

RESEARCH PAPER

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Luke 24:11 NIV

But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

It has been there from the start. The passionate gospel proclamation of women and the coinciding dismissiveness of men. There was no gap between when women, divinely visited by God, proclaimed what they saw and when their words were summarily dismissed as “nonsense.” Both elements were there day one. From the angelic visitation and nuance of the Greek verb for “telling” that communicates their proclamation was to go on and on, there are multiple proofs that women were intended to be divine witnesses.¹ There is also the outright statement of disbelief in what they bore witness to directly.² I will argue that women were divinely intended carriers of the gospel, and yet, because of cultural norms, were and are dismissed today.

¹ Reid, Barbara E., Shelly Matthews, and Amy-Jill Levine. *Luke 10-24*. Collegeville, MN, UNITED STATES: Liturgical Press, 2021.

² Fitzmyer, Joseph A. 2010. *The Gospel According to Luke X-Xxiv : Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. The Anchor Yale Bible, V. 28a. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Contextual -Literary Analysis

Luke 24:1 NIV

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.

Luke begins his account of the resurrection with the women. In fact, his main characters to the all-important moment in the Christian faith are indeed women. All 4 gospel accounts include the women, but Luke highlights their role in keeping with one of his major distinctive themes. Going a step further, the Galilean women were the only group to see all 3 necessary elements of the resurrection story.³ They saw firsthand the crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb of Jesus. No other group saw all 3 of these foundational elements to the faith of Christians.⁴ Despite their first-hand account, not something they simply heard from someone else, their testimony was taken as “nonsense.” This word in the original was used of a patient that is speaking deliriously or gibberish from a fevered state.⁵ This gives us insight into the uphill battle women have faced through all the ages of Christianity. If women, who were there as eyewitnesses to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus were dismissed as easily as this, what hope do women of today have in witnessing to the gospel?

It is important to note that the women both saw and heard things firsthand. They saw the crucifixion (Luke 23:49). They saw the burial (Luke 23:55). They saw the empty tomb (Luke 24:3). Could there be any stronger witness? Not only did they see it, but it was a group of them. Multiple witnesses. On top of that, it was the same witnesses at each event. There could be no

³ Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Luke*. Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015.

⁴ Gadenz, Pablo T., Peter Williamson, and Mary Healy. *The Gospel of Luke (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture)*. Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: Baker Academic, 2018.

⁵ Bock, Darrell L. *Luke: 2 Volumes (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: Baker Academic, 1996.

confusion or need for collaboration on what was seen. These were not “fly by night” passersby. These were devoted followers who had been with Jesus and even invested in His ministry for several years. Their heart was to anoint His body with spices. They were devoted to Him even in death.⁶ Even beyond the seeming reality of His Messiah bid going awry, they were still devoted. Yet, during their extreme grief and disappointment, they were startled and instructed divinely by the supernatural appearance of angels.

The angels bring us the second witness of the senses in the form of hearing them speak (Luke 24:5-7). They saw with their eyes, but now they hear with their ears. If seeing were not enough, and it was, they were instructed by angels. The empty tomb and later encounter with the risen Jesus would have been more than enough to legitimize this climatic gospel account. But now, the angels of God, give direct interpretation to the women. This completes the requirement of “out of the mouth of two or three witnesses” in two different dimensions. There were at least 3 of them that witnessed it all. There were two different forms of witness that were given to them. These women were not only qualified, but they were double qualified!

The words of the angels pick up on the continuity of the devotion and witness of the women. The angels reminded them of what Jesus had said when He was in Galilee.⁷ This is an amazing statement. This authenticates that heaven took notice, and even regarded their participation as notable. If the discipleship and witness of women was not meaningful, then why did heaven take note of their devotion and discipleship “in Galilee”? This was an authentication of their devotion to Jesus and their committed discipleship. There is honor and acknowledgment

⁶ Parsons, Mikeal C., Charles Talbert, and Bruce Longenecker. *Luke (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: Baker Academic, 2015.

⁷ Carroll, John T. *Luke: A Commentary*. Louisville, UNITED STATES: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012.

from a divine source here. They were not just “tag-alongs” in the ministry of Jesus. They were not simply “fans” of the Messiah. They were not simply curious about miracles. They were not used for contributions to the ministry. They were devoted followers that got the attention of heaven. This component is reinforced when it says, “Then they remembered his words” (Luke 24:8). They had paid close attention to the Master’s words. Their minds were sharp, and they were astute students of the Master. If they could remember words spoken before the dramatic events of the Passion week all the way back in Galilee, then how much more credible is their witness spoken immediately following their encounter with the empty tomb and the angelic visitors?

Luke 24:12 NIV

Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Following their report to the Eleven, Peter jumps up and runs to the tomb. Even though it all seemed like nonsense to the entire group, something in Peter needed to know for sure. Thank God that someone gave a little, if not much, credence to the accurate report of the women. It is sad, however, that among the ten other apostles and all the “others” assembled, no one else took their witness seriously enough to investigate. (Now in John’s account, we are told that John also ran to the tomb with Peter, but in Luke’s account, no one else seemed to care enough to make a move toward the tomb to investigate.)

