

10.12.25 Sermon Transcript – John 20:1-18/UWF Sunday

So some of you might know that one of my many tattoos that I have is of Mary Magdalene and Jesus. Up on this arm I have Mary Magdalene. And it's stained-glass style. It's the scene that we heard this morning. Typically, we hear this text on Easter Sunday every few years, but it's one of my favorite passages. I have always loved Mary Magdalene. I've always felt an affinity towards her because she's the first one to see the risen Christ. She's the one that Jesus commissions and sends. And of course, in that day, it was a bit scandalous that a woman was the one who was called to first go and proclaim to the rest of the disciples that she has seen the Lord. So I wanted us to hear this passage reminding us that from the very first, God has called not only men, but also women, and all people to be his messengers, to be his witnesses. Now, in St. Marks, this community has long-affirmed and lifted up women, and men, and all people to serve in the name of Jesus Christ.

But today especially for United Women in Faith Sunday, I want to highlight the fact that women have been called and sent from the very beginning. So yesterday afternoon, when I found out that Louisa was probably was not going to be able to be here, I thought to myself, "Well, what, what am I going to preach?" I've had all week and I've not been thinking about a thing because I thought, "Ah, I'll have a Sunday where I can just sit and listen!" I realized I don't really know much about the history of United Methodist Women, which is now United Women in Faith, so I decided to spend a little bit of time yesterday afternoon, and yesterday evening, (and even a little bit this morning) learning about the history of United Methodist women and some of the key figures in the movement over the years.

I thought this would be a good morning to share some of those stories with you. So the United Methodist women really has its origins back in the late 1800s and 1869 in Boston, Massachusetts, to be exact. There were two women who were wives of Methodist missionaries who had just returned from India. Their names were Lois Parker and Clementina Butler. And so they met together with a group of women from the local church, Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church. They met on March 23, 1869, and they shared about what they had seen and experienced when they were in India, and what they saw was that women in India had no access to good quality medical care. Many were isolated and did not have opportunities for education. As these two women met with this group of local Methodist Episcopal women, they all decided that they were not going to wait for somebody else to do something, but that they were going to do something.

They ended up forming the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, and their very first decision was to send two women back to India. They sent Dr. Clara Swain, who was the first woman missionary physician in the Methodist tradition, and Isabella Thoburn, who was a teacher. She ended up also founding a women's college in India. Between them, they opened up a hospital for women and a girls school, and apparently both of those are still in existence today. So that's how it started: a group of women who were engaged in the world around them, and they decided, this is not somebody else's to deal with. This is ours to do.

And so, over the coming decades, as this movement and these ideas started to coalesce, there were missionary societies that were formed all across the United States. They did things like sewing quilts and collecting funds; they had teas and bake sales. But those were all to raise funds to support women's hospitals and schools and other things of need in communities around the world. They did things! They founded colleges for women like Scarritt College and Bennett College. They created homes for girls and settlement houses for immigrants. They advocated for racial justice, and temperance, and women's suffrage long before the wider church did.

If you know anything about the history of United Methodist women, then you probably know that United Methodist women were always at the front edge of the church as far as how they were engaged in social issues in the world around them. (And that's still really true today.) From the 1930s to the 1970s, was a shift away from just focusing on service, shifting from charity to justice. And so their work expanded, especially in the 30s and 40s, to focus on the Great Depression's effects on families. They also focused on issues of racial segregation in the church. They were also a strong voice in calling for peace during and after World War II. In the 1960s and 70s, the United Methodist women were at the forefront of the civil rights movement. They had global mission partnerships, and they also pushed for the ordination of women, which was granted in 1956. In 1973, they officially became the organization United Methodist Women, a merging together of a number of different missionary societies in more recent decades. Towards the end of last century, the 80s up to the 2000s, they began focusing on more education for women and girls worldwide, economic justice and fair trade.

My friend Jenny Williams, who is a United Methodist pastor, grew up in a church in California. And she told me that the United Methodist women were very strong in advocating for justice and fair trade there – and so they were boycotting a company, I want to say it was Nestle, but so they weren't getting chocolate. And so Jenny, as a child, remembers, because of the United Methodist women, she did not get to eat chocolate chip cookies during fellowship time in worship! But that was their commitment to work, to push for justice.

United Methodist women have also focused on environmental sustainability, ending human trafficking and domestic violence, and health and maternal care in developing nations. I mean, the list goes on and on and on.

Just a few years back, they changed the name from United Methodist Women to United Women in Faith in order to better reflect its mission in a changing world. The new name keeps that same heart for justice and discipleship and sisterhood, but it expands its welcome to all women, not just those who are a part of United Methodist congregations.

But I want to name a few of those significant women throughout the history of the United Methodist women movement. So first, I already mentioned Dr. Clara Swain as she went to India. She was the only female doctor in all of India at that time, and she began treating patients in her home. She also began teaching Indian women basic medicine so that they could then better help their own communities. She opened that first women's hospital in Asia, the Clara Swain Hospital. Her work wasn't just about healing bodies, it was also about helping to change culture.

Isabella Thoburn, in the same way, went to be a teacher in India. She began with just six girls sitting on the floor of her home, learning to read. For me, that's a powerful reminder – we don't have to start with these big things. It can start with just the seeds, with a few people. She believed that God wanted every girl to have an education. And so she kept teaching, and that school grew. Her motto was, “We can do nothing less than our best for the daughters of India.”

A name that you might know is Sojourner Truth. She lived in the 1800s, before the formal women's societies existed, but the spirit of that movement was alive in Sojourner Truth. She was a formerly enslaved woman who became a Methodist preacher, an abolitionist and an advocate for women's rights. She walked into town just preaching that God calls everyone, men and women alike, to be free and to lead.

In more recent decades, Harriet Jane Olson was the general secretary of United Methodist women for 20 years, and she guided the organization through a lot of changes, but her focus was on really helping to shape the advocacy work of United Methodist Women. Under her leadership, the United Methodist Women focused on ending child marriage, addressing climate change, promoting fair wages and access for women to maternal health care. She said that this mission is not just about charity. It's about changing systems that keep people poor and oppressed. This is just part of the legacy of United Methodist women, now United Women in Faith. United Women in Faith have been people who have stood for justice, for equity. United Women in Faith are those who have been standing at the front edge, pushing society towards something that is more just, that reflects the values of the Kingdom of God.

Here in our own congregation, the United Women in Faith have been working together. You see things all the time about collecting suitcases for those in foster care, for learning more about that system. This year the United Women in Faith are observing the Year of the Child. Why? Because the United Women in Faith know that care for our children is of utmost importance. Bonhoeffer said the true test of a moral society is the kind of world it leaves for its children. I think the United Women in Faith know that that is true. We have folks here in our own congregation, in our own community whose names may never be in the headlines, but they are people who faithfully serve, who are always looking at the world around us and the needs of our community.

United Methodist Women, United Women in Faith remind all of us that we are all called to serve, that we are all called to work for justice, that we are all called to be witnesses to the hope of the risen Christ. Thinking all the way back to Mary Magdalene, the first person sent by the risen Christ, United Women in Faith have been called and sent, as well as you and me. All of us are called to serve Jesus Christ. We're not called just to look inward at our own souls, though that is a part of following Jesus. But even more, we're called to love God. We are called to love our neighbors. And so today, as we celebrate United Women in Faith, I encourage you to ask the question, how is God calling me? Where is God calling me? To whom is God calling me? And who is God calling alongside me to go and put faith in action changes the world? May we all have such faith. Amen.