

In Memory of Her

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,

on July 28, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Romans 16:1-7, 12-13, 15-16 (NRSV) and Mark 14:3-9 (NIV)

Copyright © 2019 by Brenda Loreman

In the mountain that overlooks the ruins of the ancient city of Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, there is a cave cut into the rock. Known as the “secret grotto of St. Paul,” it is long and narrow, about 50 feet deep, six and a half feet wide, and eight feet high, and it contains 5th-century frescoes depicting Paul and other figures from the Bible and early Christian history. In one fresco, Paul is shown with a book open on his lap (barely visible now) and his hand in an authoritative teaching or blessing gesture. We know it’s Paul because the painting is labeled.

What is most interesting to me about this fresco is that, to the right of Paul is another figure, similar in size to Paul, which, according to the conventions of iconography, meant that this person was equal in stature to Paul. The figure also has a hand raised in the gesture of teaching or blessing, and is also labeled with a name. What is remarkable is that the figure is a woman. She is Theocleia, a character in an apocryphal late second-century Christian text called the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The way Theocleia, who is the main character Thecla’s mother, is portrayed in this fresco indicates that she was considered “as an authoritative teacher who was in parallel to and in agreement with Paul’s preaching.”¹

The fact that few of you have ever heard of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* might indicate to you that it was an obscure story that was not widely read or remembered. But you would be wrong. The story of Thecla, who was a young woman who, upon hearing Paul preach, decided to defy social convention and become an itinerant preacher of the gospel, is a story that was widely told and remembered in the early years of Christian history. Even as late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religious painters were depicting Thecla in their art, and the Spanish town of Tarragona, not far from Barcelona, claims her as its patron saint.²

If you look more carefully at the cave fresco of Theocleia, you’ll notice something else: Her eyes have been gouged out, and her hand has been burned away. Because this destruction was done only to the portrait of Theocleia, and not to Paul, it suggests that the painting was deliberately defaced in this way because she was a woman (a photograph of the fresco can be found [here](#)).

To me, this single image encapsulates the story of women in early Christianity: there is ample evidence that women held positions of leadership and authority in the early Jesus movement; yet the stories and texts of these women have been gouged out of written memory and their authority has been burned away by an androcentric and misogynistic patriarchal church culture.

¹ John Dominic Crossan, “A Woman Equal to Paul,” *Bible Review* 21, no. 3 (2005): 29–31, 46, 48. <https://www.baslibrary.org/bible-review/21/3/6> Accessed July 26, 2019.

² David R. Cartlidge, “Thecla: The Apostle Who Defied Women’s Destiny,” *Bible Review* 20, no. 6 (2004): 25–29, 31–33. <https://www.baslibrary.org/bible-review/20/6/7> Accessed July 27, 2019.

This morning's reading from the gospel according to Mark offers a similar portrait of a woman in the Jesus movement. In the reading, Jesus is dining in the home of Simon the Leper—an example of his scandalous practice of sharing meals with those considered unclean or unworthy by most of society. It happens just before Judas plots to have Jesus arrested, and before the disciples celebrate Passover and the Last Supper.

While he is at the table, a woman comes to Jesus, breaks open an alabaster jar of perfumed ointment, and pours the ointment on his head. Some who were present were angry at the woman, declaring that the expensive perfume could have been sold for a year's wages and the money given to the poor.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus says. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”³

Before I go further, I want to offer an exegetical aside about “The poor you will always have with you.” This line has often been used to “justify the inevitability of inequality” and to suggest that “poverty is a result of the moral failures of poor people sinning against God, that ending poverty is impossible, and that the poor themselves have no role to play in efforts to respond to their poverty.”⁴

I think this is a horrible misinterpretation of this line, but it would require another whole sermon to talk about it, so I'm not going to address it any further in this one.

The line that most concerns me for this sermon is the last one. Although Jesus says to the disciples, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her,” the woman's prophetic action “did not become a part of the gospel knowledge of Christians. Even her name is lost to us. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the eucharist celebrated another story is told: the story of the apostle who betrayed Jesus. The name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of [this] faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a woman.”⁵ Just as that fresco in the cave has been defaced and forgotten, so too the actions of this woman in the gospel.

And the prophetic act that she does is not unimportant—on the contrary: it's a vitally important act of recognizing and anointing Jesus as the Messiah. One of the ways we know that this story is important to the Jesus narrative is that it appears in some form in all four gospels. Think about the pieces Jesus's story or teachings that are in all four gospels; there aren't very many. There's Jesus's baptism and the calling of disciples. There's the Passover feast or Last Supper. There's his death and resurrection. There's the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor. There's the feeding of the multitudes—and this one is so important that it not only appears in all four

³ Mark 14:6-9 (NIV)

⁴ Liz Theoharis, “Understanding ‘The Poor Will Always Be With You,’” *Kairos* <https://kairoscenter.org/understanding-the-poor-will-always-be-with-you/> Accessed July 27, 2019.

⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1988), xiii.

gospels, but it also appears twice in two of them, for a total of six feeding stories. And then there's the anointing of Jesus by a woman.

Because we tend to conflate the similar stories of the various gospels and get them tangled up, I'm going to spend some time detangling them, so you can really see the differences and similarities.

Mark and Mathew tell the story almost identically. Jesus is at Simon the Leper's house in Bethany just before Passover. An unnamed woman breaks open an alabaster jar of ointment and pours it on Jesus's head, and he says her deed will be remembered.

In Luke, the story happens well before the Last Supper, and Jesus is eating at the house of Simon the Pharisee. An unnamed woman, whom the gospel calls a sinner, weeps on Jesus's feet and anoints them with the ointment, drying them with her hair.