It is of note that when Peter arrived at the empty tomb, no angel appeared to him as did to the women to confirm things. This is typical for supernatural appearances. Once God has spoken, He is not in the business of repeating things, especially if it is over biased against His chosen vessels of witness! **If God was simply showing love to the women by appearing to them and did not intend for their witness to stand without the testimony of a man, then it would seem**

the angels would have appeared in some way to Peter as well and thus sealing the account with the witness of man. This is not what happened.

Peter goes to the tomb and saw more than the women did in their initial discovery of the empty tomb. He sees strips of linen lying by themselves. He witnesses the grave clothes of Jesus. He is trying to understand such things and perhaps is still wrestling with what could have been done to the body of Jesus if the grave clothes were removed. Faith had not yet come into his heart. The witness of the women had not brought faith in the resurrection. His own witness of the empty tomb did not do it. This perhaps gives some hope. Hope that mankind is always crippled by fear and doubt, regardless of the messenger. Yes, the women were discredited unjustly because of their gender. But also, there is an element of doubt and unbelief that humanity possesses due to the fall that cannot be attributed to prejudice against women. This reality should comfort and encourage women to press on, even in the face of discrimination and doubt. Men face the same obstacle, if not in the same measure, but the same root cause.

Detailed Analysis

There are several key words in our study that need to be highlighted. The word remember and the word nonsense. The word remember is the word *mimnēskomai* in Greek. It is mentioned twice in the passage leading up to our selected verse. Once it is used by the angels to the women. Secondly it is said of the women after the angelic encounter.⁸ These women were challenged to remember as a statement to all who would follow their primary witness to the resurrection. The word nonsense is *lēros* in Greek. It literally means idle tale or nonsense as it is

⁸ Carroll, John T. *Luke: A Commentary*. Louisville, UNITED STATES: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012.

often translated. This word could be the entire focus of our study as it carries with it many connotations of male superiority and epitomizes the plight of women witnesses through the ages.⁹

Another key element for the backdrop of our passage and thesis is that of angels appearing to women. There are two such appearances in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, Hagar is visited by the angel of the Lord. Another notable appearance to a woman was the “wife of Manoah”. This was Samson’s mom. Finally, we have the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary to announce the coming of Jesus through her womb. God has divinely chosen to appear to women on many occasions. They were credible enough for God to send an angel to appear to them. Hagar had no witness there to collaborate. Mary had no witness to collaborate. The biblical account of each comes from them alone with no male witness. **Why would we take their word on this and put it in the Holy Scriptures but ignore the preaching of women who declare the good news of salvation through Christ?**

There is another interesting element to Luke’s account found in the fact that he gives the backstory of what the women are told by the angels before stating who they were by name.¹⁰ Mark does not let the women speak. Luke not only lets the women speak but gives them a prominent place in the resurrection narrative (footnote). They are the first to see the empty tomb. They are the first to believe by faith and respond in declaring the good news, even before seeing Jesus. The Eleven had to see Jesus to truly believe. The women did not. If you look at the

⁹ Johnson, Luke Timothy, and Daniel J. Harrington. *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, MN, UNITED STATES: Liturgical Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Bovon François, Helmut Koester, and James E Crouch. 2012. Luke 3 : A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28-24:53. Hermeneia--A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

account of Thomas from John (reference), you see that the women are blessed “because they have not seen and yet believed.”

Let’s look at the sovereignty of God in choosing women at the first witnesses. Mary Magdelene was the only person to be recorded as seeing the resurrected Lord Jesus in all four gospel accounts.¹¹ This has caused some to label her “apostle of the apostles.” The women were the first group to witness the resurrection and be told by angels what had happened, echoing the angels telling the shepherds of the birth of Jesus. There can be no doubt that God wanted women to be the first to know He had raised Jesus from the dead. The revelation that He was risen came with a charge to remember all that He had said. If witnessing the resurrection was for their sakes only, why would they need to remember all He had said in Galilee? If they were not meant to be witnesses, why would they need to remember and why would they receive an angelic visitation? If it was only the love of God that was made manifest in this appearance and not witness intended, why was Peter not afforded the same angelic appearance to give male legitimacy to the whole empty tomb scene?

