

I have been a bit naughty today. Well, as naughty as a rector can be without getting in the newspapers.

It's Good Shepherd Sunday today, and in the church calendar, all the readings are about the Good Shepherd. Perfectly reasonable theme, but I don't want to be talking about the Good Shepherd on this fourth week of Easter. This is the Easter season. I want to be talking about the resurrection. Plenty of time to talk about Jesus as the Good Shepherd at another part of the year. So, I've changed all the readings. I left in Psalm 23, but everything else is the reading set for Easter Day. Because as far as I'm concerned, it's the Easter season, we should be talking about the resurrection. Hallelujah, the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah.

That's the spirit. And my reading of the gospel passage, the one, as I said, set for Easter Day, has been shaped by what I've been doing this week, which is spending many hours interviewing potential candidates for our new Minister for Congregational Life post, to follow in the footsteps of our beloved Rebecca. And when reflecting on the interviews, it made me realize afresh how much I've enjoyed over the years serving alongside female colleagues. It's great having Christina as a curate. Seven years with Rebecca was a delight. And I knew that my ministry has been enhanced by serving in partnership with women.

So, I was in a moment of appreciating the ministry of the women with whom I have worked when I looked at our gospel reading and saw straightaway how prominently the women feature in that gospel reading. The "they" at the beginning of the reading refers to a group of women who followed Jesus' body from His place of crucifixion, and they followed to where He was laid when He was taken down from the cross. And they're named in the middle of the passage, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, and various other women, it says. In other gospels we're told that Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom Jesus appeared after He was raised from the dead.

However, as we read on in the New Testament, we can see that these women, the first witnesses to the resurrection, are relegated to silent witnesses. And this unfortunate process begins early on. See how

when the group of women go to the disciples and tell them what they have found, their words seem to the disciples an idle tale. They didn't believe what the women said. At least St. Peter was intrigued. He was intrigued enough to go, obviously he didn't believe the women, so he had to go and look for himself. So he went to the tomb and found it as the women had said. A few verses later in this chapter, we read that the disciples were excited, gathered together and saying, "The Lord is risen indeed and has appeared to Peter." Well, that's true. But they could also have said, several hours earlier, "The Lord is risen indeed and has appeared to Mary." But they didn't say that. They waited till it was Peter who confirmed what the women had said.

They didn't think that what the women had to say counted for much. And the same thing happens when St. Paul, a couple of decades later, when writing to the church in Corinth about the death and resurrection of Jesus, as we've heard, he lists all the appearances of Jesus made to His disciples, including himself at the end. But he doesn't mention Mary or any of the women by name.

It's a sad fact that the witness and ministry of women has been muffled for much of church history, going right back to the very early days of the church. This is despite the fact that what we can see in the gospels is that Jesus clearly was revolutionary in His friendship, openness, and acceptance of women. That's most clear in the gospel of John, where about half the gospel is Jesus's deep conversations with women, with Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, the woman at the well. And there's a vitality and an openness to those conversations that's often lacking in Jesus's conversation with men. And it's the women who were faithful to Jesus. They stayed with Him through His suffering and crucifixion, when only John was left amongst the men.

So, when Jesus asked the church to hear the news of the resurrection from the lips of women, He's asking us to listen very carefully. In a society where women were always followers, He chose a woman to lead. In a culture where women were encouraged to be silent, He gave them a message to proclaim. In a world where women were treated as second class, He rose to greet them first.

And the New Testament writings themselves reflect the tension and confusion, with the church trying to live faithfully to that new vision of partnership between men and women. And the word and example of Jesus was disturbingly far-reaching and radical for them. And it's not clear that they...well, it is clear that they struggled with the implications of their own teaching. Old ways of thinking keep resurfacing. Soon after greeting men and women as co-leaders in his church and despite the fact that Paul knew and wrote that, "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female," he goes on to refer to them all as brothers and encouraging them as sons of God. And all of his illustrations nearly, they're drawn from the world of men, be it boxing, wrestling, athletics.

And that highlights the problem. Old habits die hard, even in the resurrection life. Whatever the faltering intentions of the first Christian community, it's sadly true that for the greater part of the long history of the church, this one-sided male witness has been institutionalized. That's why I've enjoyed having a female colleague, because then I realize that I'm part of a two-sided witness.

So, I'd like to go on and just draw out two applications to all of this. The first is this. It's about how we read the Bible. The Bible is our authoritative text, but that doesn't mean that it's always easy to understand. It needs to be read carefully. This is the text through which God has chosen to speak by His spirit. But it's still a text rooted in a particular context and culture. Which is why it's not helpful to take a verse out of that context and say, "Well, this is what the Bible says," because the Bible says many different things.

Take the subject of leadership in the church. For centuries, the church has insisted that only men can be in positions of leadership. People cite certain verses or the fact that Jesus only had male disciples. But as we've seen with the resurrection story, the women in the early Christian community played a vital part. The whole Christian message was entrusted, first of all, to a woman. And even St. Paul, who writes the verses that get quoted to say that you should only have men in leadership, even he as I said, wrote that, "in Christ there is neither male nor female." When reading the Bible, we need to get

behind the proof texts and the slogans and read deeply to look for the principles that undergird the text that can subvert our reading and understanding and culture in the way that that first culture that the text was given in was subverted.

Secondly, I want to point out the simple and rather obvious fact that if the first witnesses to the resurrection were women, that's perhaps the greatest piece of evidence we have to suggest that the resurrection actually took place, that Jesus was raised from the dead. Because if the disciples were making up this story, for whatever reason, they would not have had the message entrusted to women. For the simple reason that no one would've believed them. If you were making up a story, why would you, at that time, why would you make it that the women were the witnesses? Women at that time weren't even allowed to give evidence in court. And yet the whole Christian witness depended on Jesus's risen appearances to the women.

The fact that the news of the resurrection broke upon the world as a rumor spread by women was scandalous. Unless it was true, you wouldn't make it up. The disciples wouldn't have made it up. So when we read in our psalm, that beautiful Psalm Number 23 that the choir sang, "Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil," we can say that with confidence. Because it's true. Jesus was raised from the dead. He has triumphed over the grave. Death has lost its sting. We are a people of hope. Jesus, our Good Shepherd can be trusted to lead us to our heavenly home. Hallelujah. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Hallelujah.