DUKE UNIVERSITY, DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

WOMEN WHO PROCLAIM IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN:
JOHN 4 AND JOHN 20 AS PARADIGMS OF WOMEN’S PROCLAMATION
AND LEADERSHIP FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

THESIS SUBMITTED TO

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<tr>
<td>BTB</td>
<td>Biblical Theological Bulletin</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBW</td>
<td>Conversations with the Biblical World</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<td>JHS</td>
<td>Journal of the History of Sexuality</td>
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<td>JRPC</td>
<td>Journal of Religion and Popular Culture</td>
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<td>JSNT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</td>
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<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>SBJT</td>
<td>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZNW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</td>
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ABSTRACT

Why do women experience a challenge when trying to relate to the biblical text? Women often feel like their voice is ignored and their story is silenced. Even with this challenge present, women have preached and proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ since the beginning of the faith. Women’s activity in the life of Christ is evident throughout the gospels, especially the gospel of John. However, certain congregations and denominations still assert that women are to be silent and submissive, and reserve leadership within the church to male pastors, preachers, and teachers. These groups misinterpret certain biblical text in an effort to maintain that women cannot be called to lead ecclesial bodies.

Such actions silence key passages in the New Testament. The Gospel of John elevates the role of women in the life and ministry of Jesus. This thesis will look at the narratives of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in John 4 and Mary Magdalene’s role in proclamation in the resurrection story in John 20, showing the manner in which scriptural text is used to elevate women’s leadership in the life of the modern church. The Gospel of John describes Jesus' view of women is one that elevates their status, personhood, and ability to share the gospel message. In the text, women are not merely followers, but they lead others to a knowledge of the Messiah. Not only is the discipleship of women important to Jesus, but Christ also calls women to then proclaim and share their experiences with others. This thesis will serve as a scriptural basis for elevating the leadership of both lay and clergy women and teaching faithful exegesis of
the text within the modern ecclesial context. It will demonstrate the manner in which accurate exegesis leads to faithful preaching and teaching through a detailed analysis of John 4 and John 20.
DEDICATION

I am grateful for the support of my husband, Reverend Robert Steven Reneau and my mother, Ms. Bryan Candenhead Poole. They lovingly encouraged me during this process of study and writing. This thesis is dedicated to my husband and mother, along with my son Grantham Lawrence Poole Reneau who is the light of our life.

Additionally, it is dedicated to the clergywomen of the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who seek to boldly proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. These women give me hope for the future of the church and seek to transform the world in which they live.
INTRODUCTION:
DISCOVERING AND RDISCOVERING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Women have long fought to have their voices heard in both the secular society and within the halls of ecclesial assemblies and public worship spaces. Women have preached, proclaimed, and taught even when they have been told to be silent, submissive, and subservient. At times these bold actions resulted in danger and their own peril as well as humiliation and shame. When women boldly stand in a pulpit or behind a podium, they are viewed as individuals who reject the teachings of the Bible and its authoritative teaching. Often, the texts of both the New and Old Testaments have been misconstrued and poorly exegeted in order to silence women and locate them outside of the places of leadership and authority.

However, in the face of adversity women have persisted in finding their place within the life of the church. Lay and clergywomen like Susanna Wesley, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Katie Geneva Cannon, Alice Lee, and Marjorie Matthews, along with many others, worked diligently to express their call and have their voice heard. In an effort to counteract the alleged scriptural basis for women’s submission and subordination, Elizabeth Cady Stanton authored The Women’s Bible in the late nineteenth century. In the introduction she writes, “from the inauguration of the movement for women’s emancipation the Bible has been used to hold her in the ’divinely ordained sphere,’ prescribed in the Old and New Testaments.”¹ These same references to

scripture continue to be used to undermine women’s ecclesial authority. While the church has often sought to keep women in their “divinely ordained sphere” women have boldly told ecclesial and denominational bodies that their sphere is in the pulpit, in the pastorate, and the in halls of seminaries. Women’s call stories are not a new phenomenon. God has long called women into pastoral and proclamation ministry. However, the road to the fulfillment of this calling has been one fraught with challenges and rejection. Through this process, women, both clergy and lay, have experienced deep wounds that pierce the depth of their soul. At times these wounds have been used as a rallying cry for equality and recognition while in other instances they have resulted in silence. Despite the resistance of religious and secular bodies, God has long called women to leadership both in the church and in society.

This is certainly the case within the biblical text. Women like Miriam, Mary the Mother of Jesus, Deborah, the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Mary Magdalene, and countless others spoke truth to power and proclaimed salvation. They have proclaimed to both men and women and led large groups of God’s faithful people. Yet within our local churches lay and clergywomen are often silenced. Examples of women leading in the biblical text are overlooked for those that insist on silence and obedience. When passages of scripture that offer an example of women’s leadership are taught or preached, the emphasis is not on proclamation or calling. Because of this, women are not given opportunities for leadership, while their male counterparts are encouraged to serve. Various scriptures are taken out of context or otherwise poorly exegeted in order to explain why women should be silent and submissive.
Two biblical texts, which are often poorly exegeted, are John 4 and John 20.²

Though the narrative of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in John 4 and Mary Magdalene’s role in the resurrection account in John 20, women are given two examples of female discipleship and leadership within the life and ministry of Jesus. Poor exegesis often leads teachers and preachers to understand them as reformed prostitutes or sexually permissive women in need of redemption. A clearer understanding and research of these women provides a different understanding. The woman at Jacob’s well and Mary Magdalene are two women, from very different contexts, who boldly share the good news with their communities. While many scholars and preachers seek to undermine their apostolic witness and discredit the leadership they embody, they continue to serve as examples of women who followed Jesus and women whom Jesus called into ministry.

² Biblical references are derived from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.
I have the honor of serving as an Elder in the United Methodist Church. I have served congregations for ten years, and in doing so I have participated in many conversations about misconceptions about biblical views on women in ministry. For example, during a weekly Bible Study in a local church setting, a woman confessed to the group that she had not read Paul's epistles in many years. She found them to be offensive, especially the manner in which certain passages are used to silence women's voices. Rather than looking at the context of the Epistles, she chose to ignore the text. In discussing the Gospels, the same woman did not believe there were instances in the text that elevate the voice and perspective of women. She was surprised to hear of the manner in which Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, as well as the Johannine account of the Resurrection, elevate the role of women in the Gospel. Another woman, after being part of a Bible study in which Deborah was discussed, used the knowledge she gained to defend the ordination of women and the leadership of women in a local congregation. That woman's daughter now believes that she has a call to ordained ministry.

I am often asked questions about women’s ordination and the United Methodist understanding of pastoral leadership. At times, it is necessary for me defend my calling and ordination. In a majority of these instances, it is simply faithful laypersons who want to better understand the theological basis of women’s leadership. They seek to defend the
leadership of women when asked about why their church has a clergywoman as a pastor.

Only in a few instances have these conversations become hurtful. In those instances, however, I am always reminded of the power of calling, purpose, and leadership.

It is apparent, through conversations and studies in the local church, laywomen are looking for permission from the biblical text to teach, preach, and have their voices heard. They have testimony to share, and a calling, testimony and desire to lead their local congregations faithfully into the future. However, they still find opposition and discrimination, which is veiled with terms like "biblical authority" and "inerrancy of scripture." Because of this, they simply choose to ignore certain Biblical passages rather than research and determine the historical and theological intent.

Similarly, the popular folk band, The Indigo Girls, shares this sentiment with their audience in the song "Pendulum Swinger": "It's fine about the old scroll Sanskrit, Gnostic gospels The DaVinci Code a smash hit, aren't we dying just to read it and relate it, too hard just to go by a blind faith, but they left out the sisters, I've been praying to a father god so long I really missed her."3 The writer of the song grew up as a United Methodist with her father being an ordained elder in the church, but she finds it difficult to relate to the biblical text because "they left out the sisters." Too often “the sisters,” women like Deborah, the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, Mary Magdalene, and Lydia, are ignored in the teaching and preaching in local churches.

During my first few years in college, I was part of a conservative evangelical

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campus ministry, where I confronted issues of women and ecclesial leadership. Through prayer and discipleship, I felt called to attend seminary and pursue a vocation of pastoral ministry. When I expressed this calling with those who lead the campus ministry, I was told that I was mistaken and that God did not call women into leadership within the church.

Little attention had been given to the role of women in the New Testament text in my United Methodist home congregation. When confronted with issues around gender and leadership in college I was not sure how to relate my understanding of women's agency to the scriptural text. I knew of examples of women who served as clergy but could not articulate the scriptural and theological underpinnings that supported their role. As a result, I also chose to ignore large portions of the New Testament text until I arrived in seminary. As a laywoman, the church had given me limited tools for biblical interpretation when confronted with issues that were different from those espoused by my denomination and local congregation.

Two laywomen, a popular singer, and myself: we are each different from one another, in age, education, demographic settings, and theological ideologies, and yet our experience with the biblical text has been similar. We have each struggled with reading and understanding the text because "they left out the sisters." Stories of women's roles in leadership in the Gospels and Epistles are brushed over by the church, simply ignored, or poorly taught. In Caretakers of our Common House, Carol Lakey Hess brings this issue to light. She writes, "The relationship between women and the Bible can be a problematic

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4 Emily Saliers, "Pendulum Swinger," Despite our Differences.
one. Probably all of the biblical texts were written by men, most…reflect a patriarchal worldview, and…have either ignored or suppressed the history of women's participation in salvation history. Many women approach the Bible with a legitimate, and necessary, hermeneutics of suspicion toward the authors…"\(^5\) This hermeneutic of suspicion is highlighted by the reality that the biblical text is often used to oppress women, especially in Western society.\(^6\) Sandra M. Schneiders observes, "Although Christianity did not invent patriarchy….it is a fact that the Bible has been and is invoked as a religious legitimator of women's oppression…"\(^7\)

The biblical text should be used to elevate the role of women rather than suppress women's leadership. Hess is correct in her assertion that women approach the text with suspicion, primarily because of the male-centric worldview prevalent in history and in modern society. The historical role of women in the life and political atmosphere of the first century Judea and Galilee cannot be disputed. Women were not regarded as highly as men, however, despite their disadvantage, women used their voice to advance the ministry of Jesus. Those seeking to understand the life and ministry of Jesus Christ heard their words and followed their leadership. These spoken words of proclamation should be used to encourage, elevate, and teach clergy and laywomen to use their voice and their power today.

\(^7\) Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, 127.
Feminist Interpretation

As there are many different types of biblical interpretative work, there are various forms of feminist interpretation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, highlights the various types of feminist biblical interpretation. She notes that the term "feminist" is problematic, in that it often speaks to the concerns of white, middle-class, Eurocentric women and fails to address women of color. In writing about the book, she notes, "Therefore, some advisors to this project have suggested that the qualifier "feminist" should be displaced and replaced with a proliferation of names and self-designations." As different as women are, so are the variances in biblical interpretation. One who seeks to understand a text will approach it with his or her understanding of the world and the church.

For example, in “A Womanist Approach to the Black Christ,” Kelly Brown Douglas brings the African American women’s experience to light by examining the ways that the traditional doctrines of Christology, and feminist theology, have fallen short. She notes, “The Womanist Christ is not just seen as a sustainer and liberator--as presented in Black theology--but also as a prophet.” Douglas’ concept of the Black Christ seeks to lift up those individuals (especially women) who perpetuate wholeness within the Black community.

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9 Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures*, 16.
Rosemary Radford Ruether notes the manner in which feminist theology has become multifaceted, global, and interfaith in the article, "The Development of Feminist Theology: Becoming Increasingly Global and Interfaith." She brings to light the dissatisfaction that women of color felt with feminist theology in the later part of the 20th century as they felt it simply spoke to white, middle-class, women. She writes, "These women of ‘color’ coined new names for their theological reflection from their distinct female ethnic histories. African-Americans called themselves ‘Womanists;’ some Hispanics adopted the parallel term ‘Mujeristas.’ Korean feminist drew from Korean Minjung Theology…"\(^{12}\) These various perspectives of theology and interpretation have richly added to research, understanding, and life within the church. These viewpoints have given the church diverse lenses through which to view women’s experiences and the manner in which women interact with the biblical text.

As with any theological and biblical interpretation there is a bias with which one approaches a biblical text. Yet, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that there is a fundamental common goal with all feminist interpretative work. She writes, "In order to minimize the possibility of its cooptation in the interests of Western patriarchy, I argue, feminist biblical interpretation must place at the center of its attention everywoman's struggles to transform patriarchal structures…"\(^{13}\) While the race, ethnicity, socio-political understanding, and experiences of women are different, a common goal remains. The great call of biblical interpretation is to speak truth to power and transform both the

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\(^{13}\) Fiorenza, Searching the Scriptures, 21.
Church and the community by elevating women and allowing various voices to be heard.

Biblical interpretation has various objectives, all of which are essential to a faithful understanding of the text. One can seek to interpret the biblical text for clarity. Biblical interpretation is vital for preaching, teaching, and other acts of congregational leadership. Sandra M. Schneiders explains, "One can read the text primarily for information or in view of transformation."\textsuperscript{14} For Schneiders, transformation is "to be intellectually enlightened or to be personally converted."\textsuperscript{15} She explains that by reading the text for information one is looking at the historical context and theology, which is explicitly outlined.\textsuperscript{16} This answers the questions, who, what, when, and where. Reading a text for transformation is quite different. It is not simply a quest in information gathering but rather a pursuit into the heart of the reader.\textsuperscript{17} Reading and interpreting a text for transformation might call the reader to action, prayer, or discernment. Therefore, feminist biblical interpretation does not simply seek to gather facts about the historical, political, and social environment of a text, rather it seeks to change the dialogue of those in the academy, the Church, and the community. It seeks to better the lives of women in the church and the world through formation and transformation. Feminist biblical scholarship seeks to move the academy and the church to pursue equality and to empower women to leadership and service.

\textsuperscript{15} Schneiders, \textit{The Revelatory Text}, 13.
\textsuperscript{16} Schneiders, \textit{The Revelatory Text}, 14.
\textsuperscript{17} Schneiders, \textit{The Revelatory Text}, 14.
The Fourth Gospel

The Gospel of John provides us with two passages which are helpful for an interpretation and analysis of women’s roles in proclamation and leadership. John 4:1-41 details Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and John 20:1-31 demonstrates the apostolic command that Jesus gives to Mary Magdalene. While these women are from different backgrounds, they tell others what they have seen and heard. They share their experiences with the community. As the church grapples the lack of equality among men and women, studies about women in the biblical text have come to the forefront of research and discussion. Dorothy Lee writes,

"Studies of women in the Fourth Gospel have likewise blossomed in Johannine discussions of the past few decades. These writings reflect a wider interest in bringing to the fore the female characters of the Bible, drawing them from the shadows of the text itself of its many interpretations down through the centuries. The Fourth Gospel is particularly suited to such rereading, given the unusual prominence of women and the significant narrative roles they play as disciples and witnesses within the Johannine text."¹⁸

The apostolic role of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and Mary Magdalene point to the value Jesus places on women in the first century. These women in John's Gospel serve to tell others about the Messiah. The Samaritan woman returns to her community to tell others about her experience at the well. Mary Magdalene tells the other disciples about the resurrection. Their prominence is powerful for both the communities of which they are a part, as well as women in the 21st century. The responses of these women in the biblical text call clergy and lay women in the modern church to action. These texts

are not simply informative but are also transformative in that they have the power to change the heart and mind of a community by speaking power to patriarchal structures which seek to silence women in the political, social and ecclesial environments.
CHAPTER 2
SAMARITAN WOMEN AT JACOB’S WELL IN JOHN 4:1-41

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in John 4:1-41 provides a necessary theological framework for discerning the manner in which Jesus calls and commissions women for the work of proclamation. As the longest recorded conversation in the Gospel of John, the exchange is detailed as it uncovers the woman’s past and speaks to her present. Pastors, theologians, and church leaders, who seek to promote the leadership and equality of women view the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well as an authority figure for women who feel called to preach and lead congregations. This conversation is striking because Jesus, a Jewish man, seeks a dialogue with a woman of Samaritan descent and in doing so demonstrates the manner in which salvation is for all people; men and women, Jews and Gentiles. Looking in detail at the conversation between Jesus and the woman as well as the historical, political, and cultural nuances surrounding this encounter, it is clear that the Johannine gospel elevates the status of women in the life and ministry of Jesus.

