

**Luke 24: 1-11**

**50th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women in the Episcopal Church**

**July 28, 2024**

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This is a sermon about eves. No not that capital-E-Eve, not the one from the opening chapters of Genesis. Though it would be appropriate to start with her at the beginning since that Eve's story and certain interpretations about what happened in the garden indelibly shaped how women are perceived in the world.

But this is a sermon about eves, like Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve, as in the eve of something new, the time before. Today is the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of eleven women to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church; it happened at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia in late July 1974. I really hope you'll come tonight to watch the documentary of this first and "irregular" and historic event that changed so much of what we know about church. That full story is beautiful and complex, and definitely worth your while.

Tomorrow is the fiftieth anniversary of that event, which means that fifty years ago today, eleven women were getting ready: getting ready for something that they had spent years getting ready for. And not just those eleven women, but three retired bishops, and altar guilds, and acolytes, and an organist, and as it turned out about two thousand people who would attend, mostly as supporters with some coming to protest. All of these people knew it was the eve of something, they were anticipating this moment, hopeful and nervous; they were as ready as they could be. Sometimes we know it's the eve-of; we circle a date on the calendar and we put all our energy toward preparing for that day. Buying school supplies before the first day of school. Prepping meals for a holiday. Sending out invitations for a party. Packing for a trip.

But this also has to be a sermon about not knowing when you're at an eve because sometimes we are at the brink of something new and we have no idea, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women. They were prepared, but for an ending; they brought the spices to the tomb to finish a story. Instead, these three named women and some other women too found themselves standing right at the edge of something completely transformative. They didn't know that their grieving walk to the tomb at early dawn was Easter Eve. But those women were the first ones to learn that resurrection was real and true, and they became the first ones to preach the good news. They carried the news of a new world back to the others who were living in the old world of before, still living in the world of violence and death and endings, and the women told them the dazzling news. And it seemed impossible, an unbelievable, idle tale; it all seemed impossible to everyone who was still standing in the eve, on the before-side of this momentous, magnificent change. As if the women were building a bridge as they walked, transporting themselves and anyone who would listen from one world of before into another world of after.

In some ways, it might have been like that for Shiphrah and Puah too: midwives, always prepared to stand at a threshold between before and after. Midwives who knew without ultrasounds that a birthday eve can surprise you, that you don't always know that the day before everything changes is the day before. And could these women with their learned wisdom about bodies and power know that they were ushering in a revolution? Always prepared for birth and new life and its intrinsic risks, Shiphrah and Puah were prepared to thwart a death-dealing king. And they used their place inside the chaos and unpredictability of birth to deliver hope and possibility to a people beaten down by fear. Because they did invisible work, they were positioned to bridge the gap between oppression and freedom, between death and life.

So, let's be clear, this is a sermon about women. This is a sermon about women because women have always been in the story. Sometimes we know their names and sometimes we don't, but there are not stories without women. Women are in every room whether they're seated at the table or serving the table. Women have been present, seen and unseen, since Eve: feeding people or whispering wisdom, preaching good news or saying no to tyrants, leading the army or tending the wounded. Often women are there in the particularly messy and pivotal transitional moments precisely because women's work has always also been the messy work of birth and death, delivering babies and washing bodies. Women were and often still are given these dirty jobs, but these unclean tasks are holy because they happen at the very edges of life itself. The eve-moments are the front line, where the holy breaks in.

And so then, let's be clear that this is a sermon about God. Our God is a God who lives and moves in the moments that are hard and heartbreaking and holy. God is intimately and deliberately involved in the moments of eve, in the mess of ushering us forward over and over and over again from what is to what could be. God doesn't only work at the cusp of time, but God sure does seem to have a predilection, maybe even a preference for eves, for precipices, for moments when it's hard for us to see what's next. Eves are places of "what if," and what if things turned out beautifully, surprisingly, even miraculously better than we could hope for? Certainly, God is constantly imagining life for us that is beyond our feeble imaginations. When we are stuck in the place of before, believing that what is is all there is, when we are inside the mess and can only see things collapsing or breaking or falling apart, God is at work in the potential of that chaos and disorder because in the spaces between before and after is where all the possibility lives. And since the very, very beginning the creative force of God has been at work in possibility, in making the story bigger and wider and deeper and broader, showing us how far the horizon might reach.

It was messy when those eleven women got ordained. People were anxious and worried and thought the sky was falling; even the ones who wanted this new thing to happen were likely afraid. Living at the edges is risky. Shiprah and Puah must have worked with fear and trembling that they might be caught, they were caught, worrying and hoping in equal measure about doing the right thing. And Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women were heartbroken and confused that early dawn, and then they were testifying to a ridiculous and audacious claim.

Did you notice how this sermon is about expanding possibility? At each of those junctures, the world got bigger. At each brink, our imaginations were shown to be lacking compared with the ever-expanding imagination of God. The possibility of the promised land opening up to the Israelites was born into the hands of a midwife. The not-so-idle tale that would change the world was carried by a group of women with just enough faith in the promise of resurrection to say it out loud to their friends. And eleven women and three old bishops propped open one more small door to the wisdom and leadership of the other half of humankind, bringing perspectives and stories and understandings that had gone unheard for too long. At each moment when the world appeared to be fixed, shrinking, or even ending, these women found themselves peering over the rim into a bigger, wider, deeper, broader world, because the worlds that God dreams for us are worlds where our boundaries are just that - our own, invented barriers.

You know, right, that this is a sermon about all of us. This is a sermon about learning from women who stood at the edge of before and after and who found God there. This is a sermon about history and about the future, because this is a sermon about the eve of something - who knows what? We all find ourselves at eves, and sometimes we know it and sometimes we don't, at uncertain moments where everything from before falls away but then in the aftermath we can see amazing and surprising new vistas. These are the eves in which we can discover that God is real and true and holding the door open wide for us, ushering us, delivering us into an impossible future.