be the most important part of the Sunday service! This part sends us out into the world as prophets and witnesses who share our experience and bring hope.