



# ADULT STUDY

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## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 5

# Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

*The Woman Who Saw and Anointed Jesus*

## Introduction

This story is the only one in this study that is contained in all four Gospels. It must have been very important for all early Christian communities. We are reading it only from Mark's Gospel at 14:3–9, but it also shows up in Matthew 26:6–13, Luke 7:36–50 (in a very different form), and John 12:1–8. In many ways, this story shows the most clearly, of all our stories, why women were and are so important to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to his movement, the church. Jesus himself knew this is important, because he said, at the close of the story in Mark, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (v. 9). Jesus saw women, and wise women returned the favor. And in this story, this female prophet saw him first.

As feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, it is a clear witness to the male-centered tradition of the church that in the church's active memory, the Last Supper and the men present at it are well remembered, but this woman is not well remembered, in spite of Jesus' prophecy concerning her. As we will see, she is the model of both discipleship

and prophethood while the men are failing at that task. Not only did Jesus see and understand her, but she first saw and understood him.

## The Context in Mark

Let us set the stage for her story. One of the unique features of Mark's Gospel is something scholars call the messianic secret. This means that no human knew Jesus' true identity for half of the Gospel—not John the Baptist, not Jesus' family, not even his disciples. God knew it, of course, and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism as the voice of God proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). That sounds pretty clear, but we have to note that no human heard those words, saw the heavens torn open, or witnessed the Holy Spirit come down except Jesus. As the story continued, various demons blurted out Jesus' divine identity, but he quickly silenced them before casting them out. We readers are in on the secret, but all the characters in the story are kept out of it, including Jesus' own disciples.

This dynamic dramatically changes starting at 8:27, in the middle of the Gospel. Jesus asked his disciples the key question: "Who do people say that I am?" They

responded, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets” (v. 28). Then Jesus’ questioning got more pointed: “‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And [Jesus] sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him” (vv. 29–30).

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You might expect things to go smoothly for the rest of the story. Jesus and his disciples could now, together, organize themselves and the many people they had encountered into a popular movement against the Romans, who were the political, economic, and spiritual power behind the widespread oppression of the common people of Israel and its neighbors. However, Jesus sought more than mere victory over the Romans. He pursued victory over all violence, oppression, and death, and that required a very different strategy. The men who were his disciples didn’t see and understand it until after his death and resurrection, but the female disciple in this story saw it and understood it before then.

### Heading toward Crucifixion

Just after Peter guessed Jesus’ true identity in chapter 8, Jesus told all the disciples what he must therefore do: go through “great suffering,” rejection, and execution, after which he would rise again (v. 31). This drew a swift negative reaction from Peter, who had just confessed Jesus as Messiah. Shockingly, Peter scolded Jesus. Then Jesus scolded Peter in turn, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” (v. 33). Clearly, the Jesus movement was not coming together in one revolutionary purpose! Jesus went on to warn that following him meant embracing crucifixion. That requires some unpacking.

When Jesus was a boy, around ten years old, there was a major rebellion in Galilee against the Romans. The Romans responded as usual, with overwhelming and brutal force. They sent down a legion from Damascus and destroyed the rebels. They made a deliberate point of crucifying thousands of the rebels. The boy

Jesus undoubtedly saw all this and probably knew many men who had been crucified. He knew firsthand that crucifixion meant not merely a slow and painful death but also legal extinction of the crucified person’s personhood. That meant that person no longer owned anything because he no longer existed as a person. All

his property, including his children, were now abandoned property, to be seized by anyone who had the power to take it—and that would especially include tax collectors.

So when Jesus insisted that anyone who followed him must “take up their cross and follow me” (v. 34), he was instantly going the opposite direction from his disciples. They were determined to kill Romans just as much as the Romans would be determined to kill them once they knew about them. They had no intention of accepting their own violent death at the hands of the Romans. They wanted to force death on their enemies instead. They were a lot like us. They did not see that Jesus’ goal was not the defeat of their enemies but the defeat of death itself, and the defeat of all enmity.

