

Women in the Gospels

Seeing Jesus from their perspective.

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The women at the Cross, the burial, and the empty tomb

Crucifixion in the time of Jesus

The Persians invented crucifixion between 300–400 BC, and it was used by the Romans, Carthaginians, and others.

Even before he was nailed to the cross, Jesus endured great suffering. He was beaten within an inch of his life with a nine-tailed whip that had metal tips on the end of every strap.



Then a crown of thorns was forced onto his head causing huge lacerations. The soldiers covered him with a purple robe and mocked him by saying: "Hail, the King of the Jews!" (Mark 15:18).

Crucifixion is described as the worst death imaginable. Not only was it torturous, the Jews considered that anyone hung on a tree was cursed of God:

Galatians 3:13: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole."*

Deuteronomy 21:23: *You must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse.*

Jesus was nailed to the horizontal beam while it was still flat on the ground. The nails were driven into Jesus' wrists and pierced the main nerve running through the arm. With his wrists nailed into the horizontal beam, the beam was lifted and then hammered into the vertical beam.



This is not a site where any woman would choose to be.

Matthew 27:39 - 44

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" ⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴² "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" ⁴⁴ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

And yet many women were there. Who were these women? Why would they remain at this terrible scene? Matthew, Mark and John all name some of the women at the cross.

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Matthew 27:55 – 56: *Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. ⁵⁶Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.*

Mark 15:40 – 41: *Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.*

Luke 23:27: *A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.*

John 19:25-27: *Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*

As these women now stand at the Cross, their hopes dashed, their dreams abandoned. They had believed he was the One to deliver the Jews, and instead he is dying in front of their eyes.

They were there because they loved Jesus. They had been delivered from their sins and their pasts by Jesus, and they were determined to stay with him until the end, as ugly as it was. This was a heart wrenching scene for these faithful followers.

So, what won their loyalty? Why did they remain there the whole time?

Let's consider those who are named.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus

No doubt she must have remembered the prophecy told to her by Simeon: *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel . . . And a sword will pierce your own soul, too"* (Luke 2:34 – 35).

It's interesting that Jesus tells John to care for his mother and from that time on Mary lives with John and his family. Why not one of Jesus' half-brothers?

Mary Magdalene

We know that Jesus had delivered her from seven demons. This woman had deep feelings for Jesus because he had delivered her from her past. And it was an awful past.

Mary, the Mother of James (the younger) and Joseph

There were three Mary's at the cross. This Mary was probably our Lord's mother's sister—or his aunt—called in John 19:25: Mary the wife of Clopas. It is most likely this Mary was the sister-in-law of Jesus' mother.

The Mother of James and John

In Matthew 20 we are told how she came to Jesus asking him to favor her sons by granting that one would sit at his right and the other at his left in his kingdom. She had not envisioned this when she asked Jesus for that favor.

Salome

Mark tells us that Salome was there. Matthew doesn't use that name, but many believe she is the woman referred to in Matthew as the mother of James and John.

Joanna

You remember Joanna who traveled with Mary Magdalene and other women who were disciples of Jesus. She was the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household. Now we see that she was with the women at the empty tomb and no doubt at the crucifixion as well:

Luke 24:9-10: *When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.*

Given who her husband was, it was very courageous of her to become a devoted disciple of Jesus.

Women at the Burial

Matthew 27:57 - 61

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

John 19:39: *He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.*

Mark 15:46-47: *So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.*

Luke 23:55: *The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.*

It was not normal that individuals would be allowed to take down bodies of criminals who were crucified. Those bodies were typically taken to the Valley of Gehenna, which was used as a garbage dump containing the filth of the city and the dead bodies of animals and criminals.

Women at the Empty Tomb

If you compare the descriptions given in the four Gospels of the women who were at the empty tomb, it would appear that there is a contradiction. Matthew mentions two women by name. Mark mentions three by name. Luke mentions at least three by name but describes more. John only identifies Mary Magdalene. Furthermore, some include details that others do not.

So, which Gospel is right?

One thing is very clear: They all tell us that the tomb was empty, that Jesus was alive, and that the women were the first to go there and the first to tell others about the empty tomb. Those are the most critical facts and they are all in agreement on those points.

If you want to read more about the different descriptions, this link is very helpful.

<https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/how-many-women-visited-the-tomb-of-jesus/>

"The divergences among the lists have often been taken as grounds for not taking them seriously as naming eyewitnesses of the events [of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection]. In fact, the opposite is the case: these divergences, properly understood, demonstrate the scrupulous care with which the Gospels present the women as witnesses" (*Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, pp. 155-156).

Here is the first example in the New Testament of women declaring truth to men. Luke tells us that the disciples did not believe their witness at first:

Luke 24:1 - 12

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " ⁸ Then they remembered his words.

⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

John gives us a slightly different perspective of the events, with a detail that none of the other Gospels give us.

John 20:11 - 18

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

It's significant that Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom Jesus revealed himself after his resurrection. You would think that maybe Peter, James, or John would have been better first witnesses. Or if it was a woman, why not his mother, Mary, or perhaps Mary of Bethany. But Mary Magdalene was first.

Mary Magdalene and the many others with her saw with their eyes the crucifixion, the tomb, the stone rolled away, the angels, the empty place where Jesus' body had lain. They saw it and they related what they saw to Matthew and John and Luke and Mark. And what we take away from this is that the tomb is still empty!

Discussion:

Here are the women we have studied:

Mary, the Mother of Jesus	The woman at the well	A dying young girl
Elizabeth	The Syrophoenician woman	A disabled woman
Mary Magdalene	The mother of James and John	The woman with the alabaster jar
Joanna	The widow of Nain	The woman caught in adultery
Suzanne	Peter's mother-in-law	All the women at the Cross
Mary of Bethany	A bleeding woman	
Martha, her sister		

How has their relationship with Jesus touched you, inspired you?

What five words would you use to describe Jesus in light of how he related to these Women in the Gospels?

References are from the book, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women* by Rebecca McLaughlin