Simon is bothered, not about the waste of the ointment, but that Jesus is allowing such a sinful person to touch him, and Jesus rebukes him, noting that Simon gave Jesus no kiss of greeting, no water to wash his feet, and no oil to anoint his head, but the woman has done all three.

"Therefore, I tell you," Jesus says, "her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he says to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven."⁶

In John, the anointing also happens just before the Passover, and it happens at Bethany, but this time Jesus is at the home of the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. It is Mary who anoints Jesus's feet with the ointment, and as in Luke, she dries them with her hair. This time, it is Judas himself who is the one who complains about the waste of such an expensive ointment.

	Mark 14:3-9	Matthew 26:6-13	Luke 7:36-50	John 12:1-8
When	Right before Passover	Right before Passover	Early in Jesus's ministry	Right before Passover
Where	Simon the Leper's house in Bethany	Simon the Leper's house in Bethany	Simon the Pharisee's house	Mary, Martha, and Lazarus's house in Bethany
What	Unnamed woman anoints Jesus's head; the disciples complain about the costly waste	Unnamed woman anoints Jesus's head; the disciples complain about the costly waste	Unnamed woman, a sinner, anoints Jesus's feet; Simon complains about the woman's sinfulness	Mary anoints Jesus's feet; Judas complains about the costly waste

Feminist New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza comments on the importance of this prophetic act by a woman disciple:

⁶ Luke 7:47-48 (NRSV)

Despite their differences, all four Gospels reflect the same basic story: a woman anoints Jesus. This incident causes objections which Jesus rejects by approving of the woman's action. If the original story had been just a story about the anointing of a guest's feet, it is unlikely that such a commonplace gesture would have been remembered and retold as the proclamation of the gospel. Therefore, it is much more likely that in the original story the woman anointed Jesus' head. Since the prophet in the Old Testament anointed the head of the Jewish king, the anointing of Jesus' head must have been understood immediately as the prophetic recognition of Jesus, the Anointed, the Messiah, the Christ. According to the tradition it was a woman who named Jesus by and through her prophetic [...] action.⁷

This unnamed woman disciple was not alone. There is plenty of evidence that women were followers of Jesus right from the beginning of his ministry, and some of the evidence is right there in the Bible.

Chapter Eight of Luke's gospel begins with a description of the women who are also disciples of Jesus:

Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.⁸

Mary Magdalene and Joanna are also mentioned by Luke as two of the three women who go to the tomb to anoint Jesus's body and are the first witnesses to the resurrection. Despite the apparent attempts of men to squash women's authority, women *were* leaders in the early church, and Paul himself names some of them.

In the last chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul carries his greetings to his notable disciples ministering in Rome. Notice how many of them are women:

- Phoebe: notice how Paul describes her, as “a deacon of the church at Cenchreae,” Paul urges the church in Rome to “welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.” It is believed by many scholars that Phoebe was an official minister and teacher of the church. It is likely that she carried the Paul's letter to the church in Rome.
- Prisca and Aquila: Prisca, who is also called Priscilla in the Acts of the Apostles, along with her husband Aquila, probably founded the churches in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. Like Paul, they were tentmakers by trade. Note how Paul addresses Prisca first, not her husband, emphasizing that she is the more important of the two.⁹

⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, xiii-xiv.

⁸ Luke 8:1-3 (NRSV)

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, 178.

- Mary: There are so many Marys in the New Testament; this could be one who grew up in Rome and never knew Jesus, but it could possibly one of the Marys mentioned in the gospels.
- Andronicus and Junia: This is another missionary couple. Paul notes that these two are apostles, which had a specific meaning for him. It means they either knew Jesus firsthand, or they had vision of him, like Paul did; Paul notes that they have been Christians longer than Paul.
- Tryphaena and Tryphosa.
- the beloved Persis
- the mother of Rufus
- Julia, Nereus and his sister

Overall, there are 25 people that Paul greets by name in Chapter 16 of Romans; nearly one third of them are women, evidence that the church in Rome had significant female leadership.

There is also plenty of extra-biblical evidence of women as leaders in Early Christianity, not only in texts, but also in artifacts. Here are just a few:

- [This](#) fifth-century mosaic tombstone is located in the Church of St. Augustine at Hippo in North Africa and dates from the 5th to 7th century. It records the burial of ‘Guilia Runa, presbiterissa’ *Presbiterissa* is the feminine version of *presbyter*, the early Christian word for priest.
- [This](#) is a 5th-century tomb epitaph from Calabria in southern Italy. It reads: “Sacred to her good memory. Leta the Presbyter lived 40 years 8 months, 9 days, for whom her husband set up this tomb.”
- [This](#) is a mummy tag of an Egyptian woman named Artemidora, a Christian living sometime between the mid-third and mid-fourth centuries. The tag describes her as a presbyter.¹⁰

Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her. I believe that “The Christian gospel cannot be [truthfully] proclaimed if the women disciples and what they have done are not remembered.”¹¹ As we do the work of remembering the leadership of women in the early church, of essentially “writing women back into Christian history,”¹² and of reinterpreting scripture with new lenses, we are proclaiming the gospel of Jesus—the good news of God’s love for *all* people. Amen.

¹⁰ Karen Fitz La Barge, “Archaeological Evidence for Women in Church Leadership” *Thoughtful Boldness* Blog <http://thoughtfulboldness.com/archeological-evidence-for-women-in-church-leadership/> Accessed July 27, 2019

¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, xiv.

¹² Schüssler Fiorenza, xvi.