A Symbolic Account

Because this account of ministry with the Samaritan community is only found in the historical account, most believe it is a post-resurrection inclusion in the text to show the
importance of the Gentile community. Schnieders suggests there is little evidence that Jesus undertook a ministry in the Samaritan region during his life. Schnieders suggests that the encounter in John 4 is not a historical event, but rather "a reading back into the public ministry of Jesus the Johannine community's post resurrection experience of the Samaritan mission and the influence of the Samaritan converts…" She asserts that the story is a manner in which the Samaritan community is seen as legitimate in Jesus' ministry, showing that "both groups were evangelized by Jesus himself." While the gospel does not suggest that the Jewish community is less important, the story acknowledges the importance of Jesus mission to the Samaritan community as well as various Gentile communities.

This is the only account of Jesus traveling in Samaria and interacting with Samaritans while in the region in any of the Gospels. However, John 4 clearly places importance on Christ’s mission in Samaria and ministry with the Gentile community. It is for this reason that Schneider’s suggests that this narrative is a later inclusion. This is because of the importance of the evangelical mission in Samaria after Pentecost. In this regard, the woman at the well is not historical but rather representative of the entire Samaritan community. As John’s Gospel often includes stories of women and others on

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the margins, this is another example of Jesus seeking to show that all are welcome into the family of God.

As a symbolic account, the significance of this story is of great importance. This narrative displays that women, both Jews and Gentiles, can proclaim their experiences with the Living God. The intention of the author of the Fourth Gospel is clear: Jesus’ message of love and redemption is for both the Jewish and the Gentile communities and women are vital to the proclamation the gospel.

**Socio-Political Background and Barrier Breaking**

In Jesus’ time, relations between Jews and Samaritans were fraught with tension and hostility. According to Francis Moloney, Samaritans were considered people of "mixed blood," who did not participate in the worship centered in Jerusalem as noted in 2 Kgs 17:24-42. There are three views which are prominent as they relate to the history of the Samaritans. The Samaritans are either, "surviving northern Israelites, the descendants of foreign immigrants imported into the land in Neo-Assyrian times, or a mixed race consisting of the melding of foreign immigrants with native Israelites." According to Gary Knoppers, the Samaritans considered themselves to be of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Levi, making them Israelis but not Judeans. The Septuagint translates the title of the community as "the Samaritans" in a comment about the consequences of the Assyrian

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27 Knoppers, “How it Began and Did Not End,” 190.
However, it seems that the Assyrians gave this title to the community who resided in the geographical region. The Samaritans disassociated from the Jewish community when they returned from their Babylonian captivity, and hostility between the Jewish and Samaritan communities escalated over the years. Although there was great hostility, the two groups shared a common ancestry and similar beliefs and practices.

The socio-political background of Samaria provides crucial context to the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in John 4:1-41. As part of the journey from Jerusalem to the north toward Cana, Jesus could either pass through Samaria or take a longer route around Samaria. While Jesus does not appear to need to make a quick travel route, his decision to go through Samaria seems to be intentional. Many believe the intentionality of this journey is important for the gospel narrative. However, Rudolf Bultmann disagrees. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, he notes, "Jesus never purposely chose Samaria for his ministry." For Bultmann, Jesus is just passing through the area because of an efficiency of route, rather than intentionally seeking out the Samaritan community.

Despite Bultmann’s disagreement on this issue, Jesus’ reasons for traveling to the area are of great interest. Intentionality is important when looking at this text. If it is simply to arrive in Galilee in the most efficient manner possible then the conversation,
while of great importance, is happenstance. Therefore, without intentionally it does not carry the same influence as an exchange that is deliberate. Noting the writings of Josephus, which explain that a trip through Samaria is the quickest way to get to Jerusalem for festivals and other events, Marianne Meye Thompson believes that the journey was intentional. This is because Jesus was not going to Jerusalem but rather to Galilee.\textsuperscript{34} There is no need for haste in his travel plans, so therefore the journey to Samaria is purposeful and deliberate.

It is clear that Bultmann and Thompson differ from other scholars in that they view Jesus’ ministry in Samaria as historical rather than ahistorical. They present a different argument than that of Schnieders. For Thompson, the journey is deliberate, and Jesus intends to show that the good news is open to both Jews and Gentiles.\textsuperscript{35} Christ is not simply the Messiah for the Jewish community, but the love of Christ transcends race and worldly status.

In addition to cultural and societal norms, gender roles also play an important role in the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Given the cultural norms of the time, it is unlikely that Jesus would speak to a Gentile woman. However, it is Jesus, not the woman, who initiates the conversation. Even the woman questions his speaking to her as they continue their conversation. Adele Reinartz notes the women’s surprise, “She is surprised when he asked her for water, for, according to the narrator, ‘Jews do not

\textsuperscript{35} Thompson, \textit{John}, 98.
share things in common with Samaritans’ (4.9).” The disciples reiterate Jesus’ apparent misstep when they return to the well from purchasing food. This mistake is described in John 4:27: "Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman…” This astonishment can be the result of several factors; however, Susan Hylen and Gail O’Day suggest, “The disciples’ reaction to the presence of the Samaritan woman (v.27) confirms that Jesus has violated social convention in conversating with her.” Perhaps the disciples were concerned about the potential of Jesus meeting a woman to marry at the well. The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah was initiated at a well in Genesis 24 and likewise Isaac and Rebekah’s son Jacob meets Rachel at a well in Genesis 29. Likewise, in Exodus 2, the marriage between Moses and Zipporah is the result of a conflict which occurs at a well.

This issue with boundary crossing seems to trouble everyone in the scene but Jesus. Jesus does not find an issue with crossing the boundaries with are clearly defined within the societal norms. The disciples surprise and consequent objection could be the fear that this conversation might initiate a marriage with the woman to whom Jesus is speaking. Lee notes, “…Jesus transgresses cultural and religious boundaries between Jews and Samaritans—boundaries that, from the Jewish side at least, narrowly define the scope of salvation. For Jesus this is not a misstep or a social gaffe; rather it is an intentional interaction with the Samaritan woman.

38 Lee, Flesh and Glory, 72.
Jewish women were kept out of the public arena more than their Samaritan counterparts. Robert Gordon Maccini brings this to light, "The customary absence of women from the public sphere in ancient Palestine may have been less rigid among Samaritans than among Jews. One reason for keeping Jewish women out of the public sphere was that men might avoid accidentally contracting uncleanness from a menstruating woman..."  

While the Samaritans observed the Pentateuchal laws, they may not have observed them in the same way as the Jewish religious authorities and may have eliminated the need for purification after having contact with a menstruating woman. This is another reason for the disregard the Jewish community had for the Samaritan culture and community. Jewish men feared being ritually unclean after interacting with a Samaritan man or woman. However, this difference in the observation of the law also allowed Samaritan women to cross gender boundaries and have conversations with men in public settings. This is a drastic difference in religious and cultural norms from those of the Jewish community. The ability to cross the gender boundary enables the woman to share her experience with Jesus to those in the nearby town and be a witness to the acts of the long-awaited Messiah.

Even with Schneiders’ assertion, the role of the Samaritan woman is important to both the mission to the Gentile community and the role of women in proclamation and leadership. This raises the question, does Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman at  

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Jacob's well need to be a historical account for it to have impact upon women in the modern Church? If this story is being told in order to suggest the importance of boundary crossing between the Jewish and Gentile communities, can it also suggest the importance of women's agency in proclamation? The answer seems to be “yes!” Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection are for all people. Jesus embodies this radical inclusivity time and time again in the biblical text, with the Samaritan woman being yet another example that all are welcome.

Dorothy Lee asserts that the role of the Samaritan woman is not just for women but for both men and women through the use of the plural "we" in John 4:12. She invites men, along with women, into the narrative of salvation. However, since she is the one to whom Jesus is speaking, women are "genuinely included when they are able to function not just as the alien ‘other’ to what is generic but in a representative and collective role…” In any case, the woman is given a distinctiveness apart from her male counterparts which makes her part of the story. Perhaps this is because she represents the larger Gentile community or perhaps it is because she is a woman. Indeed, it could be that she embodies both as a Gentile woman. If the story is not a historical account, it is nevertheless one that intentionally includes the Samaritan woman, elevating her status and giving her a voice in the community. She has an important role to fulfill in the John 4 narrative.

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42 Lee, Flesh and Glory, 86.
43 Lee, Flesh and Glory, 86.
**A Conversation with Jesus**

John 4:1-41 details an intense conversation Jesus has with a woman from Samaria while seeking a drink from Jacob's well. According to Fred Caddock, this is Jesus' longest recorded dialogue with an individual. In this conversation, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman and asks for a drink of water. She questions this request and then Jesus begins to explain the concept of "living water" stating, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). As the conversation continues, Jesus explains that the divide that separates the Jewish community from the Samaritan community will be removed. The woman states, "I know that the Messiah is coming" (John 4:25). Jesus then reveals himself to this woman by saying, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (John 4:26). Following this conversation, the woman leaves her jar and goes to the nearby city and invites others to "come and see" this man. She then asks, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (John 4:29). Close to the end of the discourse, the narrator states, "Many Samaritans believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39).

Yet, there is far more to this conversation than this basic summary suggests. It is important that Jesus meets this woman at Jacob's well, as it is a shared holy site for both the Jewish and Samaritan community. According to Thompson, it is a reminder that this land was once "inhabited by the patriarchs," with whom both the Jews and Gentiles have a common ancestry. This shared holy site is a place of common ground and a meeting

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45 Thompson, *John*, 98.
point. It is a significant place for Jesus and the woman with whom he has a conversation. There is some debate, according to Francis J. Moloney about the location of Sychar and the well. He notes that verse 5 describes the city as close to the field which Jacob gave Joseph as described in Genesis 48 and 33.

Following a long journey northward, Jesus sits by the well at the noon hour alone, as the disciples have traveled into Sychar to purchase food (John 4:6-7). As he is sitting, waiting on the disciples to return, a woman approaches the well. She has come to draw water. Jesus initiates the conversation by asserting, "Give me a drink." (John 4:7). This is not a request, rather it is a demand. The woman responds, noting the peculiarity with which Jesus asks for a drink of water. She responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, asks a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9). In this instant, she acknowledges the boundary that Jesus is crossing. The woman is astonished that Jesus, a Jewish man, would ask her, a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, and she is bold enough to challenge Jesus’ request.

The conversation continues with Jesus’ reply, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (John 4:11). This is where the theme of living water is introduced. It is in this moment that both the conversation and the place in which the conversation occurs appears to be intentional. Jesus offers living water at the place that the woman has come to draw life-sustaining water. However, Jesus seems to ignore her.

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48 Thompson, *John*, 9
original question. He does not tell her why he has chosen to break the gender and cultural barriers that prohibit the two of them from interacting; rather he responds by telling her who he is and offering her something greater than bodily sustenance. Through his statement, he is beginning to suggest that he is the "gift of God" or the Messiah for whom she has been waiting.

The woman takes his statement to mean that Jesus is going to offer her actual water. She says, "you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" (John 4:11). She then asks Jesus if he is greater than "our ancestor Jacob..."(John 4:12). Dorothy Lee suggests that the use of the word "our" is of great importance. Lee believes that the woman is representing the Samaritan people allowing phrases like "our," "we," and "us" to suggest that she does not speak on behalf of herself but for her entire community. She also wants to know if the tired and thirsty Jewish man she has encountered at the well believes he is greater than Jacob. While she is astonished by his initiation of the conversation, she is more astonished by Jesus’ suggestion that he might be greater than (or at least equal to) Jacob. Her response seems to be distrustful, and rightfully so, as she believes Jacob to be of great honor and significance.

Jesus then responds, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-

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50 Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 86.
14). It is in this statement that the idea of "living water" seems to become a bit more comprehensible. This is not actual water but something far more significant. According to Moloney, in this water, "the promise of Jesus transcends this person, this place, this water, this well, and this time."\(^{52}\) Therefore, Jesus is greater than Jacob and the other patriarchs because his water engenders perpetual transformation. Jesus answers the woman's question about being greater than Jacob by offering her the gift of living, eternal water, which the patriarchs of the past cannot provide. This offer transcends her predisposed roles in society and in the world. Thompson notes, "Neither her gender, her ethnicity, nor her religious commitments or practices are a barrier to Jesus' gracious gift to her."\(^{53}\)

However, the woman's response to this gift offered by Jesus brings up an interesting question. Does she understand that Jesus is not offering actual water? She responds by saying, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." (John 4:15). Is this living water a method to ease the daily task of coming to the well?\(^{54}\) Is Jesus offering a perpetual source of clean water?\(^{55}\) It is apparent that the Samaritan woman does not yet understand who Jesus is or what he is offering. The manner in which a character clearly misunderstands Jesus is a frequent practice employed by the Johannine gospel writer. There is misunderstanding in the conversation but soon that confusion will become clear.

\(^{55}\) Thompson, *John*, 100.
Jesus then tells the woman to "Go, call your husband, and come back." (John 4:16). She replies that she has no husband and Jesus agrees. This guiding request shows that he knows more about her than a random encounter at the well would lead one to assume. In verse 18, Jesus then states, "for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." It is important to note that there is no condemnation in Jesus' observation. We do not know if the woman is widowed or divorced. According to Rudolf Bultmann, "It is customary to interpret the five husbands as the five Babylonian tribes…which had settled in the area of the northern kingdom." This interpretation allows the women to represent the entire Samaritan community. The woman then attempts to identify Jesus. In John 4:19 she states, "Sir, I see you are a prophet." How else would Jesus know this information about her? She wants a clear explanation of this man that she has encountered at the well. It is clear that the woman is beginning to understand a bit more about the Jewish man with whom she is having a conversation.

Following this portion of the conversation, the woman questions Jesus about the proper place of worship. She says to him, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain but you say the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20). However, Jesus does not actually say these words to the woman. It can be assumed that the Samaritan woman is identifying Jesus as a representative of the Jewish people from this statement. It was a commonly held belief in the Jewish community that Jerusalem was the center of religious worship. The Samaritan tradition believed that Mount Gerizim was the place where Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac to the Lord, as well as the place

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where Jacob received his vision.\textsuperscript{57} Additionally, the sacred text of the Samaritan culture, the Samaritan Pentateuch, includes a directive at the conclusion of the traditional Ten Commandments to "build an altar and offer sacrifice on Mount Gerizim."\textsuperscript{58} However, the woman is aware that the Jewish community holds a contrasting idea of appropriate worship. She knows that the Jewish religious leaders (and presumably Jesus) believe faithful worship happens on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

Jesus then responds in a way that crosses the apparent cultural and religious boundary that is present. In verse 21 he says, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." He continues, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him" (John 4:22-24). While this could be a change in the socio-political reality present between the Samaritan and Jewish cultures, this is a matter that deals with the pneumatological understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. There is a "realized eschatology" in this statement.\textsuperscript{59} Because Jesus is present that time "is now here" (John 4:23). Thompson notes, "The contrast between "true worship" and worship in a specific temple is neither an argument for the interiorization of worship as opposed to the practice of various rituals or sacrifice."\textsuperscript{60} She continues, "The hour is, of course, the hour of Jesus' death and return

\textsuperscript{57} Moloney, \textit{The Gospel of John}, 132.  
\textsuperscript{58} Thompson, \textit{John}, 103.  
\textsuperscript{59} Moloney, \textit{The Gospel of John}, 128.  
\textsuperscript{60} Thompson, \textit{John}, 104.
to the Father, after which the Spirit will be given..."61 This time of division in worship will soon come to an end because the Messiah will change the manner in which worship occurs. However, the woman is still not clear about who Jesus is. Verse 25 states, "I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ).’ When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."62 It is in this moment that Jesus fully reveals himself to the woman he has met at the well. He states, "I am he” (John 4:26).

This sacred moment is quickly interrupted by the disciples’ return from the town. The conversation between Jesus and the woman is quickly interrupted. The disciples approach the well and are astonished that Jesus is speaking to a Samaritan woman! Barriers between Jesus, the disciples, and the woman return with the disciples’ presence. The disciples’ reactions illustrate that gender, race, and culture make the conversation inappropriate for Jesus, a Jewish man.63

When the disciples arrive, the woman leaves her jar and goes to the city to tell others about the encounter she had experienced with the Messiah. She proclaims, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (John 4:29). The leaving of the jar at the well is significant. The woman has discovered water that does not fill a vessel but rather a spiritual water bestowed by the Messiah. In order to quickly tell others about Jesus, she leaves the burdensome jar and makes haste. The woman's proclamation and testimony are so powerfully convincing that the people depart from the city to seek out this Messiah. In John 4:39, the writer of the

61 Thompson, John, 104.
63 Lee, Flesh and Glory, 74-75.
Fourth Gospel shows the power of the woman's testimony by stating, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." Because of her words, Jesus is invited to come and stay in the city and many others come to believe.

