

*Why the Women?*  
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Luke 24.1-12 (NRSV)

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

### Introduction

During this past season of Lent we preached a series of sermons on “images” of Jesus. My musings about those images really began last fall as I started watching regularly a television program on Friday nights called “Joan of Arcadia.” The main character is Joan Girardi, a typical teenager living in Arcadia, California. A typical teenager, at least, until just like the famous Joan of Arc, God starts talking to Joan of Arcadia — literally. And God always talks to her in the “image” of an ordinary person — a teacher, a security guard, a punk heavy-metal dude, a gardener, the lunch lady at school, a six-year-old girl, a cute guy on the bus. It’s a fascinating show and if you haven’t been watching it, I suggest you do.

The theme song of “Joan of Arcadia” is a mid-1990s hit song sung by Joan Osborne called “(What If God Was) One of Us.” The song’s first verse goes:

If God had a name, what would it be,  
And would you call it to his face,  
If you were faced with him in all his glory,  
What would you ask if you had just one question.<sup>1</sup>

Well, I’ve been thinking about that for several weeks now and if I had just one question to ask of God, I would ask, in terms of today’s text, the question of my title. Why the women?<sup>2</sup> Why were

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<sup>1</sup> “One of Us” from the album *Relish* by Joan Osborne, Polygram Records, 1995. The song was written by Eric Bazilian.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur A. Just, Jr., ed., “Luke,” *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament, vol. III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 376. Many commentators have pondered this question, including Augustine. His discussion is likely too typological for our exegetical tastes but intriguing nonetheless. “The women came to the tomb, but they didn’t find the body in the tomb. Instead, they were told by angels that Christ had risen. The women reported this to men. And what’s written? What did you hear? These things seemed in their eyes like an idle tale. How very unhappy is the human condition! When Eve related what the serpent had said, she was listened to straightaway. A lying

women the ones who first saw and testified to the empty tomb and the risen Christ?

I think the answer has to do with who God is. Remember that in that time, the word of a woman had no legal or public standing. So it's no wonder that Peter and the apostles at first thought that what the women said was an idle tale. But for us, that is all the more reason to trust the story. For if any first-century writer tried to make up the story of the resurrection, he would never have women be the first eyewitnesses. But God acts differently than humans do. That's why this story is worth believing. It's not the way we would write it but it tells us a lot about who God is.

### **ONE: God is present in ordinary life**

It tells us first that God is present in ordinary life because this most extraordinary story starts out in very ordinary ways. Luke begins the resurrection story so matter-of-factly. It was the first day of the week. It was early dawn. They came to the tomb. The women brought ordinary spices in an ordinary dawn on an ordinary day to anoint an ordinary dead body. So they thought. Women did those things then. They did them together, these very common matters.<sup>3</sup> They were there to do the ordinary and natural things when someone had died.

Except what began to happen was very unordinary and very unnatural. There's even a hint of humor in the text. They saw an empty tomb and two men in dazzling clothes, angels no doubt, though Luke doesn't call them that. The women were afraid and the men spoke to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The women could have answered, "Hello?! We're looking for the dead in a tomb!" But it probably wasn't the time to crack wise and by now the extraordinary was beginning to dawn on them. This was a bright, pink dawn unlike any before it. Something extraordinarily new was happening right in the midst of their ordinary lives.

That's the way God is in Jesus Christ. God is extraordinarily present in ordinary life. There was a time when people thought that divinity was only in a temple. Some people still think that you have to come to church to find God. But the truth is that because of what those ordinary women first witnessed, Jesus is with us at home or school or work or vacation or wherever we happen to be.

Two men traveling on business met one day for breakfast in a hotel dining room. They were greeted by a bubbly and gracious waitress who made them feel at home. She served them a delicious breakfast, and when they were finished, she walked to the door with them and said, "Have a wonderful day. And, gentlemen, *live alive all day.*" As they walked to their separate cars, they talked about that unusual comment: "Live alive all day." They were so intrigued that they agreed to meet for breakfast again the next morning.

Arriving at the hotel dining room the second time, the two men were greeted by the same friendly and outgoing waitress. As they were being seated, one of them said, "Yesterday, when we

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woman was believed, and so we all died. But [the disciples] didn't believe women telling the truth so that we might live. If women are not to be trusted, why did Adam trust Eve? If women are to be trusted, why did the disciples not trust the holy women?

"So in this fact we have to reflect on the goodness of the Lord's arrangements, because this, of course, was the doing of the Lord Jesus Christ that it should be the female sex which would be the first to report that he had risen again. Humanity fell through the female sex; humankind was restored through the female sex. A virgin gave birth to Christ; a woman proclaimed that he had risen again. Through a woman death, through a woman life. But the disciples didn't believe what the women had said. They thought they were raving, when in fact they were reporting the truth."

<sup>3</sup> Donna Schaper, "The Way We Rise Now," *LectionAid* 12.2 (2004): 29.

left, you told us to ‘live alive all day.’ That’s a marvelous philosophy of life you have.”

