

Text: [Mark 15:33-41 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: March 22, 2026 – Fifth Sunday in Lent
Title: “Unlikely Courage” – An Unlikely Lent Series, week 5
Theme: The Church is in debt to faithful female disciples who have led us in faith.

1

Next month, Kate and I will travel to England as part of a Wesley pilgrimage group led by our Bishop
Exploring some places that were critical to the early Methodist movement

There are a few sites that I am really excited to see –
among them, the house in Epworth where our founder, John Wesley, grew up
As well as the London grave of the extraordinary woman who raised him – Susanna Wesley

It's not an understatement to say that without Susanna Wesley, there never would have been a Methodist movement
Not only because she raised John – among the 19 babies she bore!¹ –

But also because she was largely responsible for the early education and spiritual formation of all her kids
She taught them all to read
And every week, she spent one-on-one time with each of the 10 who survived infancy to see to their religious education

One famous story about her is that in her chaotic, noisy household, Susanna had one non-negotiable rule:
When Mom pulls her apron over her head, she is praying, and is not to be disturbed

Now, I wouldn't want you to think that her religious influence was limited to her children

Another famous incident occurred when her husband Samuel – who was a priest in the Church of England – was at a clergy gathering that required him to be away for many weeks

He left behind a priest-in-training to run his parish, a guy named Inman

But apparently Inman wasn't very good, particularly as a preacher So Susanna began a series of Bible gatherings in the kitchen at Epworth on Sunday afternoons

Initially, they were just for her (sizeable) family

But others started to join

Susanna would pray, read scripture, and then discuss its meaning

It was essentially, a preaching service

And eventually, *hundreds* of people were showing up for it

Inman wrote to Samuel asking him to intervene, to get his wife to stop

But Samuel knew better – so he sent a letter attempting to gently persuade her

Her response? It went something like this:

God has called me to this.

I'll stop, but only if you positively command me to do so.

And, just so you know, dear husband, I believe we'll both be liable on judgment day if you do.²

That settled the matter for good

She kept on until Samuel returned

2

Who are the women who helped form you in the faith?

I'm guessing that for several of you, all you need to do is look around – because some of them are here in this room

I think about my Sunday School teachers
I think about my seminary professors
My mentors, district superintendents, and colleagues, including my wife
I think about my grandmother, and my mom, and my sister
About all the faithful laywomen who have led the church in each of my appointments

Some witnessed to me with words,
Others by the examples of their lives,
Others by praying me through difficult times

The Church is not the Church without the witness of women
And so it makes me sad and angry when I hear about churches who want to exclude women from the pulpit
Who want to exclude them from leadership
Because I believe that the Spirit calls women, just the same as men

Yes, it's true that Paul has some things to say about women's leadership
But even he names women as his co-workers in the gospel³
So I see his message as somewhat mixed

3

The gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, meanwhile, make it clear that women were with Jesus throughout his ministry
Three are named in today's scripture passage:

Mary Magdalene,
Mary the mother of Joses and James the younger (a disciple of
Jesus), and Salome
Salome is thought to be the mother of the disciples James and
John
It's clear that for many of the disciples, following Jesus was a
family affair

Women are particularly important to the stories we read during
Holy Week

It was women who walked with him as he carried his cross
Women who witnessed the crucifixion
Women who prepared the spices to embalm his body
And because they made that trip to the tomb so early in the
morning,
it was women – likely the same women named in this passage –
who first found it empty

Women were the very first witnesses to the Resurrection
And the first evangelists – because they shared this good news
with the Twelve

Did you know that women were also the biggest financial
supporters of Jesus' mission, from the earliest days of his
ministry?⁴

Luke tells us that it was *female* disciples – among them the wife of
one of Herod's high officials, who provided for the men's
work –

presumably their food and housing – out of their own resources
They literally made the ministry possible

So maybe it's not so surprising that Jesus –
in a remarkable move for his time – even taught women on an
equal footing with men – they earned it!

We see this in the famous story of Mary and Martha from Luke 10
Martha wants her sister Mary to come help in the kitchen
Because that was understood as the realm of women
And Martha thought she knew her role

But Mary, meanwhile, is described as sitting at Jesus feet
Which is a common way of talking about formal learning under the
tutelage of a rabbi
Instead of criticizing Mary, though, Jesus tells Martha to leave her
alone!⁵

The courage of the women at Jesus' crucifixion
Stands in sharp contrast with the reaction of the male disciples
The women follow Jesus all the way to the end
While the men abandon him, fearing for their own lives

You see a contrast too in the Garden of Gethsemane
the men find that they can't even stay awake an hour
And yet the women are up before dawn on Easter to bring
everything to anoint Jesus

If you're reading the gospels and want examples of faith,
don't look to the men – look to the women!

4

Jesus – in his ministry – is concerned with recognizing what we
call the *imago Dei* – the image of God –
in every single human soul

Jesus doesn't care if you are male or female
He doesn't care if you are Jew or Gentile
He doesn't care if you're a priest or a tax collector
Holy or sinner

He looks at each of us and sees a unique, beloved, and forever
unrepeatable human being
Stamped at our creation with the image of God on a deep soul
level

Everything Jesus did was about bringing that image out in people
He was a mirror in which people could see that they too
possessed the imago Dei – even when others said no

Jesus would reveal it to you, then polish it, refine it and shine it,
so that by the time you walked away from an encounter with him,
EVERYONE could see it

When Jesus welcomed women as disciples, when he taught them
like men, when he trusted them with the good news of his
Resurrection

He was recognizing and honoring the image of God that he saw in
them

Even when many others – then as now – would not

Jesus reminds each one of us that we, too, are children of God
Compare that with how we sometimes navigate the world

We so often see people as problems:
As obstacles to be overcome
As enemies to be conquered
As distractions that take up a lot of our time

>>But read the gospels
Look at Jesus' life
And you'll see he didn't treat people that way
No matter who they were

5

The women we meet in the gospels
Are profiles in courage, care, and commitment
They pick up the slack while the men are hiding out

We don't tell their stories enough
We don't talk enough about Susanna Wesley
Or about Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, or Sarah Crosby
Two women who were close associates of John Wesley and who
became early Methodist leaders
Wesley often defended their preaching against those who said
they didn't belong

I can't help but imagine that Wesley found support for his
arguments in the fact that HIS MOM was ALSO a preacher
of the gospel
In this Women's History Month – and in every month - it's worth
telling these stories

Honoring the image of God in our sisters
Recognizing their unique role not only in the history of our faith
But in the life of the church up to today

Is to follow the example of the Savior
Who came to reveal the imago Dei in every single one of us

This week, my challenge to you is simple:
Write a note of thanks to a woman who has helped to shape your
faith
Think about how they helped to reveal the image of God in you

Did they model faith through prayer and service?
Did they recognize a gift in you that even YOU didn't know you had?
Did they challenge you to become everything God created you to be?
Take the time this week to say thanks.

The church owes a great debt to our mothers, to our aunts, and sisters in faith
It was their courage that first brought us the good news!

Long before Peter found his voice
Before Paul picked up a pen
It was the women who bore witness
The church owes them so much more than we are often ready to admit
So let's not be afraid to say it

Amen.

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¹ Sadly, only ten lived to adulthood – many died in infancy, including two sets of twins.

² Read about the incident here: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/courage-and-conviction-a-womans-leadership-through-a-difficult-time>

³ Read Romans 16 for examples.

⁴ See Luke 8:1-3 and Mark 15:41.

⁵ Luke 10:38-42