**Shame, Fear, and Isolation**

Many well-meaning preachers and teachers have interpreted the conversation Jesus has with the woman at Jacob's well about her husbands as a way to show that she is a woman who is on the fringes of society because of her previous marriages and current infidelity. They have focused their attention on the Samaritan woman’s sexuality rather than on her proclamation of the gospel. This is a reflection on popular biblical commentaries.

Schneiders notes, “As anyone familiar with the major commentaries on the fourth gospel knows, the treatment of the Samaritan Woman in the history of interpretation is a textbook case of the trivialization, marginalization, and even sexual demonization of biblical women…”

They have overly emphasized her sexuality rather than her voice in proclamation. In doing so, they have failed to see her role in the mission to the Samaritan community and her voice in evangelism. Thompson notes, "Jesus calls attention to her problematic situation, but he does not condemn her. Subsequently, commentators and preachers have hastened to fill the void!" This interpretation undercuts the woman's role in proclamation and her message to those in the community. If modern preachers depict her in such a way, they can ascertain that her community sees her in a similar manner.

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64 Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 188.
65 Thompson, *John*, 103.
While John 4:39-42 is clear that this is not the case, poor homiletical interpretation undermines the woman’s role in the Gospel message.

In the text, however, neither Jesus nor those in her city see either her gender or her sexual history as disqualifying. The biblical text clearly states that because of her words, others come to believe. Yet the tone of sermons is often derogatory in nature, calling attention to her sexuality rather than her missional task. How can this woman, a sinner, a person who has been married time after time, tell others about the Good News? Certainly, she cannot be the one who proclaims the gospel message to those in the city. Anyone listening to these preachers might expect that no one would listen to a woman with such a disreputable past, especially a woman who does not repent when confronted with her frequent marriages and who is living with a man who is not her husband.

However, she is the vessel for the evangelistic message to the Samaritan community. She tells her community, “Come see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (John 4:29). Because of her powerful witness, her community listens and they respond to her words. They come to believe in Jesus because of her testimony.

As Schnieders notes, the manner in which the woman is treated by commentators and theologians is used to perpetuate the oppression and abuse of women in the modern church. This is certainly the case in the modern ecclesial context. Rather than emphasizing the woman's role in proclamation and her evangelical mission, the homiletical focus is often placed on her marriages and Jesus' knowledge of her relationships. At best, modern preachers will allow that despite her past the woman
allows herself to be used by the Messiah. However, her marriages and current living situation are still the center of attention. There is the assumption that she will become repentant and, perhaps, at least marry the man with whom she is currently living. Regardless, there is an inclination to use this portion of the conversation with Jesus to challenge her evangelical undertaking. This is a case of sexual discrimination that occurs from poor exegesis.

With this dismissive interpretation, the average woman in the local church at best hears a message of trivialization related to a woman’s role in proclamation. At worst, she experiences shame. Divorce is a reality for many families. Interpretations that focus on diminishing the Samaritan woman’s witness based on her sexuality give the impression that you cannot be one who shares the Good News unless you are either without blame or repentant. The interpretation that the woman is alone at the well during the heat of the day is one that assumes the community has shamed her because of her past. Their response when she returns to the city to tell them about the conversation with Jesus leads the reader to believe otherwise. It is not the Samaritan community or Jesus who has shamed woman, it is paternalistic and unfaithful readings of the text by modern preachers, teachers, theologians, and commentators.

For example, Dr. Timothy Keller, popular preacher and writer who is the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York preaches from the John 4 text in a sermon titled “Changed Lives.” In this sermon he states, “The woman is essentially lying, well deceiving [Jesus]” when describing the conversation about her previous husbands and
current living arrangement. Another example is derived from Baptist pastor, Johnathan Mcleod who pastors in Nova Scotia. He states, “She was IMMORAL…Women usually came in groups to collect water, either earlier or later in the day to avoid the sun’s heat. But the Samaritan woman came alone at noon. Why? Perhaps her public shame caused her to be isolated from other women. In looking at these two men’s interpretation of the passage, it is important to note their theological background. Keller espouses a complementarian view of women which prohibits them from leading in certain situations.

In a paper coauthored with this wife, Keller states, “Elders are to be men (1 Tim 3:1-3). In 1 Tim 2:11, Paul forbids women to "teach or have authority" over men.” Mcleod is pastor of a Baptist Church which prohibits women from becoming elders or deacons and as a result woman are not allowed to serve in pastoral ministry as described in the congregations constitutional documents.

If through the reading of John 4 their interpretation can cast the woman in the role of a prostitute who meets Jesus at the well during the middle of the day, because she does not want to see other women from the village, then modern women can be kept in their place as those who are to remain submissive and silent least they fear a similar judgment from their ecclesial communities. This interpretation seems to be an intentional method

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of maintaining the status quo and prohibiting women from leadership positions. Not only is this interpretation inaccurate, it is harmful and results in shame and isolation from women who seek to disagree with Keller and Mcleod. It perpetuates stereotypical gender roles in faith communities by making women’s leadership biblically subversive and leads to shame, fear, and isolation of modern women in faith communities.

**Five Husbands, Five Books, or Five Gods**

It is important to look at the history of the interpretation of the woman in John 4. In doing so, it is clear that the commonly held belief of infidelity and sexual promiscuity are attributed to modern interpretations rather than historical accounts. What is the situation with her former spouses?

Interpreters of this passage offer varying explanations for the woman's current marital status. Origen believes the five husbands are a reference to the five senses.71 Referencing Origen, Day notes, “The master of allegorizers, he interpreted the Samaritan woman’s five husbands as analogous to the fifth sense. The sixth man, then, was analogous to things perceived by the spirit, but even here there was danger of encountering unsound teaching as the Samaritans had in their false religion.”72 If this is the case, the men are simply symbolic and therefore the woman is not to be interpreted in a morally negative way. Similarly, Augustine of Hippo proposes that the Samaritan woman is, in fact, living with a man who is not her husband.73 However, for Augustine,

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the five husbands do not represent five men to whom the woman has been previously married. Rather, these five men are representative of the five senses of the human body. In describing Augustine’s view, Day, notes, “These five senses are licit, given by God, but the woman, while having come to the age of using reason, has not attained wisdom, but has fallen into error—her present adulterous situation.” Although Augustine employs symbolism in his interpretation of John 4 he also understands the Samaritan woman to be a person who has fallen into sin and should be ashamed.

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas rejected the notion that the five husbands are symbolic as he sought to reinforce a literal interpretation of the biblical text. Aquinas believed that Jesus asked for the woman to bring her husband to him so that he could teach her husband, and her husband could teach her. Janeth Day suggests that he sought to emphasize Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, especially 1 Cor 11:3 and 1 Cor 14:35, which instructs men to teach women.

While Thomas Aquinas sought to interpret scripture in a literal sense, the Reformation theologians disagreed about the text. For example, John Calvin believes that the woman has led her husbands to divorce because of her own adultery, which he describes as her “wanton and suborn ways.” In a sharp contrast to Calvin, Martin Luther sees the woman through the lens of grace. Luther does not address the morality of the woman whom Jesus meets at the well in his writings. He sees her a model to be

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77 Day, The Woman at the Well, 16.
followed as someone who, after being converted, shared her experience with those in the community.\textsuperscript{80}

Janeth Norflette Day notes that, over the years, modern scholarship as it relates to this text has changed the discourse about the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. In the early modern era, there was an assumption that the woman had been married five times.\textsuperscript{81} However, some contemporary commentators, like Raymond E. Brown, acknowledge that she bears an apostolic role despite her adulterous past.\textsuperscript{82} Feminist scholars understand the role of the woman’s husbands differently. Marianne Meye Thompson notes that the woman's previous marriages would have either ended with divorce or the death of her spouse. Thompson notes that either way, this situation makes her less than desirable for another marriage.\textsuperscript{83} Perhaps she is living with the current partner for protection, as the world, in the first century, was a dangerous place for women. Thompson writes, "She needs the protection and support of a husband, but has settled for what she can get."\textsuperscript{84} Sandra Schneiders reinforces the idea that the story is not a historical account but rather a tale, used to show Jesus’ inclusivity of the Gentile community.\textsuperscript{85} Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza sees the woman as the first missionary to the Gentile world.\textsuperscript{87} This makes the

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\textsuperscript{80} Day, \textit{The Woman at the Well}, 20.
\textsuperscript{81} Day, \textit{The Woman at the Well}, 25.
\textsuperscript{82} Day, \textit{The Woman at the Well}, 30.
\textsuperscript{83} Thompson, \textit{John}, 102-103.
\textsuperscript{84} Thompson, \textit{John}, 103.
\textsuperscript{85} Schneiders, \textit{Written That You May Believe}, 134.
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story not about the woman's previous marriages, but rather about Jesus' ability to bring the Gentile community into the salvation history of the Jewish people.

For some, this interpretation does not make for quite as interesting preaching in our modern ecclesial context. The story of Jesus saving a sinful woman seems to be better received by local congregations. Jesus' knowledge of her past indiscretions prove that Jesus is also keenly aware of the sins of the people in the pews. A preacher can easily proclaim, "If Jesus saves this woman, Jesus can save you too!" The suggestion that this woman represents the entire Samaritan community, makes the Christian faith far too accessible to everyone. Many preachers and congregations see this as life-giving and grace filled. However, not all view this through the same lens. If the story is not about the woman's sin and if there is no condemnation, there is no air of superiority. If the woman represents a large number of men and women in antiquity, she does not serve as a placeholder but as the one chosen to speak to the Messiah on behalf of the community. She becomes a leader in the Samaritan society, and the Johannine community sees her as such. The story becomes about her words and actions, not her marital status. If her five husbands represent the five gods of the Samaritans or the five books of the Pentateuch, her evangelical mission and apostolic function take on an even greater meaning. She does not proclaim her encounter with Jesus despite her shame, but rather she tells others about Jesus because that is her task. She is symbolically the spiritual leader for the Samaritans who are awaiting the Messiah, and she is the one chosen to encounter the Christ.

Sexual Disparagement
For centuries women, unlike men, have been characterized by their sexuality. It is a woman’s sexual behavior that too often gives her merit or discredits her influence. For example, Tertullian called Philoumene, a well-respected female teacher, an "empty-headed whore," despite noting that her teachings were considered intellectual and spiritual "revelations." Similarly, he questioned the leader of the Cainites by suggesting that their female leader was "unchaste." In an effort to minimize a woman’s leadership or silence her voice, terms like "whore, slut, and harlot" are often used to describe women. These terms take away women’s credibility to be bearers of the Good News.

For example, in the 1971 *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Rudolf Bultmann describes the woman at Jacob's well in the context of her multiple marriages. He notes, "Man is made aware of the unrest in his life, which drives him from one supposed satisfaction to another…" Bultmann continues, "This unrest is portrayed by the woman's disturbed past and her unsatisfied present state." The phrase "disturbed past" is jarring and troublesome in that it reads far more into the text than that which is stated by the author of the gospel. It makes assumptions about shame, immorality, and agency. Moloney in *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John* makes a similar assertion, but his focus is different. He writes, "She has lived an irregular married life and is currently in a sinful situation, but the point of v. 18 is not to lay bare her sinfulness." Rather, Moloney concludes that the purpose of this conversation is to prove that Jesus knows personal

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details about the woman's life and history. Even though the conclusion for Moloney's interpretation is different from that of Bultmann, the language of "irregular married life" and "sinful situation" prove problematic. Both of these scholars make a moral judgment on the woman's past and present.

Gayle R. O'Day and Susan E. Hylen have a different interpretation of the text. According to their interpretation, neither Jesus' tone nor words cast judgment on the woman. Furthermore, these scholars suggest "the woman is caught in a situation of levirate marriage (see Deut. 25:5-10; Luke 20:27-33), in which the last male of the family has refused to marry her." These two women show that Jesus' words do not condemn or judge the woman at Jacob's well. Rather, they conclude that "John's language is neutral," but "commentators have assumed a judgment against the sexual immorality of this woman." For O'Day and Hylen, the judge is not Jesus, but rather those who read the Fourth Gospel. It is the reader who decides the woman is sexually immoral rather than the Messiah.

Many modern scholars have cast the woman whom Jesus meets at Jacob's well in an immoral light. This is also prominent in many current ecclesial contexts. By sexualizing female leaders, the leadership roles they embody are diminished and undermined. For the woman at the well, this sexual disparagement is used to negate her role in proclaiming her experience with the Messiah. Her female identity is largely found

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in her relationships (with various men), not in her encounter with Jesus or in her role sharing this event. The narrative often focuses on her sexual and cultural relationships rather than her proclamation. Many have challenged her credibility by suggesting that she has a troubled past with various husbands. This ties her body and sexuality to her identity and proclamation in a way that is unjust and lacks an understanding of the text. Her body, and it's assumed sexual activities, become more important than her proclamation to those within her community and the early church. While not as forceful as Tertullian's description of Philoumene, modern scholars have used a similar rhetoric in speaking of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

"Come and See"

Following the longest recorded dialogue between Jesus and an individual in the New Testament, the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well has a new calling. The conversation has such a great impact upon her that she leaves her task at hand by leaving her water jar at the well and returning to the nearby town (John 4:28). Her experience with a levirate marriage is what potentially drove her to arrive at the well in the middle of the day to collect water, however it is at the well that Jesus sees her for who she is. By meeting the Messiah, she is seen, validated, and has a new sense of power and proclaims to the community, "Come and see" (John 4:29).

Often Jesus tells others to go and proclaim what they have seen and heard, as is the case with the woman present at the resurrection later in John's Gospel. However,

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97 O'Day and Hylen, John, 53.
Jesus does not give the Samaritan woman a similar instruction. She is not told to return to
town to tell the others about this conversation with a Jewish man. Rather this is
something she does on her own initiative. Because of her transformation, she wants
others to meet the Messiah.

Communal Belief, Individual Faith

John 4: 39-40 demonstrates that there is communal benefit in her proclamation. Because
of her courage and witness, others seek to know more about the Jewish man at Jacob's
well. She states, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. Can this
be the Christ?" (John 4:29). A few verses later, John 4:39 states that because of her
testimony, others come to believe. The Samaritan woman at the well’s testimony benefits
the entire community. About this biblical passage, Augustine states, "Primo per famam,
postea per presentiam," or "First by reputation, then by his presence."98 Her testimony
gives a second hand account of the Messiah, but their willingness to go and meet Jesus
allows them to have a first-hand interaction with the Savior.99 Jesus is then invited into
the Samaritan community where he stays for two days. During this time he ministers to
them, and the larger Samaritan community comes to believe. Moloney writes, "The
Samaritans' openness to the word of Jesus transforms them; they become examples of
authentic Johannine belief."100

The boldness of the Samaritan woman has far reaching consequences. Her willingness to testify changes her community, and they become open to the words of the Messiah. Both the Samaritan woman and her community enter into new relationships and identities as a result of their interactions with Jesus. The ethnic and gender divisions that the disciples seek to reinforce in their rebuke of Jesus are undone in his engagement with these unlikely gentiles. The Samaritan woman’s openness to Jesus allows for a reconfiguration of boundaries that have up until this point constrained both herself and her community. They come to believe for themselves, not simply based on her words (John 4:42)

**Women in Ecclesial Leadership**

Similarly, female leaders in ecclesial settings are often the recipients of sexual harassment, ridicule, and disparagement. Often this can take the form of a question asked about a relationship of a romantic nature, an inappropriate touch, comments about clothing choices, or lack of respect based on gender. At times men refuse to ride in an elevator alone with a woman, drive to a meeting with a woman, or meet with a woman alone in an office space. The Commission on the Status and Role of Women in the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church published a video a few years ago telling the stories of clergywomen who experienced sexual harassment and inequality. The video quotes a female pastor saying, “Male colleagues said to me, ‘you must have

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101 North Alabama Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women, “#HerTruth,” YouTube Video, 18:29, November 10, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=xZk4ssVKHpA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=xZk4ssVKHpA)
used your feminine wiles to get your appointment.’”\textsuperscript{102} A different female pastor shares, “If I was given a dollar for every time I have been told I am too pretty to be a pastor, I could pay off the church building debt.”\textsuperscript{103} Finally a female pastor details an experience with her District Superintendent saying, “He shared some perceptions that might be out there about me saying, ‘We don’t want folks saying, ‘Here comes that bitch.’”’\textsuperscript{104} The stories from this presentation clearly demonstrate that women’s gender, sexuality, and body are often used to discredit and disqualify them from pastoral and ecclesial leadership.

