



Women in the Gospel of Mark

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The Gospel of Mark proclaims good news: the breaking in of God's kingdom, bringing abundant blessings for this age—blessings that include healings and feedings and the new community gathered around Jesus. The Markan Jesus calls disciples to join this new community, to engage in a discipleship of service to those with less power and status than themselves, and to endure persecution by political authorities who reject God's rule. Most of all, disciples are called to trust the power of God for good. Women are an integral part of Mark's proclamation of good news. In this article, I will be discussing the Revised Common Lectionary passages that involve women, stressing how the passages illuminate Mark's narrative themes. I have followed the order of Mark's Gospel, placing Palm Sunday and Easter at the end. Throughout, I am speaking about the Markan Jesus and the Markan narrative world, not directly about the history of women around Jesus.¹

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1:29–39. This passage narrates Jesus' healing Peter's mother-in-law, who rose "and served them." Service (δῖακονία) here most likely describes women's activities of waiting on table. Service becomes

¹Most of this article is adapted from my "The Gospel of Mark," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 470–509. The translations are my own. For a narrative reading of Mark, see also David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

Women play an integral role in Mark's proclamation of the good news. The Gospel uses the women to encourage the audience to follow Jesus in discipleship. With the women, we too are called to enjoy the blessings of the kingdom, to be of service to those with less power, and perhaps to undergo persecution for following the way of God.

an important Markan theme describing ideal discipleship, which in retrospect may apply in this passage. Peter's mother-in-law is ministering to the disciples.

*First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5): Mark 3:20–35.*² This passage includes Jesus' controversy with his own family. When his mother and brothers call him, Jesus ignores them and redefines his family as those *with him* who do the will of God. This group explicitly includes women, "sister and mother,"³ a radical claim in its first-century context. The basic unit of ancient society was not the individual as in the West today, but the family or kinship unit. Individual needs and desires were subordinated to those of the family group under the male head of household. Here Jesus replaces the blood kinship group with the family of God, a new fictive kinship group without fathers. It is a community of relationships of solidarity rather than hierarchy. This new community is open to women independent of their embeddedness in the social unit of their blood kin, where they owe obedience to father or husband. To be a follower of Jesus is to become part of this new kinship group, the community of the kingdom of God.

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8): Mark 5:21–43. In the first two passages involving women, Mark included the themes of service and the new community. This passage recounts the blessings of God's realm, namely, the healings of two females: a young girl who has died and a woman with a vaginal hemorrhage. In the first-century cultural context, women were considered less clean than men and constituted a perennial threat of pollution to men. In addition to being female, each has another source of impurity: the girl becomes a corpse, and the woman has a hemorrhage. Any physical contact with these women should render Jesus unclean. Instead, Jesus makes them pure and restores them to society. The Markan Jesus creates a new community that understands the realm of God as whole, inclusive, and without boundaries, not as the kind of exclusive realm advocated by some Jewish groups, such as the Pharisees.

The woman with the hemorrhage (5:25–34) is portrayed violating the norms for proper submissive female behavior. *She* initiates contact with Jesus: she sneaks up in the crowd and touches Jesus' clothes to obtain healing. She is not offered healing by Jesus; she claims it for herself, without permission from anyone. Her actions bring praise from Jesus, and inclusion in his gathered family: "*Daughter*, your faith has saved you" (5:34). Finally, several words appear only in the depiction of the hemorrhaging woman and of Jesus' suffering: "suffer many things," "blood," and "body." The language suggests that "Mark dared to identify the woman's suffering with that of Jesus."⁴

²The ELCA lectionary for year B 2005–2006 transfers St. Barnabas to this Sunday, thus omitting an important Markan passage.

³The NRSV in its desire to be inclusive has added sisters at the beginning. In the Greek, "sister" only appears in the final saying of Jesus.

⁴Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 34; following Marla J. Selvidge, *Women, Cult, and Miracle Recital* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990).

The two intertwined stories are united by the use of “twelve”: the girl was twelve years old and the woman had suffered for twelve years. The number twelve is symbolic of the whole of Israel; therefore the two stories together stress the inclusion of women, even unclean women, in Jesus’ community of God. We need, however, to be careful not to reinforce anti-Semitism in preaching on these texts. In the first century, purity regulations basically applied only if one was entering the temple in Jerusalem. While the Pharisees were advocating more widespread application of purity as pleasing to God, it was generally understood that peasants had neither the leisure nor the resources to keep the purity laws in daily life.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10): Mark 6:14–29. Mark’s portrayal of women is almost universally positive. This passage is the exception. The folktale-like story of John the Baptist’s execution is shown as brought about by Herod Antipas’s wife Herodias and her young daughter. The narrative draws on the motif of banquets of the rich in antiquity.⁵ Only men dined; girls, usually slaves, provided entertainment, music, and dance. The entertainment was sexually titillating, and females present were understood to be sexually available. The girl’s youth may make the scene especially shocking for modern audiences; in antiquity, however, it was not her age but her highborn status as Herodias’s daughter that made her dance shocking. Herodias and her daughter are clearly labeled as disreputable women.

