



A “Fluttering Flock” of Messengers? Women in the New Testament

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IT'S EASTER MORNING. ALTHOUGH IT IS THE LAST QUARTER OF THE TWENTIETH century after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, there is a large crowd filling the church sanctuary. The no doubt well-meaning pastor rises to preach on Matthew 28:1-10 and in his third sentence proclaims, “A fluttering flock of women became the runners with the message.” How can this happen? How is it that “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” are described as a “fluttering flock” who “meander in the graveyard”? How is it that the pastor states in public that, given the chance, the same two women would have escaped from that tomb garden as quickly as “startled sparrows”? There is nothing in the text to suggest that the women were less than purposeful. They went “to see the tomb.” While Matthew tells us that *the guards* shook from fear, he says nothing about the fear of the women, save that the angel addresses them in the customary way, “Don’t be afraid.” Whatever fear these “fluttering,” “meandering” women may have felt, they contained it until after the angel had spoken the astounding news of Jesus’ resurrection and had dismissed them to “go tell” this good news to the disciples. Then they ran, in obedience to the angelic command, in fear *and* great joy to proclaim to the disciples. The angel’s message and the women’s mission are confirmed in their subsequent meeting with the risen Lord himself.

Many arguments can and have been made about the role of the women in being the first to come to the empty tomb, the first to meet the risen Lord, and the

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first to be sent on their way with good news to proclaim. The value of these competing exegeses is not what is at stake in my quotation from this Lutheran sermon. What matters is the trivializing language and clichéd images of womanhood that are put in front of a worshipping congregation of women, men, and children who take these as biblical descriptions of women. The sermon does go on to speak in less than glowing terms of the male disciples. The description of their failure, however, does not have the same rhetorical force, for it portrays them as men in shock from the events of the crucifixion, caught in an off-moment. No such explanation precedes the description of the women whose attitudes and behavior are both more in line with “typical” descriptions of women and not mitigated by the suggestion that they too may be shocked.

This sermon writer is unlikely to be in some way “against” women. On the contrary, it is his lack of malicious motive and desire to preach the gospel that raise concern. The pastor wrote this sermon carefully for the Christian high holy day and deemed it good enough for publication. The editors who published it agreed with his assessment.¹ This agreed-upon evaluation clarifies the need for two ongoing tasks. The first is to continue to learn more about and appreciate the roles of women in the New Testament (henceforth, NT). The second is to be more attentive to the way we convey those roles and the value of those ancient women in every kind of pastoral practice. Should we fail to work at both these tasks, we risk discounting, trivializing those whom God has adopted as heirs in baptism, both women and men.

Indeed, such failure would put us in the company of some within the NT itself, for trivializing descriptions of women’s activities and speech in particular are no new phenomenon. For example, can we assume that it is true that the “sensual desires” of Christian widows will “alienate them from Christ”? Are the activities of Christian widows who do not wish to remarry able to be summarized as learning “to be idle” and worse, “gadding about from house to house” as “gossips, busybodies, saying what they should not say” (1 Tim 5:11-13)? The author assumes he knows what the women do, say, what they ought to say or not, and even how to prevent such dangerous speaking. Can we not imagine that these activities of visitation and speech might be otherwise understood? Or are all women doomed to “flutter” and “meander” in ways that are at best not helpful, at worst, dangerous? The fact that this sort of description of women’s activities and behaviors can be found in the NT bespeaks neither its accuracy nor its authority. Rather it makes us aware of how pervasive trivializing description may be, even among those who take seriously the Pauline claims that “in Christ we are a new creation,” “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 3:28).

¹Because the issues here are cultural, not personal, we have chosen not to identify this sermon or pastor.

I. THE CHANGING NEW TESTAMENT WORLD

To learn more about women in the NT, then, is no simple task. There is no straightforward story. Four basic facts about NT documents complicate any attempt to understand the roles of women in the NT story. First, the NT is not least about change. Persons move from one constellation of perceptions about God to another, a change initiated, confirmed, and sustained in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Christ. This change is what the story is about! Secondly, however, change (or difference) is apparent in these documents because the believers themselves live in history. The NT tells the story of how Jesus of Nazareth was born to a young woman in Judea during the time Augustus Caesar was emperor. It focuses on the three years of Jesus' public ministry in a small Judean area and pays particular attention to his ignominious death and subsequent resurrection. The story then moves on to places around the Mediterranean to people who had never known Jesus of Nazareth. It is a story of conversion over distances and over time, that is, in history.