Discounting of women’s leadership on the basis of imputed sexuality is also a problem in the evangelical church. Recently, Beth Moore wrote a letter which was published on her blog. In it she wrote, “About a year ago I had an opportunity to meet a theologian I’d long respected…. I’d looked so forward to getting to share a meal with him and talk theology. The instant I met him, he looked me up and down, smiled approvingly and said, ’You are better looking than ____________.’ He didn’t leave it blank. He filled it in with the name of another woman Bible teacher.”\textsuperscript{105} In the modern church, poor scriptural interpretation leaves room for the conversations such as these. As a result, women’s power, and voice are limited and a culture of submission, exploitation, and abuse is given credence.

\textsuperscript{102} North Alabama Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women, “#HerTruth.”
\textsuperscript{103} North Alabama Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women, “#HerTruth.”
\textsuperscript{104} North Alabama Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women, “#HerTruth.”
The Samaritan community, by contrast, receives the woman’s testimony and proclamation. As a result, they welcome Jesus into the community. The manner in which the Samaritan woman's testimony is received gives hope to women in today's current ecclesial setting. While there is still a resistance to leadership, her evangelistic accomplishment is clear. Because of her voice, others come to believe. Because she is bold and courageous, her community welcomes Jesus into their midst. In a world that can be unkind to those who are different, the Samaritan woman continually gives today's clergywomen biblical authority to evangelize and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Women today fear being reprimanded when they seek to lead faithfully. John 4 provides an example of a woman who shared her experience with men and women in her community. The text must be taught and preached with faithful exegesis that seeks to empower women. A faithful reading, hearing, and preaching of John 4 has the potential to engage girls and women of all ages as they discern where God might be calling them to lead. The Samaritan woman shows us that when one encounters the Living God, a story must be told and words must be proclaimed. We are not called to keep the Messiah to ourselves, but to emulate the Samaritan woman who told others about her experience. Women in the modern ecclesial context are called to preach, teach, and lead. John 4 reminds us that this calling is not new to women as the Samaritan woman preached and proclaimed faithfully.
CHAPTER 3
MARY MAGDALENE’S PROCLAMATION IN JOHN 20:1-31

In understanding the manner in which women are seen as those who preach and teach the stories of Jesus in the Gospel of John, one must look at Mary Magdalene's role in sharing the resurrection of Jesus with the other disciples. Many Easter Sunday sermons center on this text, even overlooking the authoritative and apostolic role which Mary plays in the resurrection narrative. Instead of taking a moment to elevate the status and role of women from the pulpit, the command explicitly given by Jesus to Mary is often overlooked. Like the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in John 4, the gospel writer elevates the status of women in John 20 by describing Mary Magdalene as the only person to whom Jesus first appeared after his death and resurrection. Perhaps the writer of John is not attempting to elevate women in any manner. Rather the author is simply describing the manner in
which women interacted with the historical Jesus. Rather than seeking to elevate women, the writer is describing women’s role in Jesus’ ministry. In this instance it is not John, but rather Jesus who places women on equal footing with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the manner in which John recounts the story intentionally elevates the role of Mary Magdalene. John, through his resurrection narrative in chapter 20, describes the actions of Jesus and the way in which he appears to Mary Magdalene.

**Who Is Mary?**

It is suggested that Mary Magdalene is from the town of Magdala, which is a small community between Tiberius and Capernaum on the Western shore of Lake Gennesaret. The town was a fishing village, which was known for dried fish. Because of the fishing industry, it is considered to be a community of financial means with well-appointed homes and public buildings. According to Jacqueline Lloyd, Mary is most likely a woman of financial means, because it is suggested in Luke 8 that she supports Jesus' ministry with her own property. Luke 8:1-3 describes her as someone suffering a long and difficult physical affliction, however Jesus heals this illness. There is no mention of Mary Magdalene's husband in the biblical text. Lloyd suggests that she is

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not married and is either widowed or divorced since she is able to freely leave her community to follow Jesus.\textsuperscript{109}

According to Ruth Mazo Karras, for the Medieval church, Mary Magdalene was the combination of three distinct women found in the biblical text. Karras suggests that Mary Magdalene's character combines Mary of Madgala who Christ heals in Luke 8:2 and who is the first to see Jesus after the resurrection in John 20, Mary of Bethany who is the sister of Martha and Lazarus in Luke 10:38-42, and the woman who washes Jesus' feet in Luke 7:37-38.\textsuperscript{110} Because of the association that Mary has with these three women, there is great confusion to the historical person of Mary Magdalene. It is this confusion that contributes to the mystique of the woman who followed Jesus as a devoted disciple and who witnessed the resurrection after his crucifixion and death.

**Empty Tomb, Revelatory Moment**

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes "the discipleship and leadership of the Johannine community is inclusive of men and women."\textsuperscript{111} While the Gospel of John was written 20 years after Mark's gospel account, there is an intentional resistance to the Greco-Roman patriarchal norms of society.\textsuperscript{112} Fiorenza shows the manner in which John's gospel does not elevate the leadership of the twelve disciples above others who are part of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[111] Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 326.
\item[112] Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 323-324.
\end{footnotes}
community.\textsuperscript{113} As a result of Fiorenza’s compelling research, women's role in the early church may be understood as equal to the roles of men during the same time period.

Comparing John’s account of the resurrection to those of Matthew 28, Mark 16, and Luke 24, we can see that all four gospels draw on some of the same sources.\textsuperscript{114} John’s account begins with Mary Magdalene going to the tomb alone and in this account she is the predominant character in the resurrection narrative.\textsuperscript{115} She sees that the stone is removed from the tomb's opening and runs with haste to tell Simon Peter and "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" about the incident (John 20:2). It is traditionally assumed this other disciple is John, the writer of the gospel. Mary Magdalene assumes that someone has stolen the body and removed Jesus' dead body from the tomb (John 20:4). After receiving this news, Simon Peter and John run to the tomb (John 20:4). Although it is not in the text, we can assume that Mary Magdalene ran to the tomb with them. According to the account, John reaches the tomb first and sees part of the linen used to dress the body of Jesus lying outside the tomb (John 20:5). Simon Peter is the first to go into the tomb, and he notices that the cloth used to wrap Jesus' head is not with the other linen wrappings but rather folded up apart from them (John 20:6-7). Something has troubled them about the tomb and the two men quickly returned to their home (John 20:10).

\textsuperscript{113} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 324.
John 20:11 describes Mary Magdalene as she waits on the men outside of the tomb. Although Mary Magdalene does not appear to go into the tomb with Simon Peter or John, she is there outside the tomb. After the two men leave, John 20:11-12 describes Mary’s actions following this event. She stays and weeps but then bends over to look in the tomb and sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus once lay. They ask her, "why are you weeping?" and she responds, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). While the presence of angels may concern others, it seems to have no impact on Mary Magdalene. She is not fearful and her focus continues to be on the location of Jesus' body. It is in this moment that Mary turns to see Jesus; however, according to John 20:14, she does not recognize him at first. Marianne Meye Thompson notes that a failure to recognize Jesus shortly after the resurrection is a theme found in other resurrection appearances, such as John 21:7, Luke 24:16, Luke 31.

John 20:15-17 gives a detailed description of the conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Jesus, whom Mary assumes to be a gardener, repeats the question asked by the angels in the tomb. Jesus asks Mary, "why are you weeping?" (John 20:15). He then follows that question with "whom are you looking for?" (John 20:15). She responds differently than she did to the angels in the tomb. She responds, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will take him." (John 20:15).

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Following this statement, Jesus calls Mary by name. Depending on the translation it is either "Mary" or Mariam."\textsuperscript{118} Moloney notes, "The name Jesus calls Mary and he response are Greek transliterations of Aramaic, although the narrator explains that it is Hebrew."\textsuperscript{119} It is in this moment that Mary realizes that the man she assumed to be the gardener, is not the grounds keeper, but it is the risen Lord. She replies, "Rabbouni!" (John 20:16). Thompson references passages from John 10:1-5 in which Jesus, speaking to the Pharisees, calls himself a shepherd who "call[s] his own sheep by name."\textsuperscript{120} Mary responds in Hebrew, "Rabbouni." Moloney suggests that the usage of these names for one another suggests a type of intimacy between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.\textsuperscript{121} This is not a romantic or physical intimacy, but one of faith. It would be an exegetical stretch to assume, based on this conversation, Jesus and Mary were intimate in the way that many modern books and movies would portray them. Rather, the term "Rabbouni" is a type of faith confession in which Mary recognizes the man standing before her as her teacher, savior, and Lord.\textsuperscript{122}

Jesus responds in a manner which may seem strange at first. He answers her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"(John 20:17). The command to not cling to Jesus is a bit odd at first. Scholars are divided on the understanding of this statement. Gayle O'Day and Susan E. Hylan believe that Mary's

\textsuperscript{119} Moloney, The Gospel of John, 528.
\textsuperscript{120} Thompson, John, 415.
\textsuperscript{121} Moloney, The Gospel of John, 528.
\textsuperscript{122} Moloney, The Gospel of John, 528.
understanding of the resurrection is incomplete. They think Jesus is asserting that there are more people to tell and clinging to him would prevent the story from spreading.

Francis J. Moloney has a different perspective by suggesting that Jesus is seeking to prevent the reestablishment of the previous relationship he had with Mary Magdalene. Moloney writes, "In and through the cross Jesus has revealed God and has brought to perfection the tasks given to him. The disciples are yet to experience the fruits of Jesus' glorification, but the days of being associated with the historical Jesus are over."

The second command is an unambiguous instruction to Mary Magdalene, "go to my brothers." Mary is to go to the other disciples and tell them about this conversation and about the empty tomb. These four words are the crux of her apostolic authority. She is called to tell the others, specifically the male disciples, about the resurrection of Christ. Mary does what she is clearly and unequivocally instructed to do. She leaves the tomb, goes to the disciples, and says, "I have seen the Lord." (John 20:18). Following this declaration, John 20:18 then states, "she told them that he had said these things to her." Mary tells the disciples, including John and Simon Peter who left the tomb, about the resurrected Christ. She is the first person, at least in John's account, to proclaim the risen Lord. She is the first person to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Faithful Follower or Reformed Prostitute

123 O'Day and Hylen, John, 194.
124 O'Day and Hylen, John, 194.
The prominent thought that Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute dates back centuries. This misconception became widespread when Gregory the Great portrayed her as a prostitute who was on the outside of the group of people who followed Jesus. Ann Graham Brock writes, "Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) is one of the sources of this misidentification." Katherine Ludwig Jansen believes that the Mary Magdalene created by Gregory the Great in his sermon in 591 at the Basilica of San Clemente is not only incongruent with the scriptural text, but she would be "entirely unrecognizable to her colleagues in the primitive church." For years there was a long held belief that the sinful woman in Luke 7 is Mary Magdalene, although the woman is not named and there is little evidence to back up this claim. Luke 7 states, "A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them." (Luke 7:37-38). Many scholars now believe there is little chance that the woman in the passage is Mary Magdalene. For example, prominent professor at Asbury Seminary, Ben Witherington, notes in 1979, "There is a slim possibility that Mary Magdalene may have been the woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee." This theory is not one which has come to prominence recently: since the 1960s theologians

from a variety of backgrounds have sought to prove that Mary Magdalene and the sinful woman described in Luke 7 are not the same person. Nevertheless, it continues to be a popular conception outside of the community of Bible scholars.

Interestingly, Ann Graham Brock notes that this understanding of Mary Magdalene is not widespread outside of Western Christianity. According to Brock, this interpretation was not proposed by early church figures before Gregory the Great or in the Eastern Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{130} This is the result of a clear distinction between Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene.\textsuperscript{131} However, for Western Christianity, the idea of Mary Magdalene as a recovered prostitute is still prominent. It is not uncommon for preachers to describe Mary as a prostitute in need of saving. For example, an article in Christianity Today International written by Zachary Eswine, an assistant professor of homiletics and director of the Doctor of Ministry program for Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, seeking to give help to a struggling preacher, states, "Who is this Mary Magdalene? She is a terribly broken woman, notorious sinner in her past. Jesus had met her, healed her, forgave her, restored her to her true identity as the lovely one that she was, as a daughter of the King."\textsuperscript{132} This is common rhetoric on Easter Sunday and this type of message continues to perpetuate the idea of Mary Magdalene as a recovered prostitute.

\section*{Mary Magdalene as a Sexualized Figure}

\textsuperscript{130} Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 169.
\textsuperscript{131} Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 169.
In modern culture, there is a sexualization of Mary Magdalene that, intentionally or unintentionally, discredits her role in the resurrection narrative. Ruth Mazo Karras, describes the manner in which reformed persons achieved sainthood in the Middle Ages. She suggests that Mary Magdalene is part of a group of women including such figures as Mary of Egypt, Thaïs, and Pelagia, all of whom achieve sainthood during this time period despite their past actions. For the Medieval church, Mary Magdalene was the combination of three distinct women found in the biblical text. Since she is associated with the woman who washes Jesus feet in Luke 7, many have assumed that Mary's sin was sexual in nature. Although this is an inaccurate assumption, this imagery is portrayed through plays and works of art from this time period.

The changing understanding of Mary Magdalene’s sexual past can be seen in art throughout history. A favorite for artists throughout the years, Mary is depicted in various ways depending upon the time period. For example, Michelangelo’s Noli me tangere, which is lost but depicted through other works, is derived from the John 20 text. It shows Mary clothed and standing next to Christ. It depicts her as an apostle and faithful follower rather than a reformed prostitute.

However, in Victorian England there was a resurgence in sexualized portrayals of Mary Magdalene. An example of this is found in William Etty's portrayals of Mary

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Magdalene from 1835-1845. In Etty's *The Pentitent Magdalen, The Magdalen*, and *A Study of the Magdalen*, Mary is seen as naked with a cloth draped over her or completely naked looking to a crucifix for salvation.\textsuperscript{137} Images like these, prominent in Victorian England, serve as reminders of how “wayward women” may be perceived during a time of modest dress and female submission.

Similarly, the more recent book, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown suggests that Mary Magdalene had a romantic relationship with Jesus as his spouse and that they produced children.\textsuperscript{138} Nancy Calvert-Koyzis makes the case that Brown's use of historical documents is inaccurate and poorly researched as he seeks to make this claim.\textsuperscript{139} While not seen as a penitent prostitute, Mary is still defined sexually the 2003 bestseller.

This ancient and modern sexualization of Mary Magdalene plays into the narrative that she is a flawed woman in need of saving. It undermines her apostolic authority and her leadership, thus calling into question the authority of all women in the modern church. Rather than being viewed as a faithful follower of Jesus like her male counterparts, she is defined by promiscuous behavior, shame, and disgrace.

**A Woman to be Rescued**

There is something about a knight in shining armor rescuing people from lives of misery and sin that preaches well in the pulpit. This combination of Disney fairytale with

\textsuperscript{139} Calvert-Koyzis, "Re-Sexualizing the Magdalene."
sacrifice and salvation engages congregations and reassures them of their own eternal life. Jesus does seek to save the lost, bring light to darkness, and triumph over death. However, it is problematic to assume that certain individuals need more rescuing than others. For example, Eve is no worse than Adam and Bathsheba no worse than David. Peter denies Jesus in John 18:15-27, while Martha is reminded of the need to listen to Jesus' teaching in Luke 10:38-42. Women in the biblical text are often seen as sinful damsels in distress rather than people, despite their flaws, who seek to follow the Living God.

In the gospel text, Jesus seeks to offer grace rather than punishment. An example of this is seen in John 7:53-8:11. A woman is caught in adultery and the Scribes and Pharisees seek to stone her to death in accordance with the Mosaic Law. Jesus, contrastingly, offers grace, forgiveness, and acceptance. Jesus is seen as rescuing both men and women from their own lives of sin. The story of Zaccheaus, a childhood favorite, demonstrates the manner in which Jesus meets with sinners, welcomes them into the community, and feasts over a common meal (Luke 19). Similarly, the parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal brother, demonstrate the manner in which Jesus seeks to save the lost (Luke 15).

It is clear in the gospel text that Jesus seeks to save the lost and bind the heart of the sinner. But while both men and women are rescued, only women are singled out in modern interpretations as needing salvation from a sexually wayward lifestyle. In modern interpretations of the biblical text, men are not seen as sexualized persons. If men are admonished for sexually inappropriate behavior, as in David’s interaction with
Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11, their lasting legacy rarely hangs on this sinful act. Women, contrastingly, are often seen in two distinctive paradigms. They are either understood as both holy and chaste, like Mary the mother of Jesus or they are viewed as reformed prostitutes. This depiction of women devalues their role in proclamation and apostolic leadership.