One note that must be submitted to this argument is that of the possibility of Joanna being the Lukan source for the authorship of this account. How did Luke know these details? Who was there but the women themselves? Similar to the reliance on Hagar and Mary for the account of angelic appearance, one of the women had to bear witness to Luke or Luke’s source of what had happened. The detail of the account suggests an eyewitness account as the source of Luke’s writing. Many details are far beyond the Marcan account. Bauckham brought up an interesting theory of the chiasm represented in Luke 24:9b-10 that places Joanna at the center. He supposes

¹¹ Patella, Michael F., and Daniel Durken. *The Gospel According to Luke: Volume 3*. Collegeville, MN, UNITED STATES: Liturgical Press, 2005.

this is a clue to the fact that Joanna was most likely the source Luke drew on in his account of the resurrection from the empty tomb.¹²

As we approach the heart of the issue at hand, let us focus more on the word “nonsense” that is used to describe the Eleven’s response to the eyewitness of the women. Here we have the three women mentioned and “the others” who give a detailed account of what took place at the empty tomb. They saw first-hand the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, and then saw and heard the angels give admonition and witness to the fact that Jesus was indeed alive. There were three basic responses to this account that could have happened. They could have believed. They could have not understood but remained open to possibilities (which Peter ultimately demonstrated alone). The final option, which is the one at least 10 of them chose, according to Luke, was to treat the women as being foolish or literally delirious. This word is where we get the root for our word delirious and speaks of someone who is suffering from a high fever and talking out of their mind. This is the level of trust these men had in the women who reported.¹³ If these had been women they did not know or who had not been with them for years serving Jesus, it might be excused or understandable. These women had been there for all the great miracles and teachings of Jesus. They had traveled together and watched in amazement as Jesus healed, delivered, and even raised the dead. And yet, because of the enormity of what had transpired and some bias to the testimony of women, the account of the greatest event in human history was treated as nonsense. Luke uses this word to stress the full weight of their response. He leaves no doubt as to the way the report was received. Not at all. Not even close. Summarily dismissed!¹⁴

¹² Garland, David E. 2011. *Luke*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan.

¹³ Jeffrey, David Lyle. *Luke*. Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: Brazos Press, 2012.

¹⁴ Carroll, John T. *Luke: A Commentary*. Louisville, UNITED STATES: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012.

Synthesis

Ultimately, the “nonsense” response of the apostles is the same response given today to the women who have encountered the risen Jesus and step out to bear witness. Not much has changed from the initial report given by women. Women are still sounding the gospel message loudly, and men are still disbelieving. The initial excuse of not having the context to understand or believe is gone. All we are left with today is the simple fact that a woman (or non-man) is bearing witness. Of course, there are issues of biblical interpretation of passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12, but in the end, the women of our day are no better off as witnesses than the women who were trusted with the first eyewitness account of the empty tomb and an accompanying angelic appearance.

There is no way anyone can faithfully approach the text of Luke 24:1-11 and not come away with a sense of honor for the role of the women in their witness of the resurrection. Their bravery to stand boldly at the foot of Calvary, follow Joseph of Arimathea to the burial tomb, and participate as the initial eyewitnesses of the resurrection narrative should cause even the most chauvinistic of our camp to give credit where credit is due.

There is something deep in the psyche of men that denies women equal standing and resists their ability to stand as witnesses to the risen Christ. In fact, there have been many attempts to discredit the very faith of Christianity since the primary witnesses of the resurrection were women. How could God ever make the mistake of choosing women in solidifying the most important event in the Christian faith? How could women be relied on to carry this incredibly important news to the apostles when the apostles are the very ones we applaud as being the progenitors of our Christian heritage?

The Luke narrative highlights women from start to finish. We have an angelic appearance to start the book and another to end the book. Both are of utmost importance. The birth of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus were both heralded by angels and were both to women alone. Joseph was not there when Mary saw Gabriel and heard the Messianic announcement. Peter and the other apostles were not there when the women saw the angels and heard the explanation of the resurrected Jesus. Based on the strength of these undeniable facts, why would we limit women from declaring the gospel? Why would we stop them from simply telling of what they have seen and heard from the risen Jesus? If their devotion to Him has brought them to a place of revelation, why would we deny them the ability to proclaim?

I must admit that deep in my heart is the same bias that the Eleven had on that first day of the faith. Step by step, this bias is exposed and removed at the Cross. Male superiority and all the accompanying beliefs that would hinder women have to die at the Cross of Jesus. Thank God Peter was open to hearing them. Thank God there are Peter's today who are still open to hearing and eventually willing to become champions of women.

Reflection/Application

There are huge implications to the life of every believer with this passage. For men, deciding to eliminate two-thirds of the Body of Christ because of some disputed passages in the epistles is hardly conscionable. As men, we need to take a step back and ask the Holy Spirit to show us where we have neglected the development of women and where we have directly impeded their ability to be faithful to the calling on their lives to be witnesses of the risen Christ.

For women, this passage and many others should bolster their confidence that they have a role to play in the final harvest. Their voice is needed. They are called and gifted to declare the Good News in the same way as men. They are not lesser because they are female. They are equal in importance to the cause. Their bravery is the only reason we have full documentation of the most important event in the faith. Left up to the men, much would be missing from our story.

For this passage, Luke's perspective was in line with the journey I have been on for 20 years in regard to releasing women into preaching ministry. The more I study, the more convinced I become of the important role Christ intends for them to have and convicted of my lack of priority to preparing women for this sacred task.

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