Although it is a small collection of documents, the NT writings span about a century in the writing.² The persons involved in the spread of this story, a remarkably diverse group, come from all parts of the Mediterranean world and many levels of that society. These two facts alone should alert us to the possibility that different writings in the NT might say very different things about the way God is at work in the world, so long as we assume that the God whose ways are contemplated is a living God.

Think about it for a moment: we see a century of change within the community of faith and in the wider world. The NT emerges from the time when God's covenant people began to be drawn from among non-Jews who nevertheless insisted on claiming the Jewish scriptures and God as their own. During the period covered in the NT, the growing numbers of these folks and their difference from their "predecessor bodies" had become apparent, even to various ruling powers, let alone to the predecessors. Christians were getting attention as a new group, a difficult position for them in a society that found novelty suspect and undesirable. During this period some people who had money, prestige, and power began to follow Jesus. In addition, although most Christians were still converts with all the enthusiasm and commitment for which converts are well-known,³ some believers were second- and third-generation Christians.

During this period, the political life of the ancient world continued to move in new and complex directions that impinged directly and indirectly on the lives of believers. Jerusalem was destroyed. Augustus's successors came to power in Rome and initiated changes in taxation, recruitment for the military, local governance, and even imperial religious structures. All these events demanded theological and

²Genealogical and theological concerns do drive many texts into the farthest reaches of history.

³See Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), for detailed discussion of conversion, its motives and results, and some of the pertinent literature.

ethical reflection from those who followed Jesus. If the roles of and attitudes toward women did not remain the same throughout this time, we should not be surprised.

In addition to the significance of change in the lives of believers, another fact about the NT makes it difficult for us to appreciate the roles of women in the NT period and its literature: every document in the NT collections, so far as I know, was written by a man or men and addressed to men, although women were expected to overhear and be instructed.⁴ Does this matter? Yes. Men in the ancient world were generally cut off from women's daily lives and tasks (with, I presume, some exceptions). Men had good theoretical justification for ignoring women and their concerns. One does not have to read widely in ancient literature to see how clearly women are recognized as creatures intellectually, emotionally, and physically inferior to men. Because of their deficiencies women needed to be instructed and controlled. This training and restraining of women was the shared duty of men who wrote to one another about effective and proper ways in which to go about it. Men did not record opinions of women on these matters. Therefore, women's stories about their lives, beliefs, or feelings are not included in the NT.⁵

These realities make very complex the process of understanding and appreciating women in the NT. To understand is to recognize the varieties of voices and purposes in the NT and to appreciate the silenced. This requires deepening our acquaintance with NT texts and with the ancient world. Not to make this effort will short-change the way we understand the Bible's power as the word of God among us. With due attention let us turn to these texts. We begin with the Pauline writings, then Acts, the pastorals, and the gospels.

II. WOMEN IN PAULINE LITERATURE

Paul gives us the clearest picture of women involved in the early Christian movement insofar as he writes to real and often named persons who lived in real and often named places within a rather short span of time. There are certainly issues of how well Paul has perceived what is going on in each ecclesia and how well he understands the women of these small groups.⁶ We do not need to reckon with them here. Rather, we begin with the openings and closings of some Pauline letters. Those who are there named are likely to be influential community figures, given the need to be especially careful at start and finish about local politics that could affect the reception of one's message.

⁴On determining the gender of authors, see Ross Kraemer, "Women's Authorship of Jewish and Christian Literature in the Greco-Roman Period," in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991) 221-242.

⁵One clear example of different descriptions of the same behavior of a woman occurs in Luke 18:1-18. The widow is seen by the male narrator as demanding revenge or justice. The male judge, negatively characterized by the narrator, says simply that she is harrasing him. She does not describe her own action.

⁶These questions are taken up in detail in interesting and provocative work such as that of A. C. Wire, *Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

The single most useful witness to women in the NT is Romans 16. Although there is argument about the connection of this passage to the letter to Rome, there is no dispute that it is Paul's work and that it has integrity as a unit. In Rom 16:3-23, women and men, leaders in the Jesus movement, are greeted by Paul. This is the longest list that I know from the ancient world that names women as leaders of communities and worthy of note. Women bear epithets that suggest leadership and honor in their own religious communities. They are publicly honored by Paul in the eyes of those to whom this letter went.⁷ Most women's names stand on their own in a way unusual for the ancient world. Only the mother of Rufus is identified by the name of a male relative. Paul expects the community to know those whom he greets. We note that similar roles are attributed to both women and men and that women's names are interwoven with those of men. The women are neither afterthought nor parenthesis in this list. Romans 16 is a recommendation of Phoebe, a deacon at Cenchreae, who is about to embark on a journey for the church's sake. We note also that Paul greets other women whom he has known from a variety of places, suggesting that they too traveled in their mission work. Confirmation of this supposition comes from Paul's greeting to Prisca and Aquila, who have migrated from Rome and perhaps back again.

In Paul's letter to Philemon he directly greets a "sister" Apphia. In this letter we see clearly how kinship terms have been used to define relationships in the Christian community rather than the legal family. One function of baptism is to create a new family of siblings adopted by God.⁸ Sister Apphia is a member of such a group to whom Paul writes. The text does not suggest that she is wife to Philemon. Similarly, in Phil 4:2-3, Paul calls upon two women of the ecclesia, who are in some way at odds, to be reconciled. These women are named (without reference to a male relative) and identified as "co-strugglers" in the gospel with Paul and other males. In both Philemon and Philippians women are named because of something particular about their situation, not just because they are women. They matter in their communities and to Paul.

Paul's responses to the activities of women believers in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 7, 11, and 14 indicate their public activity, whether positively or negatively interpreted. As one might suspect from the ways in which women were named in Romans 16, some women seem to have become believers without their spouses (1 Cor 1:1, "Chloe's people"; 7:13-16). While such women are not encouraged to end their marriages, permission is given for such termination, should the unbelieving spouse desire it. It seems clear that commitment to the faith and the community of the faithful takes precedence over commitment to household, including children.

⁷Women are called deacon, benefactor, co-worker in Christ Jesus, housechurch hosts, prominent among the apostles, workers in the Lord, a mother [not only biologically], saints.

⁸In Philemon, Paul plays with kinship terms as part of the way to make his point about the redefinition of Philemon's relationship to Onesimus in light of Paul's having "begotten" both of them and of God being father of all. See also, e.g., Rom 8:14-17; 1 Cor 4:15. On this topic, see Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993) 31, 170-172.

This is not acceptable behavior for women in the wider Mediterranean world. 1 Corinthians 7, like Philemon, undercuts the importance of the legal family for those who belong to Christ. The preference for virginity for those so gifted had a similar effect. It created an environment in which women's roles differed greatly from the prevailing model which was defined by reproduction.⁹

There is no question that the Corinthian women pray and prophesy in gatherings for worship (1 Cor 11:5). These are not unimportant activities in Pauline communities and for Paul himself.¹⁰ Neither female prophecy nor worship leadership were unfamiliar in Jewish or pagan circles, but both took on new importance among the early Christians for two main reasons. First, the Lord who was worshipped could only be known through ritual or visionary experiences. Second, the Spirit was free to address and claim anyone in visions, dreams, and actions. The Spirit's freedom is a keynote in Acts and in Paul. The combination of non-gender-based appearances of the Spirit in somewhat private, often domestic, settings¹¹ offered a unique opportunity to women to take leadership roles of many kinds (patron, worship leader, prophet). The household, after all, was the customary domain of women who saw to its maintenance with some freedom.

At this point in the NT period, the little faith groups were not important to outsiders. They were scarcely distinguished from their Jewish or Gentile neighbors and did not yet form a group with pretensions to public relevance. When Christians were able to be distinguished as such, what went on in the household began to be of interest to the wider public. Since it was customary for men to be accountable for their household's propriety and decorum, growing public awareness of Christian worship created new questions about appropriate leadership. The tension between the household as a place of freedom and responsibility for women and a unit for which men were responsible in the larger world grows stronger in some of the NT's later writings.

Some of this tension, as well as the inherent tension of trying to live in the new age before the old is fully gone (1 Cor 10:11), also appears in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14. Again, we need not decide about how Paul perceived the problem or how he imagined that he solved it, or even whether Paul wrote 1 Cor 14:33b-36, to note that women *are* acting in ways that create some discomfort in the gathering. It is clear that Paul wants to minimize any disruptive effects women's behavior might have in a worship group and yet not bar women from public worship involvement. The question as to whether Paul insisted that women—or wives—be silent in the churches is about the response of NT males to some NT females; it is not about what the women themselves were doing. Indeed, neither Paul nor the complain-

⁹See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University, 1988) 5-32. Also very valuable on this topic is Aline Rousselle, *Porneia* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

¹⁰Prophecy is one of the greater gifts, not to be disregarded: 1 Cor 12:28, 29; 14:29, 32, 37; 1 Thess 5:19-20.

¹¹See John Elliott, "Temple versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 211-240.

ants underestimate the role of the women speakers: it is their very speaking up that comes into question. These women do not “flutter” at all, even in the face of disapproval. They pray, prophesy, perhaps teach, and even argue in the Christian gathering. It is pertinent to our thinking about NT women to wonder whether women obeyed such a command, if such it was. From the ongoing concern in later letters and from Revelation (2:20) it seems clear that many women were not silent.¹²

III. WOMEN IN ACTS

The book of Acts corroborates the importance of women believers. It is true that Luke has a complex agenda for his historical narrative. That agenda includes apologetic that aims to distance Christianity from the realm of exotic, novel, or “eastern” superstition, attractive in Celsus’s later words only “to children and stupid women.”¹³ In spite of a need to represent believers as upstanding and stable people, Luke is interested in women, suggesting that there are women to account for in the early communities.¹⁴

The role of women in the early mission of the church in Acts suggests that women were not silent. Luke’s paradigmatic line for the way in which mission is to be done is uttered by Lydia, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my household and stay” (Acts 16:15). She insists upon behavior which Jesus himself had commended to his representatives (Luke 9-10). She makes her claim energetically and effectively. Lydia, a business woman with a household and no named male relative, insists that trust in the Lord is the only “rule” governing shared hospitality; she becomes central to the mission in Philippi (Acts 16:40). We may compare her to Mary (Acts 12:12-17); Tabitha, a disciple (Acts 9:36-43); Priscilla (Acts 18; Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19). There are other women believers named or alluded to about whom we know little, especially Damaris of Athens (Acts 17:34); Philip’s virginal prophesying daughters (Acts 21:9); and the numbers of women in towns and villages of Asia Minor who found Paul persuasive (Acts

¹²Every responsible reader of scripture must draw some conclusion, however tentative, about the command to silence in 1 Cor 14:33b-36, given the disastrous effects such a word, presumably from Paul, has had in “all the churches.” The issues and possible solutions are well rehearsed in Robert Allison’s article, “Let Women Be Silent in the Churches” (1 Cor 14:33b-36): What Did Paul Really Say, and What Did It Mean?” *JSNT* 32 (1988) 27-60. Allison concludes that 33b-36 represent an “ironic rebuke” of those who would silence women.

¹³*Contra Celsus* 3:55. Celsus articulates a suspicion about religions commonly held by males of the educated class. See R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University, 1981) 62-73. Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984) 48-67 offers a balanced discussion of “superstition” from a Roman point of view. This suspicion seemed particularly apt in relation to Christians.

¹⁴The controversy over Mary and Martha is suggestive concerning the difficulties in interpreting women’s roles in the gospels. Compare Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38-42,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3/2 (1986) 21-36, with Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View,” *JBL* 109 (1990) 441-461, and Loveday Alexander, “Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha’s Story,” in *Women in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. G. Brooke (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1992) 167-186.

17:4, 12).¹⁵ The activities and varieties of women in Acts support the picture in Paul's letters.

We have noted four sets of circumstances that enhanced the ability of women to participate freely and perhaps as leaders in early communities of believers. One was the reconstitution of "family" through the adoption effected in baptism. A second was that the use of the household as a base for the group brought ecclesial meetings firmly into the domain of ancient women. A third was the baptismal gift of the Spirit. This gift to women and men summoned some persons of both genders to public prophecy. Also important to women was the marginality of these groups in their time. Unknown as a group to most in the early first century, believers were not even clearly self-defined. This changed as more persons came to consider themselves Christians and be so identified by others.

IV. WOMEN IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

Appropriating Paul's message seems never to have been easy and almost always to have been important for early believers (2 Pet 3:15-16). Differences over acceptable roles and activities of women in the NT period follow two basic lines that could easily stem from the kind of confusion we continue to experience in interpreting 1 Corinthians 11 and 14. We are able to trace two distinct ways, both laying claim to a Pauline pedigree, in which the roles of early Christian women took shape. Only one of these appears in the canon. The pastoral epistles that are generally agreed to be non-Pauline firmly enforce roles for women that are limited to the domestic. Indeed, women are to be saved by the bearing of children and are to be protected from their own emotional and moral lability (1 Tim 2:13-15) by the diligent oversight of congregation, father, husband, and even children (presumably sons). Leadership roles for women are not mentioned and difficult to imagine (1 Tim 2:11-12). Yet we hear that Timothy's own faith was passed on to him by his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice (2 Tim 1:5). The author of this letter must have been especially grateful for the "sincere" faith that these two generations of women passed on, given the "weakness" of women in general and "their willingness to believe anything" (2 Tim 3:6-7).

"Superstitious" was a common negative evaluation applied to another's religious belief. Since "superstitious" beliefs appealed only to the weak-minded, such beliefs were especially likely to appeal to women and lead them into uncontrollable behaviors (violence, sexuality).¹⁶ Even if the beliefs remained harmless, no sane man and no society would find them useful. For Christianity to make its way in the world, it had to become a religion with male leaders and spokespersons. Women adherents had to be under control or the faith would continue to be subject

¹⁵Luke never argues that women did not respond to the missionaries, even if negatively (Acts 13:50). Rather, he insists that these are respectable women, again pointing to the possibility of significant numbers of women believers who awaken the fears of the likes of a Celsus.

¹⁶On women's participation, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings* (New York: Oxford University, 1992) 52-60. This book is full of thoughtfully presented information.

to the suggestion that it was only superstition and not valid for reasonable men. The earliest stages of an increased control over Christian practices and social behaviors make their appearance in the dissent in the Corinthian congregations about the proper way for women to participate in the new faith communities. The desire to limit women's involvement to the domestic sphere and eliminate their participation in public religious activities is quite clear by the time of the pastorals. In these letters social acceptability is at stake. Christians have come to public attention and some public scorn or worse. In spite of the importance of women, and the possibility that they served as deacons (1 Tim 3:8), it is clear that the major role of women is to be safely and traditionally domestic. We hear from no women, nor are any addressed. Paul is claimed as the authority for such restriction.

How different this interpretation of Paul is from that in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. This non-canonical text was influential in the early church. Thecla, a pagan virgin, hears Paul, is converted, and refuses to marry in order that she might follow Paul. God's preservation of her mission over against the determined opposition of her family, fiancé, and city is the gist of the story.¹⁷ From this text we gain insight into another kind of Christian woman of NT times and a bit later. We learn what women might do who continued to value the freedom and public roles open to them in Christian life. It is no accident that Thecla finds support from a woman mentor, most of the women of the city, and even from a female lion who was to have eaten her in the arena.¹⁸ It was precisely female refusal to participate in "business as usual" that was at stake for some women of this period. The women refused filial and marital obedience. In an early historical martyr story, Perpetua, a nursing mother, must resist every demand of domesticity and become, as Thecla did, a man. Her milk dries up; she hands over her child; she is stripped of her clothing; and finds as she enters the arena that she has become a man. Thus she is able to endure her martyrdom.

This kind of literature highlights just what the writer of the pastoral epistle seemed to fear: the breakdown of the family; the abandonment by women of their domestic duties; and the inability of men to control their women in the face of a call from God. All these are the prideful point of stories such as those of Thecla and Perpetua. This kind of early Christian woman does not appear in the NT pages, except (and this is not negligible) as the subject of rebuff. We have suggested some reasons as to why this concern for standard propriety arose. The apologetic and control motif of the post-Pauline NT documents was very strong. The community

¹⁷This popular story, which begins with Paul's visit to Iconium (Acts 13:51), existed in numerous translations. The date of its writing is unknown, but Tertullian mentions it as early as 198-200 (*De Baptismo* 17) where its already widespread influence is acknowledged and discredited. Women found this model persuasive enough to call forth correction: "If those who read the writings that falsely bear the name of Paul adduce the example of Thecla to maintain the right of women to teach and to baptize, let them know that the presbyter in Asia who produced this document as if he could of himself add anything to the prestige of Paul confessed that he did it out of love for Paul."

¹⁸Some women did in fact pursue the paths that are described in this fictional account. See Monique Alexandre, "Early Christian Women," in *A History of Women*, vol. 1, ed. Pauline Schmidt Pantel (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1992) 426-444.

of believers in Jesus the Christ no longer attempted to remove the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but became a place where Jew, slave, and female were again subordinate categories. They suggest what is trivial and/or dangerous. It is no surprise that documents manifesting concern for such propriety and household harmony found their way into the canon of a scripture that had come to be important in a world empire.

V. WOMEN IN THE GOSPELS

It is also no surprise that ambivalence about the roles of women permeates the gospels as well. For Christians in our time this insight is crucial. To most persons in contemporary churches the gospels seem to be the history about Jesus, the real story.¹⁹ The roles of women in this story have heightened importance and authority for most hearers. How did Jesus treat women? What roles did women fill in the gospels? How ought women who follow Christ behave? While answers to these questions are hard to come by, given the mysteries of the gospels' composition, the gospels as stories also hinder our efforts to understand the women who appear. The evangelists, after all, are interested in Jesus. The driving story is that of Jesus and of his ministry of praying, preaching, and teaching in Palestine, his death, and resurrection. Once we get beyond the basics, the stories come in disparate fragments drawn together by persons with social and theological agendas. Also, the evangelists are likely to be men who did not personally know Jesus and all those around him. Finally it is likely that some NT writers wished to downplay the roles of women in the Jesus movement. How, then, can we talk about women in the gospel stories in such a way as to do even proximate justice to their lives as early followers of Jesus?

The record of numerous women around Jesus must be taken as a sign of their presence, at the least. We observe that in its earliest stages of being, when Jesus led an itinerant, prophetic movement, women traveled with him. In the new family of those who follow Jesus, women are members (see, e.g., Mark 15:41; Luke 8:1-3; 23:55; Acts 1:13-14).²⁰ Women provide (Luke 8:2; 10:38-42; Acts 12:10-12; 16:15, 40) and prophesy (Mary, Elizabeth, Anna in Luke; the anointing woman in Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13; John 12:1-12).²¹ They learn from Jesus in public and private, eat with him, and exercise diakonia as Jesus himself did.²² They witness to Jesus as messiah. The Samaritan woman (John 4:27-42) witnesses to Jesus and persuades her whole town to meet him. These women are not so different from the men in the

¹⁹This sense is heightened by the fact that the gospels are stories about Jesus, that they therefore seem to be older than other NT texts, and finally by the fact that they are honored liturgically.

²⁰Note, however, that Luke sees fit to say that "wives" are left behind by those who follow Jesus, thus addressing only males (Luke 18:30; Mark 10:29; Matt 19:29).

²¹On this woman and her role in Acts, see D' Angelo, "Women in Luke-Acts" (note 12 above), 452.

²²δῆλον, δῆλον: see, e.g., Luke 8:3; 10:40; 12:37; and esp. 22:26, 27. See also Acts 1:17, 25; 6:1, 2, 4. John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University, 1990) is an informative study of the use of these terms in the ancient world.

NT. They are people both named and unnamed, with and without understanding who move in and out of Jesus' story.

There are, however, some differences between women and men in this story. Women rarely misperceive Jesus. Women are faithful, following Jesus to the cross in all the gospels. In addition, all the gospels tell us that women were the first to see the empty tomb and to meet the risen Lord.²³ We dare not take this action for granted, no matter how often commentators suggest women were merely dutiful. In Tobit the hero's insistence on burying his co-religionists killed in persecution is a sign of remarkable piety, worthy of reward. This dangerous care is also the worthy ministry of some of the devout and courageous women around Jesus. By their actions, the women make a commitment to the new family constituted by Jesus' followers. Their named or unnamed inclusion is not to be taken for granted in the ancient world.

Of course, there is serious debate about the ways in which the evangelists portray these women. To paraphrase Jesus (Luke 10:26), "What is written in the gospels? How do you read?" What about the sharp irony of the one whom Jesus commits to our memory, but whose name Mark does not even tell us (Mark 14:9)? Perhaps a yet sharper irony is the failure of lectionary and sermons to remember these women. Jesus does not silence women who cry out for help, not even at the behest of the twelve. Yet more women are present and well accounted for in the NT than in most of the publicly told story about Jesus in our day. Our tradition has been harsh to women in many times and places, the ancient fears of women's irrationality and weakness, with all their corollaries, rising to restrict women over and over again. But it cannot be done. There *are* women messengers in the NT. Even if their own voices do not come to us, the alert reader cannot miss their presence and faith. Like the woman who demanded attention from the "unjust judge" (Luke 18:1-8), they – we – continue to be heard. Like Lydia, they – we – continue to insist on their full share in the church's mission. ⊕

²³We are bound to wonder why no women are mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 when he lists chronologically those to whom the risen Lord had appeared.