This is not to suggest that Mary does not need to be rescued. Dorothy Lee describes the manner in which the Johannine text demonstrates that God's reign begins in the present by transforming the current situation.\(^{140}\) If God's reign begins in the present, then *all humans* are rescued, because life overcomes eventual death. To assume that Mary Magdalene does not become transformed by the power of God's work within her life as she interacts with Jesus negates the divinity of the Messiah. Mary is a faithful follower and certainly her life was transformed by her faith in Christ. However, there is little evidence to suggest that she had a *sexual* history that would be incongruent with Jewish teachings. Mary does not need to be rescued from her past any more (or any less) than any of Jesus’ other disciples.

When Mary is defined chiefly as a woman in need of rescuing, her role in the Gospel narrative is dismissed. This idea of a promiscuous past undermines her apostolic role and it undermines women in the modern church's ability to be seen and heard as bearers of the Gospel message. It suggests that women are innately sinful because of their gender and can only be saved through the words of men sharing the gospel with them.

\(^{140}\) Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 214.
Under this paradigm, women’s presumed sexually sinful nature precludes them from sharing the gospel with others.

It is clear that this is an unfaithful and inaccurate exegetical explanation. Women are not more sinful than men by nature, however this understanding can be used to discredit their role in leadership and teaching. Mary is not more sinful than Simon Peter, however years of biblical interpretation would lead one to think that is the case.

Historical exegesis has often seen her as the one who Jesus saved and Peter as the one who taught others about the Gospel.141 In these instances, Peter is a better choice for one who tells others about Jesus resurrection because he has not considered one to be burdened with shame like Mary Magdalene. If Mary continues to be viewed as a woman in need of rescuing, her role in preaching and proclaiming is undermined by poor exegetical interpretative work.

**Bold Witness, Mary’s Proclamation**

In a world where women are often silenced, Jesus’ instruction to Mary Magdalene gives women an example to follow. As previously noted, Jesus' words in John 20:17 are a command, "But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary is told, explicitly, to go and tell others about the empty tomb and about her encounter with the risen Christ. She follows Jesus' instructions and goes to the male disciples and announces to them "I have seen the Lord."

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(John 20:18). Gayle O'Day and Susan E. Hylen have suggested that the NRSV translation is inaccurate, contending that “brothers” probably implies the entire faith community and therefore should instead be translated as "brothers and sisters."\(^{142}\) They assume that gathered with the male disciples are also women grieving the loss of Jesus. Mary Magdalene’s task is great, and it highlights her role in the missional purpose of the church.

There is a shift in the emotion present at the beginning of the encounter to the end. At the beginning of the story, Mary is tearful and distraught.\(^{143}\) She does not know where the body of Jesus has been taken. Then there is a transition from tearful to extreme gratitude as she seeks to hold on to Jesus, clinging to him. Finally, there is a transition to purposeful mission as she is told to tell the other disciples about this experience. It is this emotional shift that ends with joy. O'Day and Hylen write that Mary is entrusted with "the proclamation of the joyful completion of Jesus' work on earth."\(^{144}\) She is called to proclaim the resurrection, telling others about Jesus. While this is not a sermon in a typical manner it is a sermon in the truest form. This is a proclamation of the Good News, of the resurrection, and of life ultimately overcoming death. Mary proclaims, "I have seen the Lord." This proclamation not only heralds the Messiah, but also places her as the first preacher of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is a title that she alone holds.

Following Mary's proclamation, the response of the disciples is interesting. The next few verses demonstrate their fear and uncertainty about what will happen in the days

\(^{142}\) O'Day and Hylen, *John*, 194.
\(^{144}\) O'Day and Hylen, *John*, 194.
and weeks following Jesus' death. Not necessarily the eleven who followed Jesus, this is more than likely a broader group, consisting of those who witnessed the crucifixion and who are fearful for their own lives.¹⁴⁵ They are worried about the authorities coming for them since they have certainly been seen with the man who was crucified. John 20:19 tells us that the group has gathered in a home behind locked doors. Rather than leaving the place where they heard about Jesus' resurrection and going to find Jesus, they seek shelter and congregate together for protection. Either they do not believe Mary Magdalene's testimony and discredit her witness, or their fear overcomes their joy in the resurrected savior. Perhaps this is a different group of believers than those with whom Mary meets, however the text does not give us any indication that this is the case. It is then that Jesus appears in the room showing his hands and his side to prove his resurrection. From this account, it is clear that those who have gathered following Jesus' death remain paralyzed by their fear.

Mary's courage is in sharp contrast to the disciples' fear. The Fourth Gospel does not describe her as being timid at any point. She is first grief stricken, then relieved, then empowered. She is never described as fearful or second-guessing her command to tell others about her encounter with Christ. Unlike her counterparts, she does not go find a home and seek protection behind locked doors. For Mary, the resurrection is powerful enough to overcome any fear that might be present after witnessing the gruesome crucifixion of her Lord.

¹⁴⁵ O'Day and Hylen, John, 195.
A Case for Leadership and Ordination

Mary's testimony and proclamation are often pointed to as a case for the ordination of women. If a woman was the first apostle, and first person to proclaim the risen Christ, certainly women are permitted from a biblical and theological perspective to preach and lead congregations. She serves as an example to women who seek ordination, or lay leadership in their local parishes. Her words are not casual or careless, rather they are intentional. Similarly, Jesus is intentional in sending her to tell others about her experience. Her voice is heard by the male disciples as well as other believers and it is powerful. Throughout history, many have sought to weaken her role in the post-resurrection narrative through calling her a reformed prostitute, to drawing images of a barely clothed woman, to suggesting that she is the wife of Jesus. By looking at the text through a critical lens, it is clear that this is not the case. Mary is a faithful follower of Jesus who is commanded and commissioned to tell others about the resurrection. She is fearless in the face of danger and unwavering in her role to inform others about the resurrection. Mary Magdalene is unashamed of the Gospel and powerful in her witness.
CHAPTER 4: APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY AND DIVINE WITNESS

Over the years there have been misunderstandings concerning what it means to be one who proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ. There are debates in the Catholic and Protestant churches regarding apostolic authority and the role of clergy. Some churches, such as the Catholic and Anglican churches, believe they can trace the ordination of their bishops back to Peter. Other religious groups place an emphasis on pastoral and ecclesial
call rather than succession. Some denominations ordain women while others believe there is no Biblical or theological basis for the ordination of women. Historically, twelve original apostles are recognized: Simon Peter, Andrew, James son of Zebedee, John, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Thaddeus, Matthew, James the Lesser, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who is replaced by Matthias in Acts 1. However, the simplest meaning of apostle is someone who is a follower of Jesus and one who shares Jesus with others. An apostle is someone who is sent out to preach, teach, and proclaim.

**Apóstolos**

Understanding who qualifies as an apostle, and what it means to have apostolic authority can be confusing. While some churches believe apostles are simply those men and women like Paul, Peter, and Junia who are called apostles in the biblical text, other ecclesial bodies believe that this is an office that is active in the modern church. There are modern preachers and teachers who call themselves "Apostle" as a title of designation. Skye Jethani writes, "Various theological streams and ecclesiastical traditions hold opposing views on apostleship."\(^{146}\) While there is not a set understanding of the definition or the term “apostle,” there is considerable consensus that an apostle is one who is sent out and proclaims the message of Jesus Christ.

The term’s origins are unclear; however, there is a proliferation of research in this area. Francis H. Agnew suggests that the understanding of an apostle is derived from the

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rabbinic tradition found in the Old Testament tradition of “saliah,” in which a person is sent and is the representative of the one who sends. The understanding of “apostle” found in Luke-Acts provides a clear analogue to saliah. Agnew writes, "The saliah convention is significant for the Christian apostolate in its formal element. It is the relationship between sender and sent, not the content of the commission given that is primarily important. The saliah is the authoritative representative, the surrogate of the one who sends him [or her], within the limits of the commission given. His [or her] status as saliah is entirely determined by this relationship, and it is in this respect only that he [or she] is empowered to act." To be an apostle is to be one who is sent by a person to share something with another person or a group. The term comes from the Greek *apóstolos*, literally meaning "one who is sent off." Yet, the question of who sends the person is important. Additionally, whether the command is implicit or explicit is also of great interest.

**Paul's Definition of Apostolic Authority**

To understand apostolic authority, it is helpful to look at Paul's definitions throughout his letters. Paul calls himself an apostle in Rom1:1, defining the term as a person "set apart for the gospel of God." Similarly, in 1 Cor 1:1 he writes that he is called "by the will of God." He uses different language in his letter to the Galatians, writing, "Paul an apostle -- sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ

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and God the Father who raised him from the dead -- and all the members of God's family, who are with me…" (1 Gal 1:1). In the first letter to Timothy instead of using the term "will of God" like in the letter to Corinth, the author uses the term "command of God." (1Tim 1:1). In totality, the epistles seem to legitimize apostolic authority in two ways: a first-hand witness to the resurrected Christ, and receiving a call from God to proclaim the good news.  

However, bearers of the Good News rarely witness a first-hand account of the resurrection. It is historically clear that only a handful of those who proclaim Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have witnessed, personally, any of the events. Certainly, those who call themselves apostles in the modern era have not personally witnessed Jesus and his life on this earth. The understanding of an apostle remains unclear. However, one aspect is apparent, an apostle is one who tells others about Jesus.

Using this working definition of apostle as one who tells others about Jesus, both the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well as well as Mary Magdalene bear this title. They tell their communities about Jesus and the way a simple conversation with the Son of God has changed their life. Mary Magdalene certainly bears the more traditional title of apostle, one who has witnessed a personal account of the resurrection who is then is sent to tell others. There is little grey area in this account.

The First Apostle: Mary or Peter

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150 Brock, Mary Magdalene, 6.
There is a long debate about who bears the title of the first apostle post Jesus' resurrection. There are those who wish for Peter to bear this title while others believe the role belongs to Mary Magdalene. The gospel accounts are inconsistent concerning who first sees Jesus and who is told to tell others. At times it seems that this debate serves as the hinge for women's authoritative preaching and teaching. If Mary is the first to witness and proclaim the resurrection, there is little room to assume that other women cannot do the same. However, if the honor belongs to Peter, Mary is simply a woman who faithfully followed Jesus. While Mary is a faithful follower of Jesus, there is more to her role than devotee or disciple: she is one who has a first-hand account of the resurrection and tells others about this event. However, her role in the narrative continues to be a subject of controversy.

Even in the early Church, there was concern about who might qualify for apostolic leadership. Many early Church documents describe Mary as one qualified to be an authentic messenger of the Gospel. For example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes some early Christian documents consider Mary Magdalene an "Apostle to the Apostles" which places her in a state of great honor in the early Church.151 Gayle O'Day and Susan E. Hylan agree, writing, "Because the word "apostle" literally means "one sent," some scholars consider Mary to be the first apostle."152 Ann Graham Brock brings to light the manner in which there is great disagreement over the term "apostle" in her book, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*. She concedes that there were

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those in the early Church who recognized Mary as an honored apostle but points out that other early documents clearly exclude women, some going so far as to describe Mary Magdalene as no more than a redeemed sinner, a prostitute without apostolic authority.\textsuperscript{153} This centuries old debate in one that has challenged women's authority and place in the church.

**Competition Between Mary and Peter**

In the gospels, the stories of the resurrection are drastically different. In John 20, Jesus appears only to Mary Magdalene and she then tells others about the resurrected Lord. Mark's narrative account has Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. (Mark 16:1). Similarly, Matthew's account describes Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." (Matt 28:1-6). However, Luke deviates strongly from the other gospel narratives. Luke shows Jesus appearing only to Peter, which is odd since Mary Magdalene is clearly described in the other narratives. In Luke's account, Mary Magdalene and the women go to the body with spices as was the custom. There they find an empty tomb and they meet "two men in dazzling clothes" who told them that Jesus was risen (Luke 24:4). According to Luke 24, the risen Lord appeared first to Peter, not Mary Magdalene\textsuperscript{154}  Holly E. Hearon's research shows that Luke attempts to elevate Peter's apostolic authority over that of Mary Magdalene.\textsuperscript{155} According to Hearon, Luke leaves out unflattering stories and comments about Peter, which are

\textsuperscript{153} Brock, *Mary Magdalene*, 1, 16.
\textsuperscript{155} Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition*, 19-20.
found in the other synoptic gospels, while giving him apostolic authority over Mary Magdalene.

Ann Graham Brock makes the assertion that Mary Magdalene is the first apostle, however she also notes the differences between the resurrection narratives in the gospel texts. The resurrection narrative found in Luke 24 bears a stark contrast to the resurrection narrative of John as well as the other synoptic gospels. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that there is a significant competition between Mary Magdalene and Peter as the first witness to Christ’s resurrection.\textsuperscript{156} The author of Luke-Acts appears to elevate the role of Peter. This is apparent because Peter is given great authority and status, when compared to other individuals in the text.\textsuperscript{157} While Peter is elevated, Mary Magdalene’s authority is dismissed in Luke-Acts. Brock demonstrates the manner in which Luke-Acts omits pertinent texts that place Peter in a less favorable light.\textsuperscript{158} For example, both Mark 14 and Matthew 26 detail Jesus’ question of Peter regarding his sleeping while Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane praying prior to his betrayal.\textsuperscript{159} Luke 22:45-46 describes Jesus as not only inquiring of Peter but questioning all of the disciples.\textsuperscript{160} However, perhaps the greatest difference deals with the manner in which the Gospels handle Peter’s denial narrative. Both Mark 14 and Matthew 26 describe Peter as cursing and swearing when asked if he knew Jesus prior to his death.\textsuperscript{161} Contrastingly, the Gospel of Luke renders Peter as perplexed by the question rather than cursing and

\textsuperscript{156} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 51.
\textsuperscript{157} Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 20.
\textsuperscript{158} Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 20-29.
\textsuperscript{159} Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 26.
\textsuperscript{160} Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 26.
\textsuperscript{161} Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 29.
swearing.\textsuperscript{162} It is important to note that Peter, in Luke’s account, is not flippant about his denial of Christ, rather he is brokenhearted and remorseful (Luke 22:62). It appears that Luke leaves out details of Peter’s actions, seeking to elevate his status to future readers of the text.

However, it is not what is omitted in Luke’s text that is of greatest interest, it is what is included that shows the manner in which the author of Luke-Acts seeks to advance Peter’s role. The greatest divergence from the other accounts is found as Jesus walks the road to Emmaus described in Luke 24:33-34.\textsuperscript{163} Luke 24:24 states, “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon.” This verse demonstrates the partiality that the author of Luke-Acts has to the prominence of Peter. In the Gospel of Luke, Peter’s shortcomings are not highlighted in the same way they are in Matthew and Mark. These differences in the synoptic gospels demonstrate the bias that the Gospel of Luke has towards Peter’s importance to the apostolic narrative.

By elevating Peter, the author of Luke-Acts diminishes Mary Magdalene’s role in the post-resurrection account. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests this discrepancy is not only found in the Luke-Acts narrative.\textsuperscript{164} Various accounts which are not included in the canon, such as the Gospel of Thomas, Pistis Sophia, the Apostolic Church Order, and the Gospel of Mary seem to disagree about Mary’s role in the resurrection.\textsuperscript{165} Fiorenza notes, “While the Gospel of Mary argues for the authority of Mary Magdalene on the ground that Christ loved her more than all the other disciples, the Apostolic Church Order

\textsuperscript{162} Brock, Mary Magdalene, 20.
\textsuperscript{163} Brock, Mary Magdalene, 30.
\textsuperscript{164} Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 51.
\textsuperscript{165} Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 51.
argues for the exclusion of women from the priesthood by letting Mary Magdalene herself reason that the weak, namely, the women, must be saved by the strong, namely, the men.\textsuperscript{166}

The manner in which John’s Gospel portrays Mary Magdalene and Peter is differs from the Synoptic Gospels. Peter only appears in chapters 1, 6, 13, 18, 20, and 21 of the Gospel of John with each account lacking the admiration found in Luke.\textsuperscript{167} Peter is noticeably absent from certain accounts where other disciples are present. Peter’s prominence at the Last Supper is also worth noting. Brock points out Peter’s secondary role to that of the Beloved Disciple, in John 13.\textsuperscript{168} It is the resurrection account where there is the greatest difference. The Synoptic Gospels either have Peter alone or Peter along with Mary Magdalene witnessing the resurrection. John portrays Mary Magdalene as the only witness to Jesus’ resurrection at the tomb.\textsuperscript{169} It is also only the Gospel of John, in which Mary Magdalene is commissioned to go and tell the others. Her role in John’s account is very important. Carla Ricci emphasizes this significance by stating, “She has to carry the news to the others, who are lamenting Jesus’ death, as mediatrix of the proclamation that life prevails over death, light over darkness.”\textsuperscript{170} The resurrection narrative in the Gospel of John not only shows Mary Magdalene’s authentic role in the story, but also shows that women were part of the Johannine community. It suggests that

\begin{footnotes}
\item[166] Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 51.
\item[167] Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 30.
\item[168] Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 46.
\item[169] Brock, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, 27-48.
\end{footnotes}
women were a vital part of the community both as teachers and leaders. Like the male disciples, women in John’s account were sent by Jesus to be with his followers.\textsuperscript{171}

**Modern Scholarship and Mary’s Status**

Most modern scholars consider Mary Magdalene an apostle who witnessed the resurrection and gave an account to others. Sadly, this clear assumption is not without debate. Holly E. Hearon explains that studies about Mary Magdalene often fall into two categories: academic research either understands her as a reformed sinner who turned away from a life of sin or as a woman who is not a sinner (or at least no more than the other apostles) and who was part of Jesus' close group of disciples.\textsuperscript{172} The latter group sees Mary as an apostle whereas the former does not. This research is largely based on documents from the early Christian church. If the early church's desires were to undercut the apostolic authority of Mary Magdalene (and other women as well), it would intentionally leave out their narratives from the story of Jesus.

