**Context**

In this First Followers series we are looking at how ordinary people were changed by the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. On this Mother’s Day we are going to focus on two women whose roles in our story are hidden in plain sight.

First, I want to say this about a couple of things by way of context for our reading of Acts today.

You have sometimes heard me say that the genre of the book we are reading drives the reading strategy. For example, if you are reading the Psalms you approach it as you would the reading of poetry. If you are reading OT stories you understand that you are seeing the history of Israel as filtered through the understanding of 20 generations of God’s people.

But with Acts the genre is unique among all biblical books because of the nearness of the author, Luke, to the events he reports. If he wasn’t actually there (and sometimes he *was there*) he knew people who were. So we read Acts with an excitement and wonder appropriate to proximity to what actually happened in the years after the resurrection.

The second point is that the Bible has always been a history about ***the men*** of the biblical drama, written by men. The women are present throughout, but always in a way filtered by the patriarchal culture of the many societies and ages in which the drama plays out. The stories of the Bible focus on men not just because they were written by men, but also because it was believed in those times that men were the prime actors in God’s history.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The OT has its women heroes and villains. Eve, Sarah, Miriam the sister of Moses, or the unnamed mother of Moses who sets her son adrift in a tiny ark of reeds, Ruth, Esther and more, these were all crucial figures. But that isn’t much ink in a community’s history that spans two millennia.

One of the most amazing features of Jesus’ ministry is that it was funded by women who travelled with him in itineracy. In Luke 8 we learn that travelling with Jesus and the twelve were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward, Susanna …and many others, who provided for them out of their resources (Luke 8:3).

Imagine that…women travelling with Jesus, paying the expenses of the ministry. You think they didn’t have their opinions too? Why would we think they were not full partners in the ministry?

But if you know this male bias, it makes you sensitive to the ways in which the lives of our women are present in every story and even though you have to decode and uncover their contribution, you know its there.

I have always believed that real gender equality existed in the mind of the Son of God, and in the early Christian community, I would argue, and perhaps after our reading today that will become a little more apparent.

“All of the gospel writers, but in particular, our present author, Luke, have a wonderfully positive characterization of women in the Jesus story.[[2]](#endnote-2) Women are portrayed as faithful and believing throughout the gospel narratives, even though many emerge from lives of disease, oppression and sin. In contrast, men are portrayed as disbelieving and egotistical (the disciples, Lk 9:46; 22:24), and dismissive of the testimony of women as “idle talk” (Lk 24:11). Luke has a gender bias, and it is slanted in favour of women” (Neale, *Luke* Vol 1, p 182).[[3]](#endnote-3)

For this, and many other reasons, to be a First Follower of the Risen Jesus was to be dragged into a cultural and spiritual revolution of almost incomprehensible dimensions.

**In the Text**

On this special day we celebrate the women of our congregation. It is appropriate that we read our passage today with eyes that are sensitive to the largely hidden presence of the women in our story.

So I want to talk about tanners, centurions in general and then our two women of the day, Mrs. Simon the Tanner (sorry… don’t know her name) and Mrs. Cornelius, wife to the centurion.

Our larger story in Acts runs like this. After the church was scattered from Jerusalem at the execution of Stephen, Acts tells us that Peter went about …here and there among all the believers (Acts 9:32). Peter is in Joppa staying with Simon the Tanner. He had just raised Tabitha from the dead there (Acts 9:36ff).

Our narrative for today is about how Cornelius, the first Gentile and his family, of which Mrs. Cornelius was the matriarch, were the first Gentiles to become Christians in the world - Acts chapter 10.

Cornelius is a Roman centurion in Caesarea.

**[PICTURE ON SCREEN]**

This is the remarkable aqueduct at Caesarea. Herod the Great built the city as the new provincial capital of Palestine. It had the best harbor in the country and was the gateway to the Mediterranean for the country.

Much of Acts is set in Caesarea *because* it was the provincial capital. Philip arrives there after his experience with the Ethiopian Eunuch and settles there (Acts 21:8, Paul and Luke stay at his house upon returning from abroad). Paul travels through Caesarea all the time because it was the principal port of the country.

The matriarch of the Cornelius household is Mrs. Cornelius. She is largely invisible, but Acts 10:2 tells us that Cornelius …was a devout man who feared God with all his household…



(the aqueduct at Caesarea)

Peter, meanwhile, is staying in the home of Simon the tanner in Joppa, on the coast 63 km south of Caesarea, for the setting of our story.

His vision, where he sees a sheet descend from heaven with unclean animals and is ordered to eat, occurs on the roof of the tanner’s home. The vision is a sign to Peter gentiles should not be considered as unclean. Remember that at this time there were no gentiles in The Way.

Tanners were one of the despised trades because they touched unclean animals but more so because of the tanning process involved the use of bodily emissions… let’s just say it was a very smelly business. You see how Peter finds himself surrounded by uncleanness, ritually and physically. He is in a place that couldn’t be further from the sanctity of the temple!

The Mishnah tells us that the tanner’s wife could sue for divorce say, “I thought I could endure it, but now I cannot endure it” (*Mishnah*, Ketuboth 6:10, the chapter on marriage laws).

