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Easter Story Highlights Role of Women in Jesus's Life and Death

By Adelle M. Banks
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When Rhonda Kelley reads the Easter drama in her Bible, the women's ministry professor feels God's affirmation of her as a woman.

"Jesus really valued women and always reached out to women," said Kelley, who teaches at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and is co-editor of "The Woman's Study Bible."

"I know that God values me," she continued, "but to see it in His life, when He was here on Earth, demonstrates to me His great love and care for women."

Women figure prominently in the Gospel lessons that culminate in Jesus's Resurrection. In roles unusual for that period, they travel with Jesus and witness His crucifixion and burial. And women, including Mary Magdalene, are the first to learn that His tomb is empty.

Scholars say that what is remarkable isn't just the prominent roles played by women -- especially in light of modern church debates over women's ordination and leadership -- but that they often were more loyal than Jesus's male followers.

"Jesus did not patronize women," said John DeHousaye, an assistant professor of New Testament at Phoenix Seminary, an evangelical school in Arizona. "He treated them as human beings. By treating them as sinners in need of repentance, He humanized them."

Mary Magdalene, according to biblical accounts, is the one who announces seeing the resurrected Jesus. "He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons," the Gospel of Mark says. "She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept."

Ann Marie Stewart, author of "Preparing My Heart for Easter: A Woman's Journey to the Cross and Beyond," marvels that a woman was chosen for the task rather than a man.

"It's a woman who gets that truth to tell," Stewart said. "A woman is the first missionary of the Resurrection."

Scholars of the Bible and its depiction of women agree that the prominence of women at Jesus's side is significant, but they differ on how to interpret that prominence. For example, some consider Mary Magdalene a missionary or an evangelist, but others view her role as evidence that women have a rightful place in the pulpit.

"The lesson for me is that women should have full access to church leadership as they had access to the Lord of the church," said Priscilla Pope-Levison, a United Methodist minister, and professor of theology and assistant director of women's studies at Seattle Pacific University.

"I think that we have more than a glimpse of what the ideal is, which is men and women in ministry together, not one assigned one role and another assigned another role."

But Kelley offers a different interpretation of Mary Magdalene.

"She definitely was doing the work of an evangelist," Kelley said. "I don't think that we can say she was the first evangelist. She didn't have a formal title."

Despite the differences of interpretation, scholars say the women who were with Jesus were more likely to stick by Him than some of the disciples -- all of them men -- he had chosen as his official followers.

"Whereas they abandoned Him, these women were willing to stay with Him even to the end," DeHousaye said.

The Rev. Andrew M. Greeley, a Catholic priest and author of "Jesus: A Meditation on His Stories and His Relationships With Women," writes that the placement of women at key points in Jesus's life "suggests that in some ways they were superior in their faith in comparison to the apostles."

Their devotion, during the difficult period when the man they had followed was being killed, extended to the cross. Three of the Gospels note that women stood "at a distance" as Jesus was crucified.

"Why did the women stay?" Stewart asked. "What drew them there? In a lot of ways, that had to have been the worst scene that you could

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possibly have seen. . . . I believe it's because He so changed their lives and He so loved them. They were going to watch it until the end."

Jack Levison, professor of New Testament at Seattle Pacific University, said he has attended a church service in which the reading of the Gospel of Mark ended with the verse that precedes the description of the women standing afar: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" the centurion exclaims after Jesus takes his last breath on the cross.

"It sounds like a great climax," said Levison, a United Methodist layman who is married to Pope-Levison. "The climax is that Jesus continues to be surrounded by these women."

The female companions of Jesus, continuing their devotion after the crucifixion, were ready to care for His body after His death.

"They were there to honor that body and to honor who He was, just like they were to honor Him at the cross," Stewart said.

But, as the Gospels tell it, there was no body to care for with their embalming spices. Instead, they had a new task ahead of them.

"They have this enormous, miraculous event to tell," Stewart said. "They have the most important story to tell of all."

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