Martin Hengel's research shows a shift in the academic understanding of Mary Magdalene and her role in the early church.\textsuperscript{173} Hengel suggests that Mary held a high apostolic position in the early church similar to that of Peter, because Mary's name appears first in the list of women's names as Peter's does with men.\textsuperscript{174} Hengel points out that Mary Magdalene is excluded from the list of individuals to witness the resurrected Jesus.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[Adele Reinhartz, “Women in the Johannine Community,” 25-26.]
\item[Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition*, 2-8.]
\item[Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition*, 3-4.]
\end{footnotes}
Messiah in 1 Cor 15:3-7, and he attributes this to the Jewish law which prohibits women's testimony and views such testimony as invalid. This shift in understanding Mary Magdalene's role in the early church has significant impact on the way her calling and leadership are understood. Placing her on equal footing with Peter allows her apostolic leadership to be seen as valid.

Similarly, Gail O’Day and Susan Hylen describe Mary Magdalene as an apostle who is sent by Jesus. They note, “She is not simply entrusted with a message about a meeting spot in Galilee, but with the proclamation of the joyful completion of Jesus’ work on earth.” Additionally they suggest that Mary’s message is not for the male disciples alone but rather, it is for men and women. This is because of the phrase in John 20:14, “my brothers” which includes the entire community of those who followed Jesus including both men and women. Mary Magdalene’s bold statement is the first witness of the resurrection and the first proclamation of the Good News. This makes her the first post-resurrection apostle to proclaim salvation.

The Samaritan Woman as an Apostle

The Samaritan woman's authority is implicit when compared to Mary's explicit command. Sandra M. Schneiders, shows the Samaritan woman to be a "Christian Disciple-Apostle." She suggests that there are a few reasons for this title to be given to the woman whom Jesus meets at Jacob's well. The first reason is due to the placement of

175 Hearon, The Mary Magdalene Tradition, 5.; Hengel, Maria Magdalena, 248-250.
176 O'Day and Hylen, John, 195.
177 O'Day and Hylen, John, 194.
178 Schneiders, The Revelatory Text, 188.
the narrative within the Gospel of John. The woman's story is paced between Nicodemus who does not recognize Jesus and the royal official who understands Jesus as the Messiah. According to Schneiders this makes her a symbolic character that serves a larger function in the Johannine community. Second, the Samaritan woman and Jesus have a clearly theological conversation in which Jesus equates himself with Jacob, as representative of the patriarchs. Schneiders writes, "Characteristic of Samaritan theology was its Mosaic-patriarchal tradition as opposed to the Davidic-monarchial tradition of the Jews." Jesus is revealing himself as the promised one, the Messiah, to the woman at the well. However, it is important to note that this revelatory action is not immediate. It is a slow unfolding of who Jesus is and what he represents. Dorothy Lee notes, "in this reading, the woman moves from a literal and material level of understanding to a metaphorical and symbolic one." This revelatory mark is clearly associated with those who bear the title apostle. The Samaritan woman does not stand alone in her interaction with Jesus. Rather she symbolizes the entire Samaritan people for whom Jesus is also the Messiah. It is clear that Jesus reveals his true identity with the woman at Jacobs well, fulfilling the first requirement that would grant her apostolic authority.

Choosing to Proclaim

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179 Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 188.
180 Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 188.
183 Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 75.
However, the second requirement, being sent by Jesus to tell others, is a bit different. The Samaritan woman chooses to leave her jar at the well and return to her community to relate this encounter she experiences with Jesus. Mary Magdalene is explicitly sent by Jesus to tell the others. Since John's account does not explicitly describe a command in which the Samaritan woman is told to go back to the village and tell others, we must assume that the command is implicit. This encounter has changed her in a way in which she cannot keep this to herself. She believes that others must know about this experience. Even though the command is implicit, Jesus is still the sender who impels the woman to share her experience. The woman at the well is so transformed by her encounter with Jesus that she, seemingly with reckless abandon, leaves her jar and goes to the village to tell the others about her experience.

While the historical role of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well is greatly debated, her role as an apostle is not. If the account is a historical description of authentic ministry in Samaria, it is worth noting that it is a woman who tells others in the community about Jesus’ salvation. As an allegorical account, the woman represents the entire community, including men and women. She is representative of the world as she knows it and the manner in which salvation is not simply for the Jewish community but also Gentiles. If her function is representative, she embodies an apostolic function as well as a salvific role. Both men and women, both Jews and Gentiles, can tell others about the impact and transformation Jesus has made upon their lives. Similarly, Jesus’ salvation is for both the Jewish community as well as the Gentiles, as demonstrated by the woman’s status as a Samaritan. Colleen Conway describes the woman as a missionary to her
community noting, “As a result, the woman who initially expresses doubt about Jesus’ communication with her emerges as a successful missionary figure, leading her people to a knowledge of Jesus as savior of the world.” She tells others about her encounter with the Messiah and they come to believe because of her witness.

As an allegorical account, the Samaritan woman represents the Samaritan community's evangelistic mission. It is of great interest that the writer of the Gospel of John places this responsibility in the hands of a woman who has come to the well in the middle of the day. The woman is elevated because Jesus chooses to engage her in a conversation. Sandra Schneiders explains that this elevation of the Samaritan woman makes the male disciples uncomfortable. Schneiders writes, "It seems unlikely that whoever wrote the fourth gospel had some experience of women Christians as theologians and as apostles, was aware of the tension this aroused in the community and wanted to present Jesus as legitimating female participation in male-approved roles.”

The writer of John sought to intentionally include a Gentile woman as one who proclaims the Gospel, showing that belief, salvation, and evangelism are for all who are part of the family of God. While this makes the disciples uncomfortable, it shows that women can preach and proclaim even when others question their role in the Gospel narrative. The responsibility of telling others about Jesus is often relegated to the Jewish men in the text. However, Jesus clearly reverses these roles, seeking to show that men and women both have apostolic authority to share the Good News.

186 Schneiders, The Revelatory Text, 192.
187 Schneiders, The Revelatory Text, 192.
Authority and the Modern Church

Telling others about Jesus is not always as easy as it appears. Throughout history, despite having a clear call to word and sacrament, women are told that their gender prohibits them from such. It is often difficult to gain the authority to preach and proclaim. How one goes about gaining authority to preach the gospel is of great interest. The Methodist Church's General Conference of 1956 permitted full clergy rights to women without limitations. This petition was a product of the Ministry Committee's work, which was comprised of 84 members. The ratio of these 84 members is interesting as 81 were men and 3 were women. The report of this committee proposed that clergy rights be granted to only unmarried women, which passed the committee 40 to 32. During the three-hour debate, Dr. Zack Johnson, the president of Asbury College proposed that women receive clergy rights with no exceptions as a substitute for the motion coming from the Ministry Committee. While the delegates to General Conference today are more diverse, it is important to remember that in 1956 only men were eligible to be clergy delegates to the General Conference. While women could serve as lay delegates, the voting delegates in 1956 were overwhelmingly men. Dr. Johnson's motion passed with the support of a majority male voting body. Shortly following this decision Maude Jensen was ordained.

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189 Clayton Childers, The Debate that Changed the Church.
190 Clayton Childers, The Debate that Changed the Church.
191 Clayton Childers, The Debate that Changed the Church.
and 26 other women received full clergy rights.\textsuperscript{192} Other mainline denominations have similar stories. The Presbyterian Church, or what would eventually become the PCUSA denomination made the same decision in 1956.\textsuperscript{193} Other denominations followed suit over ten years later including the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Reformed Judaism, and The Episcopal Church.\textsuperscript{194}

The role of men is interesting in each of these historical accounts. Without the support and votes of the men present at the General Conference of the Methodist Church in 1956, women would not have received full clergy rights. The same is true in other denominations. Because of the church's history and the manner in which women's leadership is historically understood, women must be granted permission from men to preach the Gospel and lead congregations. While the calling of women to proclaim the Good News is documented throughout history, including the early church, women are often pushed to the side when called to ordination. For women's calling and ordination to be valid, historically they have sought this validation from their male counterparts.

Necessity of Permission

There is a clear necessity of permission from those who hold power and influence. Throughout history, women have sought permission from their male counterparts before engaging in various activities, which were predominantly performed by men. This is the result of a patriarchal structure in Western society which has long held power over the


\textsuperscript{194} David Masci, \textit{The Divide Over Ordaining Women}. 
voice and role of women. This patriarchal structure is also found in ecclesial bodies and assemblies. Even in recent history, an unmarried woman was required to ask her father for permission to do something outside the norm of operation. Once married, that same woman had to ask permission from her husband. It was not until the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 that women could obtain a credit card without their husband's signature.\textsuperscript{195} This structure has biblical origins as observed in Col 3:18-4:1.\textsuperscript{196}

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza brings this to light in the book, \textit{In Memory of Her}. She writes about household structure, which is the byproduct of Greco-Roman understanding of family life and organization. She demonstrates this by writing, "The formal structure of such a household code then, consists of address (wives), exhortation (submit to your husbands) and motivation (as is fitting to the Lord)."\textsuperscript{197} She explains that the only new element to this description for the Christian community that is different from the Greco-Roman cultural understanding is the phrase "in the Lord."\textsuperscript{198} In short, the patriarchal structure, understood by those in modern Christian culture, is not the result of the teachings of Jesus Christ but rather Greco-Roman societal norms.\textsuperscript{199}

As a result, women often feel the need to ask permission from men in order to use their voice. Nancy Lammers Gross writes, “Women who struggle to use their speaking voices in the pulpit usually do not feel they have permission to speak. There are, perhaps,

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\textsuperscript{196} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 253. \\
\textsuperscript{197} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 253. \\
\textsuperscript{198} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 253. \\
\textsuperscript{199} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 254.
\end{flushright}
as many reasons for this as there are women who struggle to speak.” Churches, largely lead by men, seek to undermine women’s voice in leadership. In many instances, men are the ones who may give permission, and they do not give women permission to speak. The perpetuation of this can be seen in such groups like the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which proposes a complementarian view to church, life, and society. This group, which is held in high esteem by various evangelical churches, is comprised of a board and staff of entirely men. It is organizations like this, as well as denominations of ecclesial bodies, that seek to expound upon the view that women's leadership and voices are secondary to their male counterparts. Although these groups point to scripture as the basis for their reasoning, it is clear from Fiorenza's work that this is an adaptation of pagan Greco-Roman practice, and not founded upon the views of Jesus.

In fact, in looking at John 4, Jesus does not grant permission to the woman at the well to return to her town and proclaim that she has met the Messiah. Even as the Son of God, he does not grant her permission to do so. Rather, she goes of her own volition. There is power in this act. There is power because rather than seeking permission from the male leaders in the Samaritan community, the woman is so moved by Jesus that she shares her testimony on the authority of her own experience. She does not question the appropriateness of her words. She does not fear that it might be inappropriate for men to learn from her. She does not seek permission to share but is so transformed by Jesus that

she boldly proclaims. Permission comes from the transformation she experiences through encountering Jesus at the well, not from others who question her validity.

In John 20:17, Jesus commands Mary Magdalene to tell the other about the resurrection. This is a command by God and permission is given from the Messiah. Her command is like that of Paul's as he describes his call to establish his apostolic authority. She does not need permission because of her gender; rather she is seen like the male disciples who are charged with spreading the Good News. Similarly, Mary does not ask John and the others who are gathered together following Jesus' death, if she can tell them about her experience. She does not ask permission from her brothers in Christ. Rather, she knows that she has a task at hand and is compelled to proclaim that Jesus has risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene does with this faithfully and with boldness to the male disciples who are overcome with fear.

However, the role of the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene is overlooked when it comes to the complementarian view of gender proposed by various groups. Within these contexts, the roles of these women and their leadership in their communities and the early Christian movement are overlooked, misunderstood, or simply ignored. Instead of looking at their role in proclamation, they are seen as repentant women and cast off as reminders of sexual redemption. The exegetical manipulation that wishes to view them as sexually promiscuous does so to undermine their apostolic and authoritative significance. Instead of being lifted as an example of first century women who follow Jesus and tell others about the Messiah, they are seen as women for whom Jesus has pity. With this understanding, when women do choose to preach about the wondrous work of
Christ, they must have permission and the backing of their male counterparts. Clearly, as those who have been created in God's image and given a voice for proclamation, this is an unfaithful understanding of leadership and faith practice. It is through the words of the Samaritan woman that a community comes to meet Jesus and welcome him into their midst. It is because of Mary Magdalene's witness that the male disciples learn of the resurrection of Jesus. When one is commanded to proclaim, one need not seek permission; rather there is a need to be faithful in the call.

For both of these women, there is power in proclamation without permission. Once God calls them, they do not need to receive permission from others to tell about their experience. For women in the modern church, this is freeing because it is religious authority that is rooted in Christ. Both the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and Mary Magdalene meet Jesus, are transformed by their encounter, and tell both men and women about it. Their permission is granted by God, not humans.

Others Believe

The roles of proclamation for the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene are of great interest. While the woman at Jacob's well is not told to go tell others but chooses to do so, Christ commands Mary Magdalene. This command is clear and direct as he states, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your
God.” (John 20:8). Both women are bearers of the Gospel message and heralds of the Messiah, but the way they are given authority, permission, and validity is different.

In observing the woman at Jacob's well, there is a clear revelation of who Jesus is and why he is talking to her. This revelation occurs over the course of their conversation. The woman is first surprised that Jesus is asking for a drink of water, much less engaging in an actual conversation. It takes the Samaritan woman a few moments to understand who Jesus is and why he is talking to her. She first sees Jesus as a Jewish man in search of water, then as a prophet sent to the Jewish community, and finally as the Messiah. This journey of understanding who Jesus is and why he is talking to her is a slow unfolding of clarity. The woman is not directed by Jesus to tell her community about this conversation. She chooses to do so. Rather than being told to go and tell the others, like Mary Magdalene, her sending is self-initiated in nature. Jesus meets the woman at the well and engages her in transformative conversation, and she is compelled by this conversion to tell the men and women in her community what she has seen and heard. Is she an apostle? Does sending have to be explicit or can it be implicit?

Sending can be a transformation that occurs in the heart and mind of a person. The woman's testimony is not less valid because Jesus does not clearly tell her to go to her town and tell others about their conversation. It is not to be disregarded because Jesus tells her to "go." However, she does not go on her own. She is sent through the change and the hope she experiences through the conversation with the Son of God in the heat of

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the day. The woman at Jacob's well is not sent explicitly but rather implicitly. She can do no other than proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. She goes to her community to share about the Messiah because she has experienced acceptance, forgiveness, and is made whole by the man she meets who ask her for water. Her transformation compels her to leave her jar at the well, go to those who have placed her on the fringes of society, and proclaim that she has met the Messiah. While Jesus does not explicitly tell her through his words to go, the command is clear within her heart. Through the definition found in the epistles, Paul's understanding of apostolic leadership may not understand her as such, but her community sees her as authoritative.

Sandra M. Schneiders fully embraces the Samaritan woman’s role as an apostle. She states, “That her apostleship is fully effective is indicated by 4:41-42, according to which the Samaritans come to full faith is Jesus as “Savior of the World” (another indication that this is a post-glorification account retrodicted into the historical ministry).”

In this regard it is clear that the Samaritan woman bears the title and role of apostle. Her role is evangelical in nature in that she proclaims the Messiah and others come to believe. Additionally, because of her message, Jesus is welcomed into the town and both men and women spend time with the Messiah.