### His Disciples Resist

Things did not actually get better between Jesus and his male followers after that. At 9:31, Jesus again told them that in Jerusalem he would be killed and be raised after three days. His disciples responded by arguing among themselves about who was the greatest—in other words, about who would be the next Jesus. They heard him say that he would be killed, and they took that into account with surprising aplomb. What they didn’t hear was him saying that he would be raised. Jesus’ own death began to make sense to them, but his resurrection from the dead made no sense at all. They could not see Jesus as a crucified messiah; they refused to do so.

A similar clash happened at 10:33–45. Again, Jesus made it very clear what would happen to him in Jerusalem, more explicitly than he had before. James and John then asked Jesus to set them on his right and left—that is, to make them his lieutenants when they got to Jerusalem and Jesus entered into his “glory.” Jesus then explained something that is a huge consequence of his coming crucifixion/resurrection, and indeed of his

whole ministry. His type of leadership was the opposite of that of the world's leaders. Rather than serving himself, he served others *without* serving himself. Furthermore, his leadership is the sole model of leadership for his followers, both then and now. That is how he calls us to serve.

It is because Jesus said this that there is anything like equality and democracy in the world now. The rule of democracy is supposed to be that those who govern do so on behalf of the governed and *not* in order to serve themselves. We owe that momentous change to Jesus.

In chapter 10, Jesus also made two huge and momentous social and economic changes. He first changed marriage from patriarchal marriage, which is a contract between the husband and the wife's father, into a covenant between a man and a woman. Women gained the right to jointly own the property of their husbands and have the right of inheritance. Then, after demonstrating the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of wealth with the rich young man, Jesus abolished patriarchy altogether in favor of communal possession and use of all property among believers.

## The Female Prophet unlike Any Other

This struggle between Jesus and his male disciples, and the changes Jesus enacted, is the context for his anointing in chapter 14. This woman came into a house that was not her own and anointed Jesus on his head. The story doesn't tell us a lot about her socially—not even her name—but it does tell us a few things.

First, the house belonged to an outcast, Simon the leper. He was therefore not friends with the priests, scribes, and Pharisees. He was not on their mailing lists. The fact that he's named likely indicates that he was a known follower of Jesus, sort of like Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross. They were in Bethany, so within relatively easy walking distance of Jerusalem, but also not under the noses and eyes of the authorities.

This unnamed woman saw Jesus first. She knew him and understood him before he knew and understood her. She came in during dinner with a very expensive jar of ointment and anointed Jesus' head. This tells us first that she had money of her own and had decided, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna from Luke 8, that she would support Jesus. We don't know how

she came by this money, whether by her own work or through inheritance.

We know that she was a prophet unlike any other. Not just anyone in the Bible could anoint someone on their head, which is to make that person a king, a priest, or a prophet. Only someone who was already anointed could do so. Plus, there is not a single instance in the Hebrew or Greek Jewish Scriptures in which a woman either anointed someone else to be a leader in Israel or was herself anointed for that purpose. Women anointed their faces or bodies to make themselves attractive to a man. But no one anointed them on the head to be prophets, and no woman gave that anointing to another person. This does not mean that she could not be a prophet, but rather that this prophetic role could have come to her only directly from God.

In addition, we know that she saw, appreciated, and supported Jesus of Nazareth in the way he was and with the mission he had, rather than in the way the men wanted him to be, to serve their agendas for power and wealth. She saw him, understood him, and accepted him for who he was, what he was doing, and the way he was doing it. Jesus, in turn, accepted her; he correctly saw her act as a good service and a kindness, knowing very well both that no man was going to anoint him into their preconceived ideas and roles of king and that he was carrying out God's mission.