She replied, “That isn’t a philosophy of life; it is Jesus Christ. He’s my answer. He brought me alive out of all kinds of sickness, darkness, and trouble. When I found him, I found life.”<sup>4</sup>

What a wonderful witness that is. But notice what Jesus Christ didn’t do for her. He didn’t turn her life into a life of luxury. She didn’t find a prince who swept her away into a fantasy of pampered wealth. She was still a waitress. She still had to work hard for a living. All her problems were not ended. But something amazing had happened to her in the routine of the ordinary. She knew that Jesus Christ was with her. So she was not just living. She was *alive!* That’s what the story means. It means that we are alive because God is extraordinarily present in our ordinary lives.

## **TWO: God understands ordinary life**

The story also means that God understands ordinary life. Not only is Jesus extraordinarily present in our ordinary lives but he knows you and me and understands what our lives are like. When the women saw the empty tomb, Jesus wasn’t there. He was already out in the world, eternally present with his people. But he had been there. The grave clothes and tomb were not props. Jesus really suffered on Good Friday. He really died on Good Friday. These are the ordinary things of life and Jesus understands them because he experienced them.

Charlie Shedd, the well-known preacher and author, tells about hearing a radio show where they interviewed “people on the street.” The announcer went to a busy New York City street corner and was talking with some high school girls. They were on their annual ‘sneak day’ to the big city. They were acting silly — giggling, laughing, whispering, clowning. Except one girl. She was the epitome of perfect poise. She kept her cool and calmly said what she thought.

The announcer was obviously impressed. So he asked her, “How come you’re so calm? You must have been on radio before.” She had not. So he pushed for an explanation and she had one.

“I don’t get scared like my friends do,” she said, “and the reason is my mother. When I was eleven, she died. That night she called us in and told us, ‘I want you girls to know I’m going to die, but I’m not afraid. The Lord promised to prepare a place for me. And I believe him. If you will remember this, you won’t be afraid to die. And if you’re not afraid to die, you don’t need to be afraid of anything.’”<sup>5</sup>

What a remarkable young woman and what a remarkable mother. When we know that Jesus Christ really does understand what we face, we don’t have to be afraid. Yes, life does get heavy. Time closes in. Friends and loved ones die. We will someday. We’re lonely. Our bodies begin to give out. We have more aches and pains than we have places. The struggles seem so big and we seem so little. Our world is so filled with misery. But Jesus Christ understands. He knows all about this and we don’t need to be afraid.

## **Conclusion**

Friends, because of the story the women witnessed, we can trust that Jesus is present with us and understands us. That is why we can have joy today, even though our world suffers so and so do

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<sup>4</sup> Floyd W. Thatcher, ed., *The Gift of Easter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976) 87.

<sup>5</sup> Thatcher, 149-150.

we. In a book called *Clothed with the Sun*, a woman named Joyce Hollyday talks about this kind of joy.<sup>6</sup> She describes events in a Salvadoran refugee camp several years ago. But such misery would not be unique to that camp or that conflict.

One year not long before Christmas, soldiers came to the camp and arrested a Christian leader in the camp. They bound him by his thumbs and took him away. When he tried to escape, they mowed him down with machineguns. Later, his pregnant wife and five children gathered around his coffin as a single candle burned in the darkness.

In another part of the camp, a group of women surrounded an infant boy and sung to him in a dark tent, lit only by candle. Between the verses of the song, the boy's mother sobbed in anguish and tried through the night to use an eyedropper to coax some nourishment into her starving child. The boy was too weak to cry. His eyes only stared as if expecting an answer to a question he could not ask. Soon he died.

Yet somehow, a few days later on Christmas Eve, those simple believers managed a joyful celebration. They dressed as best they could, cooked the food they had, made presents with string and tinfoil and bright, colored beads. The children reenacted the journey of *José, María y el niño Jesús* in search of shelter. "This Christmas we will celebrate as they did," said one mother, "looking for a place where our children can be born and safe."

One of the refugee women asked a church worker from the United States why she always looked so sad and burdened. The American said she felt such grief over all the suffering she witnessed and her commitment to give all of herself to the struggle of the refugees. This refugee woman gently confronted her: "Only people who expect to go back to North America in a year work the way you do. You cannot be serious about our struggle unless you play and celebrate and do those things that make it possible to give a lifetime to it."

And she explained how every time the refugees were displaced and had to build a new camp, they immediately formed three committees: a construction committee, an education committee, and the *comité de alegría* — "the committee of joy." Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as digging latrines and teaching their children to read.

Dear friends, that capacity for joy comes from, yes, the Christmas story, but even more from the story told by the women who first witnessed the empty tomb. Because of what the women were privileged to see first, we can go forward in joy. We can go forward, even in this world of suffering, as a *comité de alegría* — a committee of joy, spreading the news that Jesus is alive and will be with us always. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>6</sup> Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 224-225.