This is the only instance in Mark of a narrative with sexual overtones, but it is not a negative portrayal of female sexuality.⁶ Lewd behavior was stereotypically part of elite banquets, and Mark’s peasant audience probably heard the story as yet another example of the notorious debauchery of rulers. Herod (who is part of Mark’s negative portrayal of political authorities) is depicted negatively, as are Herodias and her daughter.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18): Mark 7:24–37. This passage narrates the story of the Syrophenician woman, a Gentile who seeks out Jesus to exorcise her daughter’s demon.

Mark continues the themes of upholding wholeness rather than purity and of breaking boundaries to extend God’s realm. But most remarkable is the dialogue between the woman and Jesus. As in many of the controversy stories, sharp dialogue is followed by a snappy saying (see 2:15–17, 18–20, 23–28). But in this story alone, the snappy retort is not made by Jesus. Jesus first refuses to heal the daughter on the grounds that children (the Jews) must be fed before dogs (the Gentiles). The woman cleverly and politely uses his own argument to convince him: “Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Jesus replies that “for this

⁵See Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 24–79; 93–95.

⁶The story, however, has often been interpreted as concerning women’s sexuality. See Janice Capel Anderson, “Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter,” in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 115–133.

word” the demon is gone from her daughter. For the content of what she says and not just for her faith or persistence (as in Matthew’s version: Matt 15:21–28) Jesus grants her request. The Syrophoenician woman has led the Markan Jesus to enlarge the boundaries of the realm of God to include even Gentiles: shortly after in Mark, Jesus feeds four thousand Gentiles, a great abundance of crumbs!

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Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19): Mark 8:27–38. This passage does not explicitly mention women, but its theology is important for all Christians, perhaps especially for women. After the Markan Jesus announces his coming passion and resurrection, he instructs everyone that those who follow him risk being persecuted as well. Jesus calls the crowd along with the disciples: “If any want to come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me” (8:34). “Come after” and “follow” make this passage a general invitation to discipleship for everyone—then and now. The invitation, however, stresses not the blessings of God’s realm, but the cost—persecution, even execution by political authorities. The call to deny self is often heard today as a call to sacrifice self—always to be subservient and to endure suffering that could be alleviated—as a demand of Christian discipleship. Yet in the first-century context, this is not an exhortation to suffering in general. General human suffering—hunger, illness, etc.—is overcome by the present blessings of the realm of God. To deny self means rather to renounce one’s blood kinship group and join the followers of Jesus.⁷ The call to take up one’s cross is an exhortation to remain faithful to Jesus and God’s rule in the face of persecution.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20): Mark 9:30–37 and Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24): Mark 10:35–45. Again, these passages do not feature women. They do, however, provide Mark’s understanding of service, which is important for understanding Mark’s message. In both passages, the teaching on discipleship and service are addressed to the Twelve. In Mark 9:35, Jesus says, “If any wish to be first, they will be last of all and servant of all.” The disciples are called to service, διακονία. This is ordinary service—waiting on tables, taking care of children, and so on. In wealthy households, male or female slaves did these tasks; in the peasant world of Jesus and Mark, wives and daughters did them. The Twelve are called to do women’s work. In Mark 10:43–44, Jesus says that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (διάκονος), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (δοῦλος) of all.” One might expect Mark to

⁷Bruce J. Malina, “Let Him Deny Himself” (Mark 8:34 & Par): A Social Psychological Model of Self-Denial,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (1994) 106–119; Joanna Dewey, “Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take Up Their Cross’: A Feminist Reading of Mark 8:34 in Mark’s Social and Narrative World,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34 (2004) 98–104.

contrast being first or great with being weak or with suffering as the way of God; however, Mark does not contrast power with suffering, but with service. The sign of the true disciple is not to suffer much but to serve much.

