

Mary, Joanna, and Susanna: They Supported Jesus

[Luke 8:1-3](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

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A lot of eyebrows were raised when Jesus came to town with women in his support team. No one questioned the men he had with him. Prominent teachers often had male students in tow. But women? In the first century, a woman's place was in the home, supporting her husband, caring for her children, and staying out of sight. Plato suggested that a bad man's fate was reincarnation as a woman. Aristotle wrote, "Females are imperfect males, accidentally produced by their father's inadequacy, or by the malign influence of a moist south wind." Josephus was of the opinion that "the woman is inferior to the man in every way." And a first century male prayed like this: "I thank you, O God, that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." Women, generally, were not allowed an education, and prominent teachers never, never allowed a woman to sit at their feet.

Into that misogynous world strode Jesus with a cohort of women among his closest followers. By placing women alongside the twelve apostles in this text, Luke acknowledged their full equality. In Jesus' eyes they were as worthy as the twelve.

AND, THEY WERE WOMEN OF GREAT GENEROSITY. "Mary, called Magdalene . . . and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others . . . provided for them (Jesus and his apostles) out of their resources," Luke writes. Nor was this an isolated occurrence, like a one-time grant from a foundation. Matthew indicates that the women were still supporting Jesus at the end of his ministry. When Jesus was crucified, Matthew writes, "Many women were also there looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." It's clear that these women gave regularly and consistently to support Jesus' ministry there in Palestine, just as you give regularly and consistently to support Jesus' ministry here in the nation's capital.

And Jesus was unashamed of his need for their support. His mission, Luke tells us, was to go "through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God." Proclaiming: that was his ministry in word < preaching, teaching, training the twelve. And bringing: that was his ministry in deed < healing the sick, curing the lame, feeding five thousand and then four thousand. And because his was an itinerant ministry, it meant he must give up carpentry with its twelve-hour days and six-day weeks, so he could go on the road. But giving up carpentry meant giving up his sole source of income. So Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women picked up the slack: "They provided for them out of their resources."

When the Apostle Paul tacked a thank-you note to the end of his letter to the church at Rome, he listed twenty-seven women and men who had assisted him in his ministry. And the headliner, the very first on the list, is a woman, Phoebe, a deacon in the church at Cenchreae. "She has been," Paul says, "a benefactor of many and of myself as well." And the Greek word for "benefactor" occurs only here in the New Testament. It's as if Paul went to his Greek thesaurus to find a unique word to describe Phoebe, who, like Mary, Joanna, and Susanna, was a woman of great generosity.

Again, THEY WERE WOMEN OF GREAT COURAGE. People everywhere must have taunted them: "Why don't you go home where you belong?" But they stuck with Jesus all the way to the cross.

Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, was especially courageous. Herod was so paranoid that he punished anyone suspected of complicity with his critics, and by this time Jesus was considered a critic. Yet Joanna didn't just support Jesus privately and behind the scenes. She was out in public with Jesus where everyone, including Herod's spies, could see her, and that took great courage.

Then, Joanna and Mary Magdalene were among the women who ventured out to Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning to complete the embalming of his body. While the male disciples cowered behind locked doors for fear they too would be arrested and executed, the women courageously identified themselves as followers of the crucified one.

Of course, courage is not exclusively a female attribute. So let us honor women and men in business who take a stand against the kind of corporate ethics (or should I say non-ethics) that have blemished the Tyco Corporation and are now tainting major Wall Street firms. Let us honor women and men in government who will not cave in to special interests, but who exemplify the highest ideals of public service. Let us honor female and male veterans who have faced enemy fire, and who bear in their bodies and psyches the wounds of war. And let us honor our teenagers who, perhaps more than any others, are bombarded by demonic lures to embrace drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, to surrender high moral standards, to cheat on tests and steal from the internet. Every year, on Youth Sunday, we hear testimonies from high school seniors who, in the face of extreme peer pressure, will not compromise their faith.

Courage is not the exclusive property of martyrs and Medal of Honor recipients. Courage is what you show when life gets tough, but you're even tougher. Courage is what you display when, like these women, you square your shoulders and meet the enemy head on.

And where do they come from, this great generosity and this great courage? Luke doesn't say, but I'm going to venture a sanctified guess. Luke does say of these women that they "had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities." So my guess is that they were WOMEN OF GREAT GRATITUDE. Having been healed, these women could not help but support personally and financially, the man who had so lovingly touched and so radically transformed their lives.

Gratitude is the mainspring of all true benevolence. Without gratitude our giving will be, at best, reluctant. With gratitude, our giving will never be enough. We will always wish we could give more. And don't you have ample grounds for gratitude? Yes, bad things happen, but are they not eclipsed by the glories of creation, by the crisp air of a fall day, by the colors of the maples, and the

song of the birds? Are you grateful?

Then there's your family. Do you have loving parents, do you have a loyal spouse, are there children you take pride in? Are you grateful? Have you traveled to third world countries where poverty is the norm, and then returned to America where you live in what is, arguably, the most affluent society in the history of the world? Are you grateful? Above all, do you have a sense of God's forgiveness, have you been healed of some onerous habit, do you know yourself to be a child of God? Do you not have ample grounds for gratitude?

I want to express my gratitude for the Faith Giving commitments you are making today. I'm grateful because you make it possible for me to spend my days in ministry without worrying about where the next paycheck is coming from. But I want you to know that Carol and I are not here for the salary. When I retired twenty months ago we had ample means and lots of plans: plans to visit our children and grandchildren, plans to hike and camp and fish, plans to travel the blue highways of America and to travel abroad. But one day Carol said to me, "The Presbyterian Church has been so good to us. Now that we're retired, I believe it's pay back time. So if a church somewhere needs an interim pastor, let's go!"

It was gratitude that moved us across the country. May I ask where your gratitude is moving you?