Mary Magdalene, contrastingly, clearly fits the title "apostle" as defined in Paul's letters. Not only did she know Jesus before his death, he appears to her immediately following his resurrection (John 20:15-16). By simply saying her name, Jesus reveals that he is the resurrected Lord. Immediately following this, Jesus tells Mary to go to the

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others and proclaim the resurrection. There are two important components in this narrative: first a post resurrection appearance and second a command to tell others about the Good News.

However, do the men who hear Mary's account believe her? If the chronology in the Gospel of John is accurate, the text explains that Jesus tells Mary Magdalene to tell the others, which she does. Following this, in verse 19, Jesus appears to the disciples who are still seeking refuge in locked house. Either they did not believe her account, or their fear was greater than their faith. It is likely a combination of both that causes the disciples to remain locked in the house. John and Simon Peter went to the grave and did not see the risen Lord. Perhaps, they think, Mary's grief has overtaken her and she is seeing things that are simply not there. John and Simon Peter did not return with a similar experience or story to share. It might be her gender that inhibits them from believing her powerful witness. They may choose to stay locked inside out of fear that the resurrection is not real.

What is important is that Jesus sends her. Unlike the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well Mary Magdalene is clearly the first apostle to witness and be told to proclaim the Good News of the resurrection. However, for centuries, the Church did not see her as such. There are various reasons that she was not viewed as the first person to be commissioned for proclamation by Jesus. Part of this is attributed to scholarly and historical competition in which she and Peter seem to engage. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe a diminished role of Mary Magdalene while the gospel of John highlights

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205 Brock, *Mary Magdalene*, 163.
her authority. John demonstrates that the Son of God sends her to tell others about the resurrection (John 20:17). It is clear in John's account that she is the only person to have this knowledge until she tells disciples about her interaction with the risen Christ. This command to go and tell is the crux of her authority and the authority of women who seek validation in their callings. If Mary Magdalene can be commanded to proclaim the gospel, so can other women who have been created in God's own image. Jesus' command to Mary Magdalene gives permission to generations of women that their voices are important and that they should be heard.

One area of difference between the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and Mary Magdalene in John 20 is the belief of those to whom they share the message of Jesus. The John 4 story is very clear that men and women in the town come to believe in Jesus because of the woman's declaration. Sandra Schneiders writes, "the effectiveness of her ministry is underlined by the fact that the townspeople not only "come to Jesus" which is a Johannine expression for beginning to believe, but they entreat Jesus to "remain with them," and he "remained there for two days" (v.40)." It is abundantly clear that those who the Samaritan woman tells, come to know about Jesus through her testimony.

John 20 lacks clarity as to the extent to which the disciples believe Mary. It seems that they do not believe since they choose to remain behind closed doors rather than leave and seek to find the risen Messiah. While significant, belief in one's testimony is not the

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206 Brock, Mary Magdalene, 163.
207 Schneiders, Written That You May Believe, 193.
most crucial aspect in the narratives. What is crucial is that the both women use their voices to tell others about Jesus. They both tell men, and presumably women, what they have seen and heard after a life-changing encounter with the Son of God. They both are bold in their witness and are unashamed of the gospel. Belief is important, but a lack of belief does not discount their role in being bearers of the Good News, because they are faithful in their calling.

**Mission Fulfilled**

Both the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well and Mary Magdalene are faithful in their calling to proclaim their experience with the Messiah. They are willing to tell their story to both men and women, seeking to cross cultural boundaries in order to do so. They are bold in their proclamation. While some believe, and others discount their voice, they have fulfilled the mission entrusted to them by Jesus. A preacher does not have to be believed in order to be faithful. The same is true with an apostle. It is clear from the text in John 4 that the community of which the Samaritan woman is part believes in the Messiah because of her words. However, the disciples do not seem to trust in Mary’s testimony of the risen Christ. The reluctance of the disciples who remain behind closed and locked doors does not negate Mary Magdalene’s faithfulness to the call.

Throughout history women have sought to use their voices and have been ignored, pushed aside, or simply not believed. That does not undermine their faithfulness to the message of Jesus Christ. Jennifer Copeland writes, “Over the centuries women have proved exceedingly creative at working around the restrictions placed upon them.
When women were not allowed to preach, they renamed their pronouncements prophecy. When women were cloistered from society, they reemerged as teachers. When women were denied access to the pulpit, they testified from the pew.\textsuperscript{208} Like the woman at Jacob’s well and Mary Magdalene, women throughout history have sought to be faithful in their role as proclaimers of the Good News.

Apostles are not called to success, they are called to faithfulness. As those who proclaimed the Messiah and shared Jesus’s gift of eternal life with others in their community, the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well and Mary Magdalene are faithful in their role. They do not seek recognition or status. The faithfulness of these two women is not contingent on the belief of those within their community. Rather, their apostolic function and role is inspired by their interaction with the Messiah. Both of these women are apostles because they seek to share their story faithfully with others. They are not concerned about how it will be received or if others will believe in their testimony. They seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ and serve as apostolic witnesses to the Samaritan and Jewish communities.

\footnote{208 Jennifer E. Copeland, \textit{Feminine Registers: The Importance of Women's Voices for Christian Preaching}. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 1.}
CHAPTER 5: FAITHFULLY TEACHING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The church is called to faithfully proclaim the Gospel message in its fullness. The texts of John 4 and John 20 are often misrepresented in the local church. With various mainline denominations continuing to question the role of women in the life of the church, it is imperative that the biblical texts concerning women are taught accurately. The Samaritan
woman at Jacob’s well in John 4 and Mary Magdalene’s witness to the resurrection in John 20, are two texts which are often misrepresented in the preaching and teaching moments in a local congregation. The Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well is seen as a reformed and redeemed prostitute. Her mission to her community is overlooked as an epitaph at the end of the story. Similarly, Mary Magdalene’s story is often misconstrued. Preachers acknowledge that she witnesses the resurrection in John 20, however her role in sharing the resurrection with others is brushed over while her supposed past indiscretions are highlighted. It is this ambiguity that challenges ecclesial preachers and teachers to study the text and faithfully share it with others.

The Johannine Gospel lends itself to supporting female leadership and empowerment. The author of the gospel either seeks to exalt the role of women in the life and ministry of Jesus or the author simply shares a factual account of women who followed Jesus. However, in either case, John’s gospel provides an excellent starting point for seeking to understanding the role of women in early Christianity as well as those who faithfully follow Christ in the modern church.

Lost Works, Excluding Women

It is clear that, even though John’s Gospel elevates the role of women in the early church, many accounts of women involved in Jesus’ were intentionally lost. One can easily make assumptions about who this happened and why this is the case. Karen Jo Torjesen notes, “The early traditions out of which Christianity constructs its history were formed in the cultural milieu of patriarchal Mediterranean society. Thus, the literary legacy of the first
generations of Christian intellectuals is distorted by the cultural assumption that male activity is normative."\textsuperscript{209} Rather than adapting the teaching and ministry of Jesus to the life of the early Christian community, the leaders in the early church sought to adapt the cultural and societal norms of the day to the teachings of Christ. In doing so, stories about women’s role in the life and ministry of Jesus are forever lost. It is this normative understanding of male roles, prevalent in the early church, which continues to reinforce the notions of female obedience and submission to male authority figures.

Jennifer E. Copleand questions the reasons why this happened.\textsuperscript{210} She, along with other scholars, is clear that women were part of the inner circle of Jesus. It is apparent that women served with Jesus’ disciples and traveled with him during his ministry. She notes, “The words and deeds of Jesus drew no lines between the sexes, and in nearly every encounter with women in the four Gospels, Jesus violated the customs of his time.”\textsuperscript{211} Through the writings of early Church fathers, such as Eusebius in the fourth century, women were excluded from the accounts of leadership and authority.\textsuperscript{212} Doing so might have made the new religion more accepted in the cultural context of the day, but the ramifications are long lasting in the modern church.

Additionally, in looking at the exclusion of women and their role in the church, it would be remiss not to mention the Gospel of Mary. The Gospel of Mary, of which no complete text has been found, was concealed for fifteen hundred years.\textsuperscript{213} Unlike the

\textsuperscript{209} Torjesen,"Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History," 290.
\textsuperscript{210} Copeland, Feminine Registers, 2.
\textsuperscript{211} Copeland, Feminine Registers, 6.
\textsuperscript{212} Copeland, Feminine Registers, 19.
\textsuperscript{213} Copeland, Feminine Registers, 16.
canonical gospels, Mary’s gospel was, more than likely, written in the second century and is considered by many to be a Gnostic text. However the text highlights a few points of interest. In Chapters 8 and 9 there is a description of Jesus giving teaching and preaching instructions to the disciples. Following this instruction, the disciples seem to be concerned about Jesus’ words, and Mary seeks to provide comfort to the disconcerted followers Copeland notes, “In a particularly telling scene from the Gospel of Mary, Mary Magdalene demonstrates courage and provides comforts to the other disciples.” From this account, it is apparent that Mary did more than tell others about the risen Lord; she also sought to comfort and lead the disciples in the early church. Accounts like this are lost to most readers in the current ecclesial context. While feminist scholars have sought to revive the text and view it through the lenses of female existence, there is a steep learning curve for those outside the academic practice of biblical exegesis.

**Preaching the Gospel Through Faithful Exegesis**

The practice of faithful exegesis is of great importance as men and women seek to show the manner in which equality between genders is found in the biblical text. Thomas G. Long, in looking at the work of exegetical preaching, writes, “Preaching is biblical whenever the preacher allows a text from the Bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the context and purpose of the sermon…Biblical preaching happens when a

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217 Copeland, Feminine Registers, 17.
preacher prayerfully goes to listen to the Bible on behalf of the people and then speaks on Christ’s behalf what she or he hears there.”

When preaching, it is necessary for a clergyperson to look deeply into the text and seek to understand it from a cultural, historical, and doctrinal perspective. In doing this, the text often elevates the status and role of women through a faithful exegetical perspective. However, at times, when looking at the text, the research which leads to understanding the text might be different than previous interpretation. In a book on women’s leadership and ordination, Karoline M. Lewis speaks of biblical interpretation and exegesis in this way, “You will have to give voice to interpretations of scripture that go against centuries of previous interpretation.”

Often the historical interpretation is one in which women are placed to the margins by being asked to remain silent and submissive. Similarly, the explanation of a text may overly sexualizes a woman’s experience to undermine her authoritative role in the narrative. For example, John 4 and John 20 can be used to either harm women and young girls or they can be used to give light to those who seek to serve and lead. The primary method for understanding scriptures is accurate historical and allegorical exegesis of a text. A preacher or a teacher must accurately understand the text before they can convey the biblical message to a congregation.


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In looking at a text, it is important that the teacher or preacher look for the active characters in the biblical narrative. Who speaks in the passage? What is the intended message? Additionally, those who are not main characters, who stand outside the immediate narrative, are important to observe as well. Often, women are described by the authors of the text as secondary. In many instances, these women were primary in their interaction with Jesus, but they are not described as fulfilling such a function. We have little information about many of the women in the biblical text as they are seen as secondary to the primary message of the author. The canonical Bible contains approximately 3,100 different names with about 170 of the names belonging to women. Lisa Wilson Davison suggests that while other women are mentioned in the text, they are often mentioned by their relationship status and not by name. They are understood as daughters, wives, servants, sisters and the like rather than by the name by which they are called. These nameless women are seen through their relationship status rather than their role in the narrative. However, their actions and interactions in the biblical text are of great importance. Therefore, the secondary characters in the text are equally as important as the primary because these are often the women who are active participants in the religious community.

However, at times the women are the primary characters while the men are secondary. For example, in John 4, the woman at the well, although nameless, goes and tells those in her community about her experience with Jesus. It is implied that men are

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part of that group and are secondary characters in the biblical story. Therefore, an unnamed woman proclaims in an evangelistic nature to men who are part of her community. The understanding that men are part of the group to whom she shares her experience is an important aspect of this exegesis.

Similarly, in John 20, Mary Magdalene and Jesus are the primary characters. However, Mary shares the news of the risen Lord with the male disciples who are secondary in the story. Seeing the male disciples as recipients of this good news is necessary when looking at the manner in which women are called to lead both men and women in religious settings. Often the focus on the text is the resurrection of Jesus, when it should be the resurrection of Jesus as well as the messengers proclaiming this event.

In faithful exegesis, the teacher or preacher must also raise the question of what is occurring in the text. What is the background of the story? What are the socio-political consequences of the story? In answering these questions it is necessary for the readers to look at the biases they bring to the text. For example, in John 4 there is an assumption that the woman is at the well in the middle of the day because she is outside the appropriate norms of sexual behavior. From research, that is clearly not the case. However, because this theory has been proclaimed from many pulpits and lecterns, it is important for the person exegeting the text to research it to see if their understanding is historically and biblically accurate. The reality of “what” in John 4 is drastically different than the often-assumed shame filled woman arriving at well in the blistering heat. A similar argument can be made for the narrative of John 20. While we often see the women, who shares the news of Jesus resurrection as a redeemed prostitute, historical
research shows that is not likely the case. Rather, Mary Magdalene is understood by Jesus as a faithful follower and disciple. In these cases, it is important to remember that the lens through which many have long viewed the biblical text is through the male experience. Seeing the “what” through historical exegesis as well as the lens of women’s ministry is important for accurate exegesis.

Like the “who” and the “what,” understanding the “when” is necessary when doing biblical exegesis, especially as it relates to feminist theory. It is without dispute that women have historically been understood as property who function for male sexual pleasure and procreation. While Jesus understood women as vital to the faith community, the society in which they lived did not understand them in this way. Similarly, as the Christian community grew and expanded in the first and second centuries, leadership roles of women were completely removed or ignored. This was the context in which the biblical text was written. It was authored in a society that saw every woman as the property of their father or husband. They were not able to own property or serve in leadership.

This is the context in which John 4 and John 20 were written. This can be clearly understood from the manner in which O’Day and Hylan suggest that the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well is part of a Levirate marriage, and the man with whom she is living has refused to marry her.222 Once the woman’s husband is deceased, it is the responsibility of the next male relative to marry her and provide for her financially. Rather than choosing to move from marriage to marriage, she is a victim to the societal

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norms in which she lives. Similarly, scholars and preachers have looked for an explanation to explain Mary Magdalene’s apparent singleness. While it is not clear that she is unmarried, the text never describes a husband. It can be assumed that if Mary were married, her husband would be mentioned in one of the gospel accounts. To account for her singleness, many have assumed that she was a redeemed prostitute to whom Jesus offers grace. The historical context in which she lives, the “when,” makes us wonder why she is an unaccompanied female who is often present in Jesus’ ministry. The answer is not clear, but the assumption that she is a prostitute who no man will marry is not a faithful exegesis of the text. She might be a widow who follows Jesus, or perhaps she has left home for other reasons and has never been married. Jaqueline Lloyd suggests that there is confusion about the historical Mary and this confusion has allowed imaginations to run wild. It is also important to note that the Resurrection (and thus Mary’s testimony) takes place as the Jewish community has come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. In order to be aware of this, the reader must read John 13. In the beginning of this chapter, it is clear that the disciples, along with Jesus, have traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover. During this holiday, Jerusalem is filled with visitors who are observing the sacred practice, as well as Romans who are seeking to keep the peace. Knowing that the “when” is not simply first century Israel but the “when” also includes the celebration of the Passover is important.

Understanding the geographic placement of the biblical text is of great importance. This is the “where” question a preacher or a teacher must ask of the text. As

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Jesus moves into Samaria, cultural and religious norms change. His interaction with the woman at Jacob’s well seeks to show that he is the Messiah for both the Jewish community and the Gentile world. As there is much hostility between the two groups, Jesus’s interaction while in Samaria is all the more interesting. Additionally, it is clear that Jesus spends time in the village and intentionally crosses both the cultural and geographic boundaries to demonstrate that the Son of God is for all of God’s children (John 4:40).

In a similar manner, observing the means in which the death and resurrection of Jesus occur in Jerusalem is important. Within this geographic and cultural context, there is both the Roman law and the Jewish customs which are important to observe. The disciples hide in fear behind locked doors (John 20:19-23). This is because the event that is described is taking place during the Passover in Jerusalem. The Roman government is out in full force as the Jewish community comes to the religious site to celebrate the holiday. Perhaps, Mary is less fearful of arrest by Roman authorities than her male counterparts and can easily move between the disciples and the tomb, or perhaps she is fearless and bold in her actions. Regardless, understanding that the placement of the story is in Jerusalem is vital to the exegetical work around the text.

