

It seemed to them an idle tale. After all, the testimony of women isn't admissible! And yet, if the testimony of women isn't admissible, why is it in every Gospel. While they differ, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all agree that it was women who discovered the empty tomb and became the first witnesses. Once more, after all the ministry of Jesus amongst the outcasts and lost people, those denigrated and shunned by the religious and secular culture, it is those denigrated and shunned who first receive and pass on the good news that Jesus is alive. An idle tale, Peter later referred to cleverly invented myths, Paul talked of the resurrection being called foolishness. And to top it all, the first people to see the empty tomb are women! Against charges of 'unbelievable nonsense', this is what the early church preached, and that preaching took hold of the world. And while we talk of the disciples who became apostles, it is the women whose devotion conquered their fear and who went to the tomb, finding it empty. It is the women who first brought the news to the disciples in hiding, and, while they may have thought it an idle tale, at least Peter has enough curiosity to go and see for himself. But he didn't get a godly messenger!

Given the position of women in society at that time, and many will say the position of women still, how remarkable that this story of the discovery of the empty tomb is preserved. How remarkable that, although we don't see it in the Gospel stories, the angel includes the women as witnesses of Jesus words and deeds in Galilee; 'remember what he told you?' In a male dominated society, women are given prominence in the story at the heart of our faith. The first witnesses of the resurrection. If you read Matthew, the women are the first apostles because they are sent with the message. That is what apostle means – sent. Counter cultural is a somewhat overused phrase in the church, but here it is real. In preserving the story of the resurrection, with the women going to the tomb early in the morning, the early communities of faith were stating that in following Jesus in this new way of faith in God they not only included the poor, the ill and the disabled, the outcasts from religion, they also included women. Following Jesus meant running counter to the culture around them. This new faith was not just another version of religion, it was a whole new way of inclusion, compassion and life. The resurrection made everything new, endorsing not just Jesus actions on the cross, but his whole ministry up to then. The religion of the day, not just Jewish but the religions of Greece and Rome as well, had all sorts of barriers to inclusion. Understandings of holiness and success, failure and punishment, and people having and keeping their place in society. Jesus cut through all of that in his day, embracing the sick, sharing meals with the outcast, talking with women and even dealing with the dead! A radical new way of living God's love. And the resurrection sealed and endorsed all that counter cultural behaviour, even to the point of having women as the first witnesses! And the early church got that message and tried to live it. It shows in the book of Acts with the first community sharing their possessions and supporting the poor and the widows. It shows in Luke's Gospel stories with almost every encounter with Jesus having both a male and a female parallel story. The resurrection means the inclusion of all in this new life in God through Jesus the crucified, Risen One.

However, the tensions in Paul's letters, where at one point he is greeting the female leaders of the community and at another he is telling women to be quiet in worship and only ask questions when they get home, shows that this was not an easy lesson for people, even for apostles! Culture runs

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deep and if you push too hard you will meet not just resistance but rejection. And it was too easy for the male apostles to beget male leaders and despite the obvious warnings in the Gospels about falling into the bad ways of the Pharisees and Sadducees, it was too easy for the leaders to seek authority and power. And before you know it, a male dominated faith developed. Desert Fathers become bastions of wisdom, but the Desert Mothers are forgotten. Male saints are venerated but the female saints down played. The priesthood of all believers is set aside for an exclusively male priesthood. And yet, scripture remains. Just as Jesus shared God's love with all, even the outcasts, even the sick, even women, so the resurrection is discovered by women and that new life goes on to embrace all in God's love.

The resurrection is not an idle tale or cleverly invented myth to be looked down on by those in positions of power and authority, it is the ultimate demonstration of the countercultural inclusive love of God. All are welcome in God's love, welcome to the light that shines from the empty tomb. A light that does not show up difference and discrimination but shows us all to be the people of God, blessed with life.

Rev Ross Pearce