The instruction to serve is addressed to the twelve men, not to women, children, and slaves—those whose social role is already to serve. (Of course when women or slaves have power over others, they too are called to serve those with less power.) It is precisely those in positions to wield power over others who are exhorted to act as servants and slaves. Mark is not presenting universal teaching applicable to all regardless of social status and access to power. Rather he is addressing those with some power and instructing them to serve.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22): Mark 10:17–31. By this stage in the Gospel, Mark's audience has begun to wonder if the disciples understand anything: they have not grasped God's power shown in the boat and feeding stories, and they misunderstood Jesus' teaching about persecution and service. They have attempted to establish their own control over God's realm by stopping the strange exorcist and those bringing children to Jesus. Now when Peter points out that they *have* met the demands the rich man failed to meet, the audience is prepared for another rebuke of the disciples. This time, however, the Markan Jesus reassures the disciples—and Christians today. Those who leave their blood kinship groups to follow Jesus join the new community, which receives blessings of God's realm "a hundredfold now in this age" (10:30) and also persecution from the powers-that-be. The teaching echoes 3:31–35, a community of solidarity, and again explicitly includes women, "mothers and sisters."

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Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27): Mark 12:38–44. In this passage, the Markan Jesus berates the scribes for simultaneously making a show of piety and exploiting the economically vulnerable, the widows. He then praises the destitute widow for contributing a tiny sum of money, thereby giving her whole life. The passage contrasts the widow's willingness to give her whole life with the scribes' use of their privileges to exploit others. Mark presents the widow as a model for discipleship. This reading may also provide an opportunity to include the story of the woman anointing Jesus at Bethany (see Palm Sunday below). In both passages, Mark is presenting women as models of service—one giving her mite and the other acting as a prophet, anointing Jesus with expensive nard.

Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday): Mark 14:1–15:47 (or Mark 15:1–39 [40–47]). Throughout Mark's Gospel, women have appeared quite frequently and positively. Here in the passion narrative, however, Mark's male bias is vividly apparent in his portrayal of the women followers of Jesus. Mark has mentioned Jesus'

male disciples throughout the narrative. At last, fifteen verses before the end of the entire Gospel, he states that there were many women who had traveled with Jesus in Galilee, who had followed and ministered, and who had come to Jerusalem with him; that is, there were women as well as men as disciples. Our dilemma is that, long before 15:41, we have interpreted Mark's androcentric perspective as narrative description and historical reality. We have created a mental picture of the Markan narrative world as one in which only men accompany Jesus. The mention of the women in Mark 15 and 16 is too little and too late to modify our imaginative pictures of Mark's world.

Furthermore, the exigencies of liturgical worship generally conspire to keep congregations from ever even hearing in church about these women followers of Jesus. The lectionary gives three options for reading Mark's passion narrative on Palm Sunday: the long reading (Mark 14:1–15:47), which includes the story of the woman anointing Jesus at Bethany and the notice of the women at the crucifixion and burial of Jesus; the intermediate reading (Mark 15:1–47), which keeps the women at the crucifixion and burial; and the short reading (Mark 15:1–39), which eliminates the women followers altogether. Since Palm Sunday is already a lengthy worship service, many opt for the shortest reading, thus reinforcing and extending Mark's androcentrism.

The Anointing at Bethany: Mark 14:3–9. In Mark, an otherwise unknown woman anoints Jesus' head. Anointing on the head is an act of symbolic importance. To tend someone's feet as in Luke's and John's stories is the act of a social inferior, a slave or a woman (Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8). But a host might anoint a guest's head as a sign of rejoicing. To anoint on the head is also to call that person to God's service, to consecrate him or her for a special task. Prophets and priests were anointed, but, above all, those chosen to be king were anointed. So the unknown woman at Bethany was a prophet, fulfilling the prophetic function of choosing and empowering Jesus for his messianic role. Mark states that her deed will be remembered throughout the whole world wherever the good news is preached (14:9). Nowhere else in Mark is any person or action singled out for future remembrance. As with the widow who gave her mite, the woman of Bethany is held up as a positive example. It is a shame not to read this passage in church; yet even if it is read as part of the long passion narrative, it is likely to be overshadowed by the cross. Perhaps it could be included on the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, when the story of the widow's mite is read. Mark brackets the apocalyptic discourse with these two positive stories of women so this would be an appropriate place to include it.

The Women at the Crucifixion and Burial: Mark 15:40–47. Apparently everyone in the Markan world has deserted Jesus. Of the male disciples, all have fled at the arrest, Judas has betrayed, and Peter has denied Jesus. In 15:40, however, Mark tells his audience that one group is still following, namely, the women disciples

who had been with Jesus in Galilee. Like the male disciples, they are named: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. Two of these are named again as they watch to see where Jesus is buried (15:47), and all three are named again as they go out to the tomb (16:1).

