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Can we *really* call the women in Luke's Gospel disciples?

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As the church in Ireland begins to discuss *synodality* and as the cry for respect for women becomes louder in wider society, the question of the role of women within our church has emerged as one of the key topics for discussion. This article aims to ground that discussion in the scriptural image of women that emerges in Luke's Gospel.

Many Scripture scholars¹ argue that the writer of Luke's Gospel promotes a subservient form of discipleship for the women it portrays. However, careful reading of the text shows a much more nuanced, and I would say positive, view of women's discipleship. This can be seen particularly in a sequential reading of the story of the Galilean women who first appear in Luke 8:1-3 where they are journeying with Jesus along with the twelve.

LUKE 8:1-3

The following translation is in rather clumsy English, but its aim is to give readers a sense of the meaning of the original Greek. Even though they form one continuous sentence in Greek, the three verses are normally broken into a few sentences in English translations (e.g. NRSV and NJB) and therefore lose the sense of continuity found in the original text.

And it happened that after this he was travelling through cities and villages proclaiming and preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God and the twelve with him, and certain women who were healed from evil spirits and diseases, Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out, and

1 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mary Rose D'Angelo, and to a lesser extent Barbara Reid and Elizabeth V. Dowling

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Joanna wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna and other women, who were serving them out of their resources (Luke 8:1-3).²

The *first* part of the sentence focuses on Jesus' mission of preaching and healing as he travels through towns and villages proclaiming the Kingdom of God. There then *follows* a list of those who were with him (some named, some unnamed). This verse takes the form of a summary and gives readers the impression that this is not an individual event but an example of a much more regular occurrence. The use of both perfect and pluperfect tenses suggests that the women have been part of this gathering, travelling with Jesus, seeing his ministry in action and learning from him about discipleship, for some considerable time.

THE GROUP WITH JESUS

Having established that it is Jesus alone who is teaching and healing, the sentence then continues to list those who are travelling with Jesus ('with' [σύν] implies association). There are the twelve, certain women, Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and, finally, certain other women (8:2-3).³ The twelve are linked with Jesus by the use of 'with' while all of the others are linked individually to this phrase by 'and' (καί). So, the structure of the sentence shows that all of those listed are 'associated with' Jesus. The twelve are mentioned first, but that would be as expected as readers have already encountered them when they were chosen by Jesus, called by name individually and given the new title apostles (6:13-16). Now, however, for the first time a group of women is linked with this group, and three of these women are named.

The first group of women who are mentioned are described as "certain women who were healed from evil spirits and diseases." Luke does not distinguish between the various types of illness and so being cured of evil spirits at that time could be a healing from some unexplained physical or mental illness as well as release from an evil spirit. Luke now specifically names *three* women who can be compared with the *three* men, Simon Peter, James and John, who were singled out from among the twelve when they were called by Jesus (5:1-11).

THREE NAMED WOMEN

Mary of Magdala is the first woman to be named and the seriousness of her illness as well as the extent of her cure are emphasised by the use of the number seven, which symbolises completeness in

² Author's translation

³ All Scripture quotations are from Luke's Gospel

Semitic tradition. Many commentators propose that she has come from a town called Magdala, a name that derives from the word 'tower.' A number of sites with the word 'tower' in their names are suggested in Galilee but there is no certainty as to which one is connected with Mary. Another possibility is that her name is a nickname given to her by Jesus because of her physical height. It follows a pattern that can be seen for many of the other disciples: "Simon whom he called Peter" (6:14), "Simon called the Zealot" (6:15) and "Judas called Iscariot" (22:3). By giving Mary an epithet like the others, it suggests that she is a member of Jesus' close disciples. Furthermore, by calling her 'Mary, the tower' or the 'tall person' it suggests a comparison with the leader of the male disciples 'Peter, the rock' and suggests that she holds an equally important position in the early Christian movement. Since Mary is not described in relation to a man, either husband or father (a polite way of addressing a woman in antiquity), it implies that she is either single or widowed and would therefore be more at liberty to follow Jesus as he travels from place to place.

Quite a lot of information is given about *Joanna*, especially when compared with the very limited information that is given about most of the Twelve. She is the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward. He was probably a highly placed official and therefore a man of great wealth and power. Chuza and Joanna would have been part of Herod's court. While it would be very unusual for a married woman to have the freedom to follow a rabbi or preacher, in what was a very Romanised court it would have been acceptable for a wealthy woman to have been a patron of a rabbi or holy man. However, by being a known follower of Jesus, Joanna puts herself in a very precarious position. She has come from the court of Herod, who has already imprisoned John the Baptist (3:20), and she is a follower of Jesus, who by criticising those who dress in fine robes and live in rich palaces (7:25), is in fact criticising Herod himself and his court. On the other hand, among the ordinary Galileans who were forced to pay high taxes to Herod, a member of his court would have been treated with suspicion. So even though she is wealthy and is probably a sponsor of the group, she could also be considered a marginalised member of Jesus' entourage by those who surround Herod on the one hand and by the ordinary people who suffer under his rule on the other.

The third woman to be named is *Susanna*, a name that recalls Susanna in the Old Testament, who was willing to be put to death rather than disobey that law and have sexual relations with the two elders (Sus 22-23). She can therefore be seen as a type of Jesus, because like, him, she was innocent as she was about to go to her death.

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Immediately after this, a second larger grouping of women is mentioned. Having already established that all the women are associated with Jesus along with the Twelve, it is now said that women provide for them (αὐτοῖς masculine which can apply to both the males and females) out of their (αὐταῖς feminine) resources. De Boer gives a very interesting interpretation of this phrase.

The sentence can also be interpreted as an inclusion: providing the frame are Jesus and the unnamed women, each with their own active verbs; enclosed are the Twelve and the named women, who have no active verbs of their own but are said to be ‘with him’. The unnamed women in this configuration provide for Jesus and the Twelve as well as for Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.⁴

Following this interpretation, the second group of unknown women provide service or διακονία. This concept of service has already been seen earlier in the gospel when Simon’s mother-in-law’s reaction to being cured is to get up immediately and serve (διακονέω) them (4:39), a foreshadowing of Jesus’ healing and service later that day. Because of its situation in a household, her service was probably the provision of a meal or table service. Later on that same day, Jesus models a different type of service as he heals the sick that are brought to him and releases others from demons (4:40-41). Here, the Galilean women develop this concept still further by the expenditure of resources and providing of ongoing material support to Jesus and the group around him in any way they can. In his discussion of διακονία, Collins recommends that the emphasis should be on the motivation for the work rather than the type of work involved and therefore διακονία should not be seen primarily as a benevolent action on behalf of someone, but a sending “on behalf of the person or authority who mandated the activity.”⁵ Therefore, the women whether serving at table or providing out of their own resources, are all motivated as followers of Jesus. So in the group that surrounds Jesus, there is a variety of roles for the women, some similar to that of the men who are following him, listening and learning to be disciples and some providing financial and practical support to Jesus and his band of followers, but all motivated as followers of Jesus.

4 Esther A. De Boer, “The Lukan Mary Magdalene and Other Women following Jesus,” in Levine and Bickerstaff, *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, 140-160, 144.

5 John N. Collins, “A Monocultural Usage: Διακον-words in Classical Hellenistic and Patristic Sources,” *VC* 66 (2012), 287-309: 301.

THE WOMEN IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

THE GALILEAN WOMEN IN THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION NARRATIVES

The Galilean women are not mentioned again until the Passion Narrative and it is quite possible that readers believe that they have disappeared from the scene as Jesus and his group of apostles and male disciples journey to Jerusalem. However, by describing them as the women from Galilee when they appear at the crucifixion, readers are immediately reminded of the women of 8:1-3.

When the women are first mentioned at the crucifixion, they are described as being there with Jesus' acquaintances (23:49). The word 'acquaintances' is a very vague word that has never before been used about Jesus' followers and while it may include the apostles, it may also simply be onlookers who had some contact with Jesus and his ministry. On the other hand, the group of Galilean women is specifically mentioned. Both groups stand at a distance, which keeps them both physically and psychologically back from the actual crucifixion. However, only the women are described as having been 'with' Jesus prior to this and only the women are described as 'watching' what is unfolding. They are willing eyewitnesses to this event.

Women are next mentioned as being present at the tomb (23:55-56) with a reminder again from the narrator that they have come with (συνέρχομαι) Jesus from Galilee, thus emphasising that they are among the same women who watched at the cross. In a similar way to their watching at the cross, the women watch at the tomb. However, unlike 23:49, a much stronger verb (θεάομαι)⁶ is used here which implies that they are not simply looking but observing and concentrating as events unfold. They note carefully where the body is placed. Because of the configuration of the tomb, a central burial chamber surrounded by spaces carved into the rock along the sides, the women have probably stepped into the tomb. So, these women have moved from standing at a distance at the cross (23:49) to following behind Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb, to noting at close quarters the position of Jesus' body.

THE WOMEN AT THE EMPTY TOMB

The link between the women at the burial and those who go to the tomb on Sunday morning is emphasised by their preparation of spices in the intervening time. They are the first people to enter the empty tomb where they recognise a heavenly presence in the appearance of the two men in dazzling clothes. The men

6 "to have an intent look at something, to perceive something above and beyond what is merely seen with the eye" BDAG, 445.

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begin by rebuking the women for thinking that Jesus is dead. They continue by giving the women a resumé of a number of the passion predictions that Jesus gave in Galilee in a description that is remarkably similar to the words used by Jesus in the passion predictions.

Verse	Speaker	Comparison of Passion Predictions and Proclamation at Tomb
9:22	Jesus	“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”
9:44	Jesus	“Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.”
24:7	The two men	“that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

The women are asked to remember (μυνησκομαι) what Jesus told them (24:6) and they remember his words (24:8). The verb implies more than simply memory as it brings the event to mind in the present.⁷

By remembering Jesus’ words, those who did not find the Jesus they were seeking (the body of a dead person) discover something much deeper, which does not so much lead them to the tomb as to the encounter with the one who is alive (24:5).⁸

This remembrance also shows a different aspect of the women’s role within the Gospel. The two men confirm that the women were present in Galilee when Jesus predicted his passion, death and resurrection. Their speech (“remember how he told you when he was still in Galilee” [24:6]) addresses the women directly. The women had been present with Jesus along with the twelve (8:1-3), but as the passion predictions were made to “the disciples” (9:21-22, 44), the impression could have been that these were male

7 “The meaning of this key Lucan and OT word (‘remember’) should not be watered down and taken to mean the mere recollection of the content of a previous conversation. Remembering is bringing to bear in the present, with power and new and deepened insight, the meaning of past actions and works in salvation history.” Robert J. Karris, “The Gospel according to Luke,” in *NIBC*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (London: Burns and Oates, 1995), 675-721, 720.

8 Matteo Crimella, “The Transformation of Characters in Luke 24: A narrative investigation,” *RB* 119 (2012): 173-185, 178.

disciples only. However, the clear statement: “they remembered his words” shows that this is an analepsis and readers are only now being told explicitly that the women were part of the group of disciples who were regularly with Jesus in Galilee.

Furthermore, it indicates *their presence for Jesus' key/central teaching*. It is only now, at the culmination of the sequential reading, that readers become fully aware of the presence of the women throughout the whole adult ministry of Jesus, from the early ministry in Galilee where they were schooled by him in discipleship and listened to his passion predictions, to his passion, death and resurrection. They remained faithful throughout his whole ministry, and when the male disciples abandoned him in his final days, they remained steadfast. Their presence at the empty tomb places them at the centre of the Gospel story as the first witnesses of the resurrection.

THE REACTION OF THE MALE DISCIPLES

When the messengers leave, the women return to the “eleven and all the rest” (24:9) and proclaim the whole story of what happened. Three women are named, two of whom (Mary Magdalene and Joanna) were already introduced during the Galilean ministry. By ‘sandwiching’ the names of the women who deliver the message (24:10a) between the descriptions of the eleven and the rest (24:9) and the apostles (24:10b), the importance of the women as messengers is emphasised. Their message is very comprehensive as it includes the empty tomb, the message of the men and the remembering of Jesus' words. Furthermore, even though they have not been commissioned to deliver the message to the others, they do it on their own initiative. They now have the courage to witness to the resurrection. However, the male disciples dismiss the women's testimony in a very condescending way as confused speech or utter nonsense, this despite the fact that there are enough women present to fulfil the need for at least two witnesses in a court of law (Deut 19:15).

A certain ambiguity towards the women is evident at this stage in the gospel. On the one hand, by the description of the men's reaction and ridicule of the women's message, Luke seems to downplay the witness of the women. On the other hand, readers know the truth of what the women are saying as they have already heard it in the gospel account of the women at the tomb and also know it through their own knowledge of the resurrection. This is further enhanced when Peter, despite the fact that he is one of the apostles who have ridiculed the women, gets up and runs to the tomb to check on their story. However, the ambiguity continues as even though it is the women who proclaim the resurrection while

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the male disciples show a complete lack of belief, they are never overtly given the commission to proclaim or to preach.

THE DISCIPLESHIP OF THE GALILEAN WOMEN

Women form an *inclusio* around Luke's Gospel. At the beginning, readers encounter Elizabeth (1:25) and Mary (1:38) who accepted divine messages and Mary who "treasured all these things" and pondered on them (2:19, 51). At the end, the episodes surrounding the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus form the climax of the appearances of the women in the gospel.

Throughout the gospel, various women model different aspects of discipleship but most of these women appear only once. However, the Galilean women form the unbroken link from Jesus' earliest ministry in Galilee to the morning of the resurrection and demonstrate many aspects of the discipleship that Jesus advocates. So, as well as the specific mentions in the gospel, they were also "with" Jesus at other important events. They listened to his Word (8:4-15) and his teaching about that Word (8:21; 11:27) and they observed his deeds. They were quite likely among the seventy who were sent out to heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God (10:1-12). As constant members of Jesus' followers, it is also quite likely that they were present at the Last Supper (22:14-23).

The Galilean women demonstrated how to learn to be disciples, by following Jesus on the way and listening to his preaching about the Kingdom of God. Some of them served Jesus and the remainder of the group by providing for them out of their own resources. This service was mandated by Jesus immediately after the Last Supper, a crucial point in the Gospel, when he pointed out that he was among them as one who served and therefore revealed himself as the servant leader (22:26-27). The women remained faithful to the end. There is no mention of the male disciples at the crucifixion but the women, even though they were hesitant at first and stood at a distance, moved closer to the action, saw what was unfolding and were present at the key moments of death and burial. They were the first to go to the empty tomb, see what was unfolding, listen to the message of the two men, remember and therefore realise that Jesus had risen, and finally returned to witness and proclaim that message to the eleven and the other disciples. What they had learned as disciples came to fruition in their actions.

A MESSAGE FOR TODAY

This careful reading of Luke's Gospel demonstrates that Jesus' disciples consistently included women as well as men. Despite

the fact that first century Palestine was a very patriarchal society, the group of Galilean women discussed here were schooled in discipleship by Jesus just the same as the men. It can be clearly said that Luke's Gospel proposes a Gospel of complementarity between men and women disciples, who are called to follow Jesus and, together and separately, exemplify the various aspects of that discipleship.

Much could be learned in our church *today* from this gospel model. From his earliest ministry Jesus welcomed both men and women into his band of close followers. While they may have exemplified different aspects of that discipleship at different times, they were all members of Jesus' followers. Our church should look carefully at the gospel description of the role of the women and realise that Paul's description of 'neither male nor female' should define how women are treated in our church. We are all one in Christ (Gal 3:28) and everyone's talents and abilities should be welcomed, respected and empowered irrespective of gender.

The synkrisis that can be seen between the men and women disciples in 8:1-3 not only shows bands of men and women following Jesus but also shows leadership groups with three women singled out in a similar fashion to the male leaders. Mary of Magdala is even given the epithet of 'the tower,' surely signalling that women as well as men are called to leadership roles in the church.

It is often argued that women have never been commissioned by Jesus in the same way that the men have. Yet the witness of the Galilean women at the empty tomb and the reminder to them of Jesus' words causes them to return to the eleven and the rest to proclaim the resurrection. Having been schooled by Jesus throughout his ministry, they understand the implications of the empty tomb before any of the men (including Peter) do. Surely that gives women a right to proclaim the Word today?

The women are faithful throughout the whole of Jesus' ministry, even in the dark days of the Passion. In most parishes, the majority of those playing an active role are women and that should be recognised in the official ministries of the church.

Where service is concerned, the term *διακονία* is only explicitly used about the women and their service is modelled on Jesus' service throughout his ministry. They serve not only through hospitality and table service but also through resourcing the community financially. However, service is taken to a completely different level when Jesus advocates it at the end of the Last Supper by challenging all of his followers, both men and women, to imitate his example of servant leadership, as he is "among them as one who serves" (22:27). This type of service leadership, which

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is not only exemplified but demanded by Jesus, should be the basis of all leadership in our church.

As the church discusses *synodality* at the moment, lessons can be drawn from the example of collaboration between men and women disciples, which was so evident in Luke's Gospel where in a very patriarchal society, Luke has given the women clear prominence as co-workers alongside the men.

Catholic Social Teaching. At the height of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, and faced with his own relative isolation within the walls of the Vatican, Pope Francis initiated a series of talks aimed at making some sense of the virus and its social and theological dynamics. Each talk, presented as part of what would have been his busy Wednesday public audience, unpacked the main themes of CST in accessible form. These talks became a primer both in the social teaching of the Church and as helpful catechetical background to the second of his social encyclicals, *Fratelli tutti*, which he was to launch two months later. In the first of these addresses the Pope outlined what he describes as the key social principles developed by the Church over centuries. He lists these as 'the principle of the dignity of the person, the principle of the common good, the principle of the preferential option for the poor, the principle of the universal destination of goods, the principle of the solidarity, of subsidiarity, the principle of the care for our common home'. He continues: 'These principles help ... those responsible for society, to foster growth and also, as in the case of the pandemic, the healing of the personal and social fabric. All of these principles express in different ways the virtues of faith, hope and love'.

– ANNA ROWLANDS, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, (London, T&T Clarke), 2021, p. viii.