Finally, a teacher or a preacher must ask the “how” of the text. How does the conversation occur? How are the people in the narrative changed because of the events which unfold? How is the congregation to which they are preaching transformed by the text? In looking at John 4 and John 20 the “how” is both similar and different for the two texts.
In John 4, Jesus speaks to a woman of Samaritan descent revealing himself to her as the Son of God, the Messiah. It is this revelatory action that is of great importance. In John 4:26, he chooses to reveal his divinity to a woman in the Samaritan community rather than a religious leader. This impacts the congregation listening to the preacher, seeing that Jesus is not reserved for the intellectually superior, the wealthy, or the religiously faithful, but rather Jesus speaks to all of God’s children. Jesus offers living water to the Jewish and Gentile community, to men and women, to rich and poor, and to the young and the old. Additionally, the congregation sees the manner in which the transformative grace of God can break the barriers, which are erected by society, as the woman goes to her village to proclaim what she has seen and heard and shares the Good News with others (John 4:39-42). The congregation is called to realize God’s grace, living water, is for all people. As a result, they are to share this with others in the community.

Like the passage from John 4, the resurrection narrative in John 20 has a revelatory aspect. Similar to the manner in which Jesus reveals himself to the woman at Jacob’s well, Jesus also reveals himself to Mary Magdalene when she encounters the empty tomb. By calling her by name, Jesus acknowledges that he knows her, and she realizes to whom she is speaking (John 20:16). Furthermore, similar to the woman at the well, Mary also goes and tells others about her encounter with Jesus. But, unlike the John 4 text, Jesus clearly directs Mary to tell others about the resurrection. This is a foundational feature in which congregations can observe the manner in which Jesus calls both men and women to the task of preaching or proclamation. How is the congregation
transformed by this text? They see the miracle of the resurrection and the wonder of the empty tomb through the eyes of Mary Magdalene, a faithful follower of Christ. The congregation sees this event through the lens of a woman’s action and reaction to the Easter story and her subsequent obedience to tell others about the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise.

By seeking to see John 4 and John 20 through the lens of women’s existence, experience, and suffering, a teacher or a preacher observes the manner in which the biblical texts exalts women to an equal standard as that of their male counterparts. While certain churches may not always see women as equal in terms of ecclesial leadership, it is clear that John 4 and John 20 elevate women to this place. Although there is certainly a feminist understanding of the text, this is not simply feminist exegesis, but rather it is faithful exegesis of the biblical text. The preacher is not trying to form and shape the text to prove that men and women are equal in the sight of Christ; the biblical text speaks for itself by highlighting women’s ministry in the life of Jesus.

Silenced Women: 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2

Two passages that are often mentioned when discussing women’s ecclesial leadership are 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2. These scriptures are often used to silence women in the life and ministry of the church. Karoline M. Lewis addresses this issue, “The use and misuse of the Bible to justify and judge women in ministry will not go away if we ignore it…We cannot pretend that biblical arguments against women in ministry are simply out-of-date, and therefore ignorable because these arguments based on biblical principles will only
surface in other ways.”\textsuperscript{224} One cannot discuss women’s leadership without addressing the passages that are often mentioned in relation to this issue.

Pastors in various denominations attempt to use these two passages to explain their view of women’s roles in the life of the church. For example, Mark Coppenger, in writing about 1 Tim 1:1-5 states in support of a complementarian view of gender roles, “From his words, it is obvious that women were attempting to use the church to ‘liberate’ themselves from conventional, and even biblical, womanhood. Paul may have even been sympathetic to one upset or another…. But he was determined that the church not be hijacked for lesser purposes.”\textsuperscript{225} In another example, popular writer and preacher John Piper comments on 1 Cor 14, “The common assertion that Paul is dealing with a temporary problem of unruly women has no basis in the text….It is based on the will of God in creation and the lessons that come from the breach of that will.”\textsuperscript{226}

In contrast to this view of the biblical text, much exegesis has been done as it relates to 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:9-15. Over 120 years ago Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed 1 Cor noting, “The church in Corinth was particularly given to division and disputation; and women were apt to join in and to ask many troublesome questions; hence they were advised to consult with their husband at home.”\textsuperscript{227} Articles, papers, and journals have shown the manner in which these passages are often misinterpreted by those who seek to demonstrate that men are solely called to congregational and pastoral

\textsuperscript{224} Lewis, \textit{She}, 3.
\textsuperscript{226} John Piper, "The Order of Creation," \textit{The Standard} 74, no. 4 (April 1, 1984) https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-order-of-creation..
\textsuperscript{227} Stanton, \textit{The Woman's Bible}, 140.
leadership. For example, in *In Memory of Her*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza clearly addresses 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim.\(^{228}\) Similarly, Beverly Roberts Gaventa addresses not only these passages but the entire scope of Paul’s writing suggesting that Paul seeks to elevate women, especially through the use of maternal images.\(^{229}\) Lewis notes that 1 Cor 14:34-35 is not making a claim about women’s leadership, a popular theory among those who attempt to use it to argue against the ordination of women.\(^{230}\) In looking at 1 Tim 2:9-15, Lewis states, “The instructions for women suggest conformity to the androcentrism of the surrounding culture and are not representative of the larger New Testament witness to women in leadership roles in the church.”\(^{231}\) Other preachers and teachers have worked to faithfully communicate the historical and exegetical background of these passages and in doing so have shown the manner in which both women and men are necessary for the church to thrive.

There are great inconsistencies with the authenticity of the manuscripts for 1 Cor 14:34-35. Many scholars do not believe these verses were in the original epistle because, in some ancient manuscripts, the challenging verses were moved to other parts of the letter. For example, Gordon D. Fee in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, questions the validity and authenticity of 1 Cor 14:34-35. Fee suggests verses 34-35 are either a later edition or moved from a different location in Paul’s letter, viewing these verses as

\(^{230}\) Lewis, *She*, 21.
\(^{231}\) Lewis, *She*, 22.
inauthentic. Fee also shows the trouble that arises because this portion of Paul’s letter stands in direct disagreement with what is previously written in 1 Cor 11:5. Fee writes, “The problems with seeing this as authentic are obvious. If Paul himself is responsible for such a “corrective,” it is surprising that he should add it here, yet allow them [women] to pray and prophesy in 11:5 and 13.” Fee then sums up this issues for the modern church’s view of this text as it relates to women’s leadership. He states, “What is also surprising is the sudden shift from the problem of disorder in the congregation in Corinth to a rule that is to be understood as universal for all the churches.” In light of Fee’s research, not only are the texts found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians taken out of context, there is are significant reasons to question the validity of their words and placement.

When these passages are taken out of context, great harm is done to young girls and women alike. Women are taught that they are less important and less valued by God in whose image they are created. They are told that their voices are not necessary for proclamation. Women and girls are relegated to the margins as observers in the public worship space, rather than active participants. In the vilest incidents, this type of theology and biblical interpretation can lead to physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse. This abuse occurs and is justified through the use of scriptural references.

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233 Fee, *Corinthians*, 702.
234 Fee, *Corinthians*, 706.
235 Fee, *Corinthians*, 706.
An example of abuse, erroneously justified through the use of biblical text, is demonstrated by the former president of Southwestern Biblical Theological Seminary, a prominent institution of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Paige Patterson made headlines in *The Washington Post* when he suggested that abused women should pray for their husbands and remain submissive.236 After stating that he does not counsel women to seek a divorce in the case of abuse, Michelle Boorstein reports an example given by Patterson in which he told a woman to pray for her abusive husband.237 Boorstein writes about this account stating, “The woman, he said, came to him later with two black eyes. “She said: ‘I hope you’re happy.’ And I said ‘Yes … I’m very happy,’ ” because it turned out her husband had heard her quiet prayers and come for the first time to church the next day, he said.”238 The woman in this instance experienced excessive harm and the biblical text was used in defense of this maltreatment. In these instances, women refuse to address the pain they experience at the hands of husbands and pastors because they are told to remain silent and submissive.

**Calling and Response**

The calling of women is not a new event, as the stories of both the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well and Mary Magdalene demonstrate. This is not a new occurrence, rather

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238 Boorstein, “Southern Baptist leader pushes back.”
through the life and ministry of Jesus women are seen as disciples who cultivate the ability to lead other followers. While the calling of women dates back to the Old Testament and is clearly defined in the New Testament, at times institutions and ecclesial bodies seek to undermine the leadership role of women. Certainly, female leaders who serve as models for younger women are vital, however equally as important is accurate exegesis, preaching, and teaching of text as they relate to women. John 4 and 20 provide two examples of passages that demonstrate the leadership capacity of women.

The church has failed women for decades. As noted by Lisa Wilson Davison, “Bible commentaries, church school curriculum, devotional materials, and sermons have focused on the male biblical characters. If women did show up in these examples, they were presented either as supporting characters for the men or as the antagonist to the male hero.” If women were to be faithful, they were to be silent, submissive, and repentant. Certainly, these are characteristics each person of faith requires from time to time. At times it is better to listen than to speak. Christians are called to submit themselves to God and the calling, discipleship, and obedience that is required of the faithful. Moreover, each Christian is called to repent from sin and seek forgiveness. It seems however, that these qualities are more frequently required of women rather than men.

While some denomination bodies, like the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) have diligently worked to affirm

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the callings of both men and women, often work in the local congregation is lacking. Many women continue to be the first female clergy who serve congregations, especially as the senior or solo pastor. When resistance to female leadership is present, it is not the congregation’s lack of initiative in learning, it is the former clergy who failed to teach and demonstrate the manner the biblical texts supports and affirms female and male leadership. If a clergyperson preaches the John 20 text on Easter Sunday and fails to mention that the first person to proclaim the resurrected Christ was a woman, they have neglected the biblical text and done a disservice to both the congregation and their female colleagues.

**Teaching the Laity**

Although their calling is recognized, women continue to struggle in congregational settings. In 2014, the Commission on the Status and Role of Women reported that women comprise only 29 percent of elders in full connection in the United Methodist Church, while men comprise 71 percent. While this number is an increase over previous years, it is clear that women struggle to find equality with men in congregational settings. Additionally, women struggle to receive pastoral placements in large membership congregations. This is not because women are not called or gifted to such leadership roles, but because denominational bodies, pastoral leaders, and mass-produced

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curriculum have not adequately taught the biblical text in a way that elevates female leadership.

To faithfully respond to these statistics and the reality of the women they represent is a challenging task. It first requires that male leaders in denominations which support women’s ordination prepare the congregations they serve to receive a clergywoman as their successor. This is done through sermons, Bible studies, choice of curriculum, and intentional conversations with lay leadership. Many men intentionally invite women to preach in their pulpits and preside over the sacraments. However, teaching the theological and scriptural basis for women in leadership may not always be as easy as it seems. Within the United Methodist Church there is not a curriculum that explicitly teaches the theological underpinnings and scriptural exegesis which support the ordination of women. Additionally, the theological framework is not presented in *Confirm*, the United Methodist confirmation curriculum. There are many books on leadership which are directed toward clergy, including clergywomen, however there are few resources that are explicitly for the laity. While this may not seem like a necessary resource in the current context, when many women are appointed to a congregation, they are the first woman to step into the church’s pulpit. Personally, in two of the three congregations I have served, I am the first female pastor to lead the congregation. I have received questions about my role in the church. Most of these discussions have been met with an openness that affirms my leadership role in the life of the congregation. However, I also realize that the congregants in my churches are often questioned about my role when they interact with others in the community. This not only happens to adults but also
young people. From time to time, children and youth are asked about why their church has a female pastor when men predominately fill the role in the community. In the midst of adjusting to a new community and congregation, clergywomen and their churches are also teaching and validating the scriptural and theological basis for their leadership in the life of the church. In mainline denominations, which value women’s ordination as vital to the life of the church, there must be a curriculum which teaches the laity the theological and scriptural basis of women’s leadership.

CONCLUSION: PROCLAIMING THE STORY OF ALL PEOPLE
Women must be reminded that their voices are necessary for the betterment of the church and the society as a whole. Nancy Lammers Gross writes, “The underlying theological claim assumed in this work has to do with the incarnation and the doctrine of creation. God created humanity, male and female. God’s Word dwells in us, male and female.”

Women who are ordained, serving and living the calling placed upon their life, know this to be true. They believe that they are called to tell the story of salvation. However, the challenge presents itself when women created in God’s image, who experience a call to proclaim the Good News, are told that this is not a role to which God calls women. Because of biblical misinterpretation, women are pushed to the margins of ecclesial leadership, told to remain silent, and removed from the work of the church. Poor exegesis, insufficient research, and preaching that teaches submission rather than equality and complementarianism rather than egalitarianism effectively undermines the work of the Holy Spirit within the life of the church.

While at times this has resulted in women submitting themselves to the roles which male leadership would have them serve, more frequently, women choose to ignore the biblical text. By ignoring passages that speak to women and their leadership, the prominent biblical claims about submission and silence are propagated. While women will always need to research, exegete, and at times even wrestle with certain texts which have been used to undermine their authority, there are many examples of women in the biblical text who lead their families, villages, and faith communities. However, these texts are often not preached and taught in a way that seeks to elevate the status of women.

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As in the example of John 4 and John 20, often texts that center on women are used in a sexualized fashion. This is the result of poor biblical interpretation and exegesis. Rather than focusing on the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well’s previous marriage and current living conditions, a faithful teacher or preacher will emphasize the evangelistic mission to the Samaritan community. Through adequate research a preacher or a teacher will acknowledge that there is unclear evidence to suggest she has been divorced and the divorce is a result of adultery. They will read the text for what is stated rather than seeking to place it within the modern church’s understanding of relationships and marriages. Similarly, when preaching John 20, the same individual will look at the manner in which Mary Magdalene has historically been portrayed and how that greatly differs from the gospel text. They will see her as the first person to proclaim the risen Lord, rather than a reformed prostitute. With faithful exegesis and accurate teaching, the dialogue about women during the life and ministry of Jesus slowly changes.

Through exegesis and biblical research, it is clear that both the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well and Mary Magdalene lived out the role of apostle, sharing their experiences with their respective communities. The Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well’s apostolic calling was implicit while Mary Magdalene’s was explicit, with Jesus clearly directing her to go and tell the others about the resurrection (John 20:14). Yet both of these women show clergy and lay women in the modern church that the leadership of women in the life and ministry of Jesus was greatly valued. If Jesus saw women as vital and imperative to the good news, why then do men and women in the Church question
the callings of their sisters? The answer is simple: a lack of biblical research and poor exegesis by those who preach and text the sacred words of the Bible.

In June of 2018, I had the privilege of preaching at the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference during a morning worship service. The passage for the day was John 4. During the sermon, I mentioned the issues surrounding the commonly held assumption of adultery which leads the woman to the well in the heat of the day. I also cited Gail O’Day and Susan E. Hylen’s claim that the woman might be part of a Levirate marriage which could explain her previous marriages.242 I mentioned this briefly, however following the worship service I was stopped by a clergyperson who was intrigued and interested to know more. Even with a Master of Divinity from a well-respected institution, he was not aware of O’Day and Hylen’s research. This information may not change the homiletical work for many who preach the text. I imagine that this individual would not seek to sexualize the women who Jesus meets at Jacob’s well. However, for those who would otherwise seek to sexualize the woman at the well by emphasizing her previous marriage, education about other perspectives could change the emphasis of the sermon. The sermon, in this instance, becomes not about the redemption of the woman and salvation from the sin of adultery, but about her willingness to leave the jar of water, return to the village, and tell others about the Messiah.

Curriculum and resources are vital to changing this narrative. Books like Preaching the Women of the Bible by Lisa Wilson Davison highlight the necessity of

242 O’Day and Hylen, John, 53.
using women from the biblical text to demonstrate women’s leadership. She writes, “…this book is an attempt to give voice to some of the female characters in the Bible, specifically through the spoken word of the sermon.”

Resources such as this are useful for both male and female preachers who seek to teach the biblical text faithfully to their congregations.

Though there are texts which are used to challenge the leadership and voices of women, there are far more passages, stories, and descriptions which can be used to demonstrate equality for women in pastoral ministry and lay leadership. Two passages that detail the manner in which women, who had clear interactions with Jesus, proclaimed their experience to both men and women are John 4 and John 20. In these texts the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well as well as Mary Magdalene boldly proclaim the Messiah. These women do not simply share this Good News with other women and children; rather they tell men and women about their experience with Jesus. They preach the gospel before the church develops a common understanding of preaching or exegesis and their testimony is powerful for those who hear their words. The Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene proclaim faithfully because the life and ministry of Jesus is so transformational that it calls them to push beyond the bounds of their preconceived gender roles to share this experience with those in their communities. They serve as a model for women in the current ecclesial setting, demonstrating through their actions that women are called to preach and lead in their communities by speaking messages of truth,

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grace, strength, and love which call others to proclaim the risen Christ. The voice of all
women, past and present, is indispensable for the evangelical mission of the Church.

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