Mrs. Simon the Tanner had one of two situations when she married. Either she fell in love with the local tanner and had to tell her parents about it – which I’m sure they weren’t pleased. Or more likely, her parents arranged the marriage and she was told she was to be married to a tanner. Neither she nor, apparently, Melinda Gates, could endure it.

Mrs. Simon the Tanner, hers was a life of quiet suffering no doubt… but they were a saved home. The humble tanner was host to Peter. Whole families are drawn to the Risen Christ in Acts.

Notice how the Roman soldiers come to the house and call out …standing by the gate. When arriving at a Jewish home everyone is aware that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile…

They don’t want to go in not only because it is not lawful, but because it is awful. Then Peter invited them in and gave them lodging (Acts 10:22).

When the soldier from the Roman centurion in the capital show up at Mrs. Tanner’s doorstep in Joppa (modern Tel Aviv) to summon Peter to his home it must have been a frightening prospect. Google Maps tells me it takes 13 hours to walk from Joppa to Caesarea.

Josephus says there were 500 Roman soldiers stationed in Caesarea around this time. Cornelius was a commander of one fifth the troops in the Roman provincial capital of the country. And he is a prominent figure. And so, as you can imagine, was Mrs. Cornelius. She was at the centre of society.

When we speak about Peter preaching the gospel to Mrs. Cornelius and her family, it was not only that there was the legal barrier of the Jewish law that prohibited the entering Gentile homes, but more visceral yet was Roman soldiers who mocked, tortured and executed Jesus. This story is breaking so many cultural and emotional patterns that it is hard to keep it all straight.

The political environment was so fraught that in a few years the Roman Emperor Gaius would attempt, by the power of Roman military, to set his own image up in the Temple in Jerusalem, and not many years hence to destroy the whole country basically.

But the soldier tells Peter that Cornelius had a vision and sent for him.

When Peter arrives in Caesarea Cornelius says, … you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded to you (Acts 10:33).

When they heard the gospel (this is where we get that gospel standing on one foot in Acts 10:34) and he and his family are converted, Peter says, I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34) Such a significant thing for Peter to say.

From the Text

We pause to reflect on the role of women in these stories because none of us would be here were it not for Moses’ mother who set him adrift in the hopes that the daughter of Pharoah would rescue him. None of us would be here were it not for the mothers of Samuel or David or John the Baptist or Mary, mother of Jesus.

So today we pause to think about Mrs. Cornelius. When her family accepted the Risen Jesus into their home imagine what it must have meant for her social position. Imagine the expulsion from polite society. Imagine what she endured from the other four centurion wives.

Imagine how her children were marginalized as believers in this odd Jewish sect called The Way – a movement their own government had been keen to see extinguished. Imagine how her husband’s career had become jeopardized and perhaps even destroyed by the presence of the Risen Jesus in their household. Yes, today we remember you Mrs. Cornelius!

But!!

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God… Then they invited him to stay for several days (Acts 10:44-47).

Their home became a place of rejoicing. They had their own private Pentecost right there in Mrs. Cornelius’ home.

My other point is this. I have no patience at all for views that make women second-class citizens in the polity of church life. Consider these impressive references in Luke to women.

In Acts 1:14 we learn that women were present with the disciples immediately after the ascension, in Acts 16 we learn of Lydia who met Paul in Philippi.

The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:14-15)

And finally this kind of remarkable feature of Acts. We learn …great numbers of both men and women… were added to the new church (Acts 5:14); our suffering sisters had their homes invaded by Paul …dragging off both men and women… to throw them in prison (Acts 8:3); and Paul asked the High Priest in Jerusalem for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem; both men and women were baptized at the preaching of Philip in Samaria.

Why does Luke use that dual phrase, men and women, because it is so important to understand the new culture of participation by women in the faith community. Men and women stood side-by-side in the Resurrection Movement. And they also bore the suffering of persecution right along side the men. Yes, today we remember you Mrs. Tanner, Mrs. Cornelius.

Who among us today, man or woman, young or old, cannot point to the women in our lives who have shaped us, nurtured us, inspired us, tolerated us (even when they could no longer bear it!) who have brought the Kingdom of God closer to us all? Amen.

1. Patriarchy was expressed most powerfully in the principle of primogenitor, a cultural practice known throughout history, by which the property of the father passed to the eldest son - not the daughter. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I think here we see evidence of what David Bentley Hart calls Christianity’s “subversion of the cruelest aspects of pagan society; it (alas only partial) demystification of political power; its ability to create moral community where none existed before; and its elevation of active charity above all other virtues” (*Atheist Delusions*, p xi). While eventually Christianity had its own corruptions of power of course, this shouldn’t obscure that Christianity introduced a “new conception of the world” with a buoyant equality of all (See Neale, Luke 1-9 pp 182-183 for more*)*, [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Women play prominent roles in Luke. Elizabeth and Mary dominate infancy and adolescent narratives of the first three chapters of Luke. One author called Luke 1 “gynocentric.”. (*ibid*) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)