



History of Lay Preaching: Part One *

What Does Scripture Say?

It all began with Jesus, that preacher extraordinaire. Mark puts it this way (1:21-22): “When the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” He was, of course, not part of the religious establishment. Yet he went about his ministry of calling disciples, healing the sick, telling stories with a twist, challenging anyone and everyone to know and live out God’s penetrating love for all people.

His followers included fishermen, tax collectors, and women, as Luke makes abundantly clear (8:1-3). Some had familiar names, like Mary Magdalene, while “many others” were left unnamed. Although none of these were part of the religious establishment, Jesus commanded all his followers to prayerfully wait in Jerusalem for the coming of his Holy Spirit (Acts 1: 12-14). On that fiery, windy day, all his disciples—women and men alike—were “filled with the Holy Spirit,” empowering them to preach his Good News.

John’s account of Jesus offers us some tantalizing accounts of Jesus in conversation with “ordinary” folks, resulting in their faith-filled proclamation of his identity.

Of particular note are the Samaritan Woman at the Well, the Man Born Blind, Martha (sister of Mary and Lazarus), and Mary of Magdala on Easter Sunday morning. The Samaritan woman (John 4: 1-42) is doubly marginalized, by her gender and her culture (Samaritans had *nothing* to do with Jews). After a profound theological conversation with Jesus, this thirsty woman drank in his Living Water, proclaiming him Messiah to her community. The Man Born Blind (John 9:1-41), harassed by Jewish authorities after his healing at Jesus’ hands, kept proclaiming ever deepening levels of faith in Jesus: as healer, prophet, man sent from God, and Son of Man.

Martha, one of three siblings loved by Jesus (John 11:1-44), confronted Jesus over his delay at her brother’s illness. Even though Lazarus had been dead four days by the time of Jesus’ arrival, she maintained that “even now” he could do *something*. Indeed, he did! As we know, Jesus restored Lazarus to life! But not before Martha proclaimed Jesus as “Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (John 11:27). In this Gospel, then, it was Martha who pronounced the faith statement of Peter, as found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Finally, Mary of Magdala (John 20:1-18) was the first disciple at the tomb, the first to discover the empty tomb, the first to encounter the risen Jesus, and the first sent by Jesus to proclaim the ultimate Good News of Easter. Her exultant “I have seen the Lord!” remains the ultimate faith

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statement of all preachers, lay or ordained. She, then, a lay person, became “apostle to the apostles.”

It is important to note that these powerful Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry were handed on orally, from one generation to the next, before being committed to writing. While many of the stories “matched,” others were unique to one Gospel or another. Yet all were intended to inspire faith in the person of Jesus, the Christ. Mark, the original creator of the Gospel form in the late 60s, wrestled with the terror of a community just recently crushed by Roman military might, in the wake of a Jewish rebellion. Where would they develop the courage to follow a Suffering Servant, a crucified Messiah? Nearly twenty years later, Matthew’s mixed, though predominantly Jewish, community wrestled with righteousness before the law. How could they welcome Gentiles into their midst, into Baptism, into their way of life? Luke desired a Gospel community bathed in compassion, forgiveness, mercy and meals around a common Table. While John, writing near the end of the first century, explored the many ways the eternal Jesus continually offered life in all its forms, to his own generation.

While disciples down through the ages have benefited greatly from this rich Gospel diversity, we must recognize that it was Paul—in his authentic letters—who actually first penned his passionate faith in Jesus, the Christ. Like all of us, Paul never encountered Jesus in person. But he experienced a profound, life-changing encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, empowering him—in time—to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, throughout many towns and cities of the Mediterranean world in the decade of the 50s, A.D. Journeying over 10,000 miles for the sake of the Gospel, he chose to minister with many others, both male and female.

In fact, in the last chapter of his Letter to the Romans, Paul gratefully named his co-workers, colleagues, and co-apostles. Let a brief list suffice. Prisca (known as Priscilla in Acts) and her husband Aquila (her name usually comes first) were co-workers—tent makers, like Paul, and leaders of house churches in Rome, Ephesus, and Corinth. They must have been powerful preachers and teachers, for they took the brilliant young Apollos in hand to teach him “the Way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26).

Phoebe, the only woman Paul names as deacon, was leader of her community in Cenchreae (near Corinth), where she was known to be a charismatic preacher and servant leader. Andronicus and Junia, whom Paul named as “prominent among the apostles,” were his relatives, willing to go to prison with him for the sake of the Gospel. As an aside, in the Middle Ages a scribe named Aegidius could not believe that Junia—a *woman*—could possibly be an *apostle*! So, he gave her the male name Junius, until scholars in the 1980s discovered her true identity as a woman. And there are many more faith-filled preachers recognized in Scripture, male and female, none of them part of the religious establishment.

Yet, you might well object: what about those Pastoral Letters that command women to be silent? It's important to know, as scholars now assure us, that the two Letters of Paul to Timothy and the Letter to Titus were written much later, long after Paul's death, probably near the end of the first century. What we find in *these* letters is a reflection of late first century culture, where women were subordinate to men, rather than Jesus' welcome of women and Paul's ministry with them. Indeed, Paul believed in the power of baptism, that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Furthermore, it's also believed that Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, with household codes attempting to "Christianize" the unequal status of women and men, were most likely written later, by a hand other than Paul's.

In summary, then, Scripture affirms preaching by people of great faith, both women and men, who opened their hearts, souls and minds to the person of Jesus, the Christ. In every case, they simply could not keep the Good News to themselves.



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Why does preaching matter to me?

Can you remember a homily you heard 32 years ago? I can. It changed my life. In July, 1983, I participated in my first preaching workshop, given by Dominican Sister Joan Delaplaine. A powerful preacher and expert professor of preaching, she "became" the man at the pool of Bethesda, by the Sheep Gate. Ill for 38 years, Jesus confronted her with this question, "Do you want to be healed?" He replied (to us), "you may think that's easy to answer, but it's not." As she listed all the reasons why she simply was not sure whether or not she wanted to be healed, I could literally feel a fire in my belly. Wow! I must learn how to do this!

Preaching is a sacred responsibility for me. I have worked long and hard to give my best: to pray with the Scripture, to meet with a homily team for an hour of conversation on the readings, to search out commentaries, and always to wait on the Spirit of God for a spark of truth, on which to build the reflection. Preaching is a joy, a challenge, and a calling.