Jesus saw something that wise women have always seen: that what is good and right and true is rarely accepted and understood by those in power, and that the divine transformation into that good, right, and true future cannot be easily planned or foreseen. The cause of righteousness can and will suffer many defeats and will be made to look foolish and wrong many times. Jesus knew it would require a terrible price from him, and he knew that this unforeseen, unprecedented, and unnamed woman prophet valued, supported, and empowered him in that price and that cause.

The reaction of the men present is predictably disappointing. Not only had they been opposing Jesus in his specific way of being Messiah, they had also tried to prevent others who did understand this merciful Jesus from getting access to him, including the Syrophenician woman in chapter 7 and the people bringing little children to him in chapter 10. In this story, they resisted again. They griped and made a phony criticism, that

this was a waste of money and it should have been

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## They didn't want to see a woman anoint Jesus.

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given to the poor. It's quite true that the gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed good news for the poor. Kindness should be done consistently for the poor. Jesus always did so. But this wasn't their real concern. They didn't want to see a woman anoint Jesus, despite the fact that Jesus had already lifted up women, ending patriarchy and transforming women into coequal property possessors with their husbands. And they certainly didn't want Jesus to talk about his own burial. They wanted the burials of Romans and collaborators, not of Jesus, and they wanted Jesus to lead them into that killing.

The terrible and painful irony of their supposed concern for the poor (and lack of concern for Jesus' death) is that they were displaying this fake concern while Jesus' death was being actively engineered. This story in chapter 14 is immediately preceded by the decision by the Jerusalem leaders to kill Jesus, and the story is immediately followed by Judas going to those same leaders to begin the process of that event. From this point on in the Gospel, Jesus' disciples increasingly turned away from him, finally abandoning him at his arrest. And it was only the women who remained faithful. In Mark's Gospel, they were the only ones present at Jesus' crucifixion (15:40–41). They were also the only ones to show up to his tomb to perform the last rites that they couldn't do earlier.

### The Two Kinds of Stories

We mentioned earlier in this chapter Schüssler Fiorenza's observation of the lack of attention paid by the male-dominated church to this story of the female prophet. We need to expand on that. There are two ways of observing what happens in the last three chapters of Mark, and there are two competing kinds of stories.

One is male-centered and violent. It begins with the plot to kill Jesus by the male leaders in Jerusalem, joined by Judas Iscariot. While the other disciples were generally opposed to these leaders, they nonetheless agreed with them (and were secretly complicit with them) that killing must happen. This first story ended with Jesus' abandonment, crucifixion, and burial, all done by men. The center of this story was the shocking, horrifying crucifixion of Jesus, shown to us in gruesome detail.

The other way to see these events is female-centered and nonviolent. It began with the anointing of Jesus by a female prophet, continued with the faithful presence of women at his crucifixion, and ended with the witness to Jesus' resurrection by the female disciples, who remained present with him. The center of this story, however, is a mystifying event that we don't see happen at all—his shocking and incredible resurrection.

These two stories leave us readers with a choice. Which path will we take? Which way will we see things? Will we see Jesus, as the women do, as the divine messenger of a whole new way of life, who defeats not just worldly powers who use death but also death itself through his submission to his own death and resurrection? Will we see in him the beginning of a new creation based on faith, hope, and love rather than the old creation based on fear, greed, and hate? Or will we continue to serve the world's empires with their old idols of wealth, death, and lies? Will we trust that what God has done in and through Jesus is the whole truth of a new way of living, so true and so good that it is worth risking turning away from the supposed securities of the world's empires and turning toward God's reign of life?

Jesus takes the risk of trusting us to see and value this revolution of faith, hope, and love, and to give ourselves to it just as he has done. Our ways of giving ourselves are not the same as his, but like these women, we have him as our model and example, our pledge of hope, our guarantee of faith, our living presence of love. The women at the end of Mark's Gospel invite us into that same hope, faith, and love by seeing Jesus and taking the risk to respond to him. Their stories help us to also become seeing and active participants in God's reign through Jesus of Nazareth.

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