In addition to those named, the audience is told that many other women also came up with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are described as “following” Jesus and “serving” him, both words used to define discipleship in Mark (8:34; 9:35; 10:43). Women followers have been obscured in Mark’s androcentric text, only visible in the inclusion of women among Jesus’ new relatives (3:31–35) and among new kin to be gained for following Jesus (10:30). Now Mark tells his audience that Jesus had women disciples and that they have been there all along! The women disciples, unlike the men, do not flee at Jesus’ arrest but remain faithful in face of possible persecution, watch at the cross, and watch to see where his corpse is buried. Mark presents the women remaining faithful after the men have deserted Jesus.

Vigil of Easter and Easter Day: Mark 16:1–8. The conclusion of Mark, the empty tomb narrative, is the lectionary reading for the Easter Vigil and a possible reading for Easter Day. (The other reading is John 20:1–18, which is a possible Easter reading every lectionary year.) If one is following Markan themes throughout the year, Mark’s Easter story is a fitting conclusion and call to discipleship for all. The women have remained faithful and they continue to serve Jesus by going out to anoint his corpse. Now, faced with the command of the angel⁸ to go and tell, they flee from the empty tomb, “saying nothing to anyone.”

Mark presents the women disciples failing in their turn. They flee in astonishment and amazement. Their fear is certainly an appropriate response to the power of God experienced in the empty grave and the encounter with the angel. But saying nothing is not appropriate. Here Mark continues the pattern of irony seen throughout the Gospel. When Jesus has instructed people to keep silent, they have repeatedly gone and told (e.g., 1:45; 7:36–37). Now, the women are to tell, but instead they keep silent. Thus Mark’s Gospel ends.

Three points need to be made about the ending. First, the women’s failure picks up the earlier theme of the male disciples’ inability to trust the power of God. The men are afraid when they experience Jesus’ power over the sea in the boat episodes (4:35–41; 6:45–52); they expect no abundance the second time they must assist Jesus in feeding an enormous crowd with little food (6:30–44; 8:1–10); they are afraid again at the transfiguration (9:2–8). They do not grasp the power of God active in this age. And it is on this issue that Mark portrays the women also failing. They stand firm through all the persecution; when faced with the good news of the resurrection, they flee. The women too have difficulty trusting the power of God for good.

Second, Mark’s abrupt ending serves as a call to his audience to be faithful followers of Jesus, to *do better* than the followers in the narrative. First, the audi-

⁸Literally, “a young man.”

ence hears the example of the male disciples who failed to grasp the power of God and to stand firm at the threat of persecution. The audience has then heard the example of the female disciples, who have served and were able to stand firm in the face of suffering and persecution, but who, in their turn, fail to trust God's power. All have failed in Mark's narrative; it is now up to Mark's hearers to follow Jesus.

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Third, the ending suggests that failure is not the end of discipleship. The fact that the angel instructs the women to tell the Twelve suggests that Mark does not view the men's desertion as excluding them from God's realm. Neither is the failure of the women at the tomb the end for them. Jesus is still going ahead of them to Galilee; they are expected to recover and keep following. The very fact that Mark's story is being told suggests that Mark views failure as part of continuing discipleship. Mark's audiences and Christians today are reassured that they may fail, turn again, and continue following Jesus. Mark's message may even be that human failure is the beginning of true discipleship. So Mark calls us to be faithful followers, expecting healing, expecting persecution. Mark calls us to trust the power of God for good.

Mark has included powerful stories of women in his narrative—the woman with the flow of blood (5:25–34); the Syrophoenician woman (7:24–30); and the women disciples at the crucifixion and empty tomb (15:40–16:8). Mark explicitly includes women in the new community following Jesus (3:31–35; 10:28–31). Mark portrays women (and not men) as models of discipleship and service in the stories of the widow's mite and the woman anointing Jesus at Bethany (12:41–44; 14:3–9).

Mark's Gospel is told, however, from a male perspective. Mark does not mention Jesus' women disciples until the end when the male disciples have fled. He uses the women's stories not so much to empower women to be followers of Jesus in their own right as for didactic purposes. He uses the women to encourage his audience, perhaps especially the men in his audience, to follow in a discipleship of service. I invite us to go beyond Mark's narrative, first of all, to restore these wonderful women to our memories and, second, to uphold the women's stories for their own sake. We are all called to be followers of Jesus, enjoying the blessings of the realm of God in this age, being of service to those with less power than ourselves and, as needed, undergoing persecution for following the way of God. ⊕

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