

The Marys are stronger together (Matthew 28:1-10)

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The lectionary offers two options for the Gospel text this Easter Sunday. Both feature women--John focusing on Mary Magdalene, and Matthew naming two women as the resurrection witnesses, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary."

The phenomenon of women in groups, in community, has been near the front of my mind for some time now. The election of President Donald Trump helped spur hundreds of thousands of women to march on Washington, D.C. in January and millions more to march in solidarity all over the world. Since then, many groups of women across the United States have worked to remain connected--to mourn what they understood to have been lost with Trump's victory, to encourage each other to remain true to their values, to stand together for what they believe is right.

In Matthew, two women go together to visit Jesus' tomb. There they become witnesses to a profound phenomenon--a great earthquake, followed by the descent of a heavenly angel who rolls away the stone. The men guarding the tomb are immobilized with fear. But the women remain alert, despite their fear. They remain conscious enough to receive the angel's message for them: that they don't need to be afraid, and that the one they came to see is not in this tomb. Jesus is alive, the angel tells them, and he wants you to go tell the others.

Thanks to plenty of biblical commentary on the subject, many of you already know that at the time and within the culture that this story takes place, women were not considered reliable witnesses. Not just colloquially but legally--a woman's testimony to an occurrence like this one would not have been admissible in court. And so it is all the more remarkable that Jesus would entrust this profoundly important message to two women.

Times have changed, and American women today can, of course, speak without the accompaniment of a man, share news and information in the public square, and testify in court. Yet residue of the ancient ways persists. Women who suffer sexual assault often bear the burden of proof--proof not just that the assault occurred but that they are reliable witnesses at all. Their character, behavior, emotional capacity, and judgment are all brought into question by the accused, often turning the woman into the one who must defend herself. Women in the public eye who express vulnerability and strong emotions frequently have their witness discounted as subjective or somehow tainted, while men who do the same are applauded for their passion and authenticity.

What Matthew's version of events highlights is the power of women standing together as witnesses. Together, the Marys are fearful but not immobilized. Unlike the lone Mary Magdalene in John, in Matthew's Gospel the two women recognize the angel as a messenger from heaven--and Jesus as their own beloved one returned to them. Perhaps most importantly, they recognize themselves as reliable witnesses who can be entrusted with the most important message of their time and ours: that the crucified Savior lives, that faith prevails, that love overcomes.

The marchers on January 21 represented the power of women standing together, bolstering one another's strength, to persist in sharing our witness. To persist in naming what is right and what is unjust. To join with one another in claiming our voices and the power of our testimony. To insist that we are indeed reliable witnesses in the faces of those who would discount our truth-telling. It is our right and responsibility to say it as we see it--and we are stronger together.