

## "One Day I Walked Along"

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### **READINGS AND SCRIPTURE –**

Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve disciples were with him as well as some women ..... Mary, called Magdalene, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources. ~ *from Luke 8: 1-3*

When Jesus was crucified, many women looked on from a distance, among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome. These women had followed Jesus and provided for him when he was in Galilee; there were many other women who had come up with Jesus to Jerusalem. ~ *from Mark 15: 40*

Mary and Mary Magdalene loved in such a way that they shed their fear. Empowered by their faith and their encounters with Jesus, they proclaimed what they had seen and what they knew to be true. These women invite you and me to such faith. Their testimony stands through the ages, as a reminder to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you, for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love." ~ *Joyce Hollyday, "An Invitation"*

**SERMON** - In the words of a Native American storyