

**PASSION PERSONALITIES: THE WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED JESUS
MATTHEW 27:55-56; JOHN 20:10-18; MATTHEW 28:1-10**

Have you ever heard the story about the two men who happened upon an ancient and magic lamp? When one of them rubbed it, a genie appeared before them and said to each of them, "I can grant you one wish." The first man thought about it and said, "I want to be the smartest man in the world." The genie said, "So be it." And it was so. He was the smartest man in the world. Then the genie turned to the second man and asked him, "What is your wish?" He said, "I want to be smarter than the smartest man in the world." The genie said, "So be it." Immediately, the second man was turned into a woman! And all the women here today said with loud and enthusiastic agreement: "Amen!"

Now I don't want to get a fight started between the two sexes on this Easter Day! But, as I conclude a series of messages today on several people who turn up prominently during the Passion of Jesus, I don't want us to forget about the women who followed Jesus. We've heard about Nicodemus, Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter, Pontius Pilate, Zacchaeus, and the two thieves crucified next to Jesus. Let's face it, men, with a few exceptions the males turn out to be a pretty sorry group. It was men who condemned Jesus to death unjustly, who betrayed Jesus, who denied Jesus, who acted as cowards towards Jesus and who cursed Him. The women turn out to be the most faithful and admirable of all of them.

Jesus had a revolutionary relationship with women as well as a revolutionary attitude towards women compared to the prevailing custom of His day and time. In addition to the twelve disciples, Jesus had a kind of traveling entourage with Him during His ministry and a significant number of these folk were women. Some of these women were quite wealthy and used their financial resources to help support Jesus and this entourage. Jesus always treated women with respect, dignity and honor. Perhaps that's why so many women evidently followed Jesus and why they were right there gathered around the cross when He died and why several of them turn up in the first Easter Day accounts.

Whenever I hear the Christian faith getting blamed for the mistreatment of women in some way or being presented as not supporting the equal value of women, I have to smile and shake my head. It's such incredible ignorance! Women, you will never find a better friend than Jesus. You will never find anyone who will treat you with greater respect and honor than Jesus. You matter to God just as much as men, because both men and women together reflect the image of God. As I read about these women who followed Jesus, three very positive facts speak to me in my own faith journey with Jesus. Whether you're male or female is irrelevant. We can all learn something very important from these women. First of all...

THEY WERE LOYAL TO JESUS.

Our first text today is Matthew 27:55-56. Who were these women gathered around the cross watching Jesus die? We don't know a definite number, but I'm struck by that word "many." Many women. Among the most prominent are Mary, from the town of Magdala; another Mary, the mother of two men named James and Joses (who we don't know anything about with certainty); and the mother of two of Jesus' disciples, James and John. Most scholars believe her name was Salome. We know from other accounts of the crucifixion that Jesus' mother, Mary, was also present.

What strikes me is the sheer loyalty of these women towards Jesus despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation. These women witnessed the crucifixion, and other scriptures tell us that several of them observed the preparation of Jesus' dead body for burial after He was taken down from the cross. The Bible also says, "The women who had been companions of Jesus from Galilee followed along. They saw the tomb where Jesus' body was placed." (Luke 23:55 MSG) It's interesting to me that there's no mention of any of the disciples being involved in this way. Can you guess who was first to visit Jesus' tomb on the very first Easter Day? "But very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance." (Luke 24:1-2 NLT)

So why? Why did these women stay at Golgotha until Jesus' body was taken down off the cross? Why did they watch His body being wrapped in burial clothes? Why did they follow those who buried Jesus' body and watch the stone roll into place? Why did they get up before sunrise and walk to Jesus' tomb that first Easter Day? Loyalty. They didn't expect the resurrection any more than the men. No, they came to put additional spices on Jesus' dead body not celebrate the resurrection. These women simply wanted to express their allegiance to Jesus in some way. They were steadfastly loyal despite being filled with probably the deepest disillusionment and despair imaginable.

Yes, - just like the men - these women had heard Jesus say He would rise from the dead, but - just like the men - they couldn't comprehend it. We know how the story turned out, but they certainly didn't at this point in time. From their perspective, their greatest hopes had been crushed when Jesus died. The most important person in their lives was gone. Their faith seemed worthless. Their hopes were destroyed. Life looked empty and tragic to those women walking towards Jesus' tomb while it was still dark. When Jesus died physically, those women died spiritually. Being a man myself, I would have seen no value in going to Jesus' tomb that day. I would have stayed away. Why do something guaranteed to make me feel even worse than I already did? But these women were simply being loyal to Jesus the best and only way they knew how.

I find their loyalty compelling. You believe in Jesus. Your hope - both for this life and for the future - is grounded in Him. But it may well be - as it is in everyone's life at one time or another - that tragedy, suffering or struggle has come into your

life. Those experiences test your faith and hope in Jesus, don't they? They can even challenge your love for Jesus. It may be the death of a loved one. It could be a chronic illness. Perhaps it's unemployment or financial loss. It could be the betrayal of a friend. It may be divorce or a marriage in big trouble this morning. Maybe one of your kids is having a crisis. It might be any number of circumstances beyond your control that confuse you, frustrate you, anger you, and make you afraid. Learn something from these women. That's never the time to give up on Jesus. Instead, like these women did, make a decision to draw near to Him the best way you know how. Stay loyal to Him even when it seems like that loyalty is a waste of your time and energy.

How I wish I could tell you that because Jesus rose up from the dead, all God's children will be spared hurt and disappointment! But that would be a lie. The fact is I can't say that on Easter Day or any other day. In fact, there's much in the Bible that implies that you only learn real loyalty to Jesus when it's tested. It's easy to follow Jesus and be loyal to Him when all is well and life is working out the way you want it to. But what happens when live caves in on you? What happens when the bottom falls out of your life? What happens when you're in a dark pit looking up for some ray of light? That's when your loyalty to Jesus gets tested. Will you still trust Him, obey Him, live for Him and follow Him – like those women did – even when your dreams and hopes are dashed to pieces?

Tommy Dorsey was a famous jazz musician. When he was singing at a church in St. Louis he got awful news. He was handed a telegram right in the service that read simply, "Your wife is dead." The church was packed. People were rejoicing in the Lord, asking Dorsey for another song. He had left his wife back in Chicago because she was in her last month of pregnancy. He remembered his last look was of Nettie sound asleep. All seemed well. But now everything was coming apart. Quickly, Dorsey headed home and entered their bedroom. Nettie's body was still there. She had given birth to a son, but within a day he died, too. Both were buried in the same casket.

Tommy Dorsey fell apart. Where was God? This was just too much pain. How could he any longer believe in God and His goodness? He quit. He was done with God. He felt alone and without peace. The Saturday after Nettie and his son's funeral, Dorsey meandered close to a piano. He sat down and started to fiddle with the keys. A song began to emerge: the melody simple, the words fresh. It became one of Dorsey's most well known and well loved songs – a song that flowed from a burdened, questing heart in search of Jesus. "Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home." It wasn't Easter Sunday, but that was the day that Easter became real for Tommy Dorsey. He told a friend afterwards, "And so I go on living for God willingly and joyfully, until that day when He will take my hand and gently lead me home." It's in life's blackest moments that your loyalty to Jesus will be tested. When that moment comes will you – like the women who

followed Jesus - be loyal to Jesus? There's a second fact about these women who followed Jesus that impresses me.

THEY LOVED JESUS.

Isn't it true that you can only be truly loyal to a person you love? The fact is that these women loved Jesus – maybe none of them quite as much as Mary Magdalene. Many believe she was a prostitute before she became a follower of Jesus, but the Bible never says that. She did have, however, an even more troubling, personal background issue. The Bible says that Jesus expelled seven demonic spirits out of her. Can you imagine having Mary Magdalene living in your neighborhood? Can you imagine having her in your family? What were family get-togethers like with Mary Magdalene around? It's clear that Jesus completely changed and revolutionized her life. Fiction writers – most recently Dan Brown in *The DaVinci Code* – love to portray a romantic relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. That's completely untrue. But it is true that Mary was forever transformed by the depth and quality of Jesus' love for her.

And Mary loved Jesus deeply in return. That's no more evident than the moving scene between Mary and the risen Jesus on that first Easter Day found in John 20:10-18. Can you sense Mary's profound love for Jesus? It was a love that brought her back to the tomb with no expectation of the resurrection. She wanted and needed to be near Jesus. She's so overcome with grief that she doesn't even recognize Jesus when He appears to her. She offers to carry away the body of Jesus if only this man who she thinks is a gardener will tell her where Jesus' body has been moved. That was a kind of irrational, exasperated love speaking. After all, what was Mary going to do with a man's full grown body wrapped up in an additional 100 pounds of spices? But it was genuine love.

Then Jesus calls her by name and she immediately recognizes Him. She must have rushed over and literally clung to Jesus in a bear hug-like embrace. I believe that's how we should understand Jesus when He says to her there in v. 17, "Don't hold on to me...." It's not that Jesus was being rude or that He had a problem with being touched. It's just that Mary had no intention of ever letting Jesus out of her grasp ever again! She was literally holding on to Jesus for dear life lest someone else come and take Him away yet again. It's as if Jesus says, "Mary, you've got to stop clinging to me for dear life. I have a mission for you. Go and give the remaining disciples a message for Me: 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

I'm challenged by Mary Magdalene's love for Jesus. Do I really love Him like she did? You can sense people who truly love Jesus. It's a spiritual intuition kind of thing. There's a glow, a peace, a certain spiritual something that separates them from those who are merely acquainted with Jesus. Jesus is simply the center of their lives, the focus, the foundation and the source. They can talk about Jesus without sounding artificial or pushy. It's like the boy who returned home after his

first Sunday School class ever. His mother asked him, "Who was your teacher?" The boy answered, "I don't remember. But she must have been Jesus' grandmother because she didn't talk about anyone else." People love Jesus because He has changed them when no one and nothing else could. People love Jesus because He accepts them in all their brokenness. People love Jesus because He forgives them when they couldn't even forgive themselves. People love Jesus because He empowers them when they've come to the end of their own strength. People love Jesus because He's gives them a future and a hope. Let me ask you on this Easter Day: do you truly love Jesus? Do you love Him like Mary Magdalene and these other women who followed Jesus? Let me point out a third and final positive fact about these ladies on this Easter Day.

THEY LET OTHERS KNOW ABOUT JESUS.

What's the first thing Jesus asked Mary Magdalene to do after appearing to her on that first Easter morning? "Go, tell." That was it. "Go, tell." You find the same theme in Matthew 28:1-10. Now, please don't miss the implication. These women came to the tomb, but then they were sent from the tomb. The direction for them – as well as for you and me – has been changed forever. We aren't people who trudge up to Jesus' tomb once a year on Easter Sunday, read the inscription on the grave stone and shed a few, sad tears. We don't come to the tomb on Easter Day at all. Jesus isn't there! Instead we come from the tomb with an announcement: "Jesus is alive! He's alive in heaven. He's alive in this world. He's alive in every person who has received Him by faith. And He can be alive in you today if you put your trust in Him."

The resurrection of Jesus is more than a fact to be celebrated once a year. Easter is more than singing songs about a risen Savior. Easter is more than listening to choirs sing, pastors preach, and enjoying a day with your family. Easter is a message to be proclaimed and lived out every day in front of others. Only a few verses after Jesus tells these women in Matthew 28 to go and tell the disciples about His resurrection, we find these words: "Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you...." (Matthew 28:19-20 CEV) In other words, "Go, tell!" If you don't go the members of your own family, who will? If you don't go to your neighbors, who will? If you don't go to the people you work with or go to school with, who will? Jesus' message that first Easter Day to the women who followed him is essentially the same one for you and me: "Go, tell!"

British pastor, W.E. Sangster, began to notice some uneasiness in his throat and a dragging in his leg. When he went to the doctor, he was told he had an incurable disease that caused progressive muscular atrophy. His muscles would gradually waste away, his voice would fail and he would eventually be unable to swallow. When other people tried to tell him how tough his life was, Sangster simply said, "I'm in the kindergarten of suffering." He threw himself into every

ministry opportunity he could find. He wrote articles and books. He organized prayer groups around England. Gradually, Sangster's legs became useless. His voice went completely. He could still hold a pen, but barely. One Easter morning, just a few weeks before he died, he wrote a letter to his daughter. In it, he said, "It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout, 'He is risen!' – but it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout."

You have a voice with which to shout today, "He is risen!" You have a tongue with which to tell others what Jesus has done. You have a heart with which to show compassion in the name of Jesus. You have a life that can shine out to others with the reality of the risen Christ. Easter is a fact to be believed, to be sure, but it's also a message to be shared. And God is asking you and me to deliver that message to a world that desperately needs to hear it. Go, tell!

A college-aged Christian named Angie was given a divine opportunity on a flight from Chicago to Lincoln, Nebraska just a few years ago. She found herself sitting next to a 19-year-old Saudi Arabian man named Ali. He was on his way to begin his college education at the University of Nebraska. As soon as Angie heard that Ali had never been in the United States before and was from the Middle East, she felt Jesus tugging at her heart. After a little chit chat about his feelings about being so far away from home and asking what he knew about American culture, she told him she was a follower of Jesus. She asked about his spiritual background. Ali was a Muslim. Angie told him that he'd probably meet a number of people in Nebraska who were Christians. Wouldn't it be helpful to understand a little about where they're coming from? She pulled out a copy of the Four Spiritual Laws – a Campus Crusade for Christ booklet - and read through each point with him. They talked a little bit more, and then Angie began reading a book she had with her. Ali went back to the booklet and read it cover to cover. Angie could hardly concentrate, she was so excited. She prayed for him as he was reading it, thankful to know that God is the One who convicts people of their need for Him. After Ali finished reading, Angie asked him what he thought, and he said it was very interesting. As they landed, Angie told him she'd pray for him. Then she was convicted that she should do it right then and there. It was scary! What would this Muslim think? She asked if she could pray for Ali and he immediately said yes. At the baggage claim she went over and met his cousin and invited them both to what she referred to as an "American culture event": a soon to be Christmas Eve service at her church.

That's an encounter you or I could easily have if we're open to the prodding of the Holy Spirit. I like how Angie put it, "This is why I love being a Christian—it's heart-pounding-scary at times and exhilarating when I see someone that I know Jesus wants to come to him, and I have the choice to step out in faith or stay in security." Step out in faith or stay in security. When you let others know about Jesus, it shows – just like the women who followed Him - that you're loyal to Him and that you love Him. So, Go, tell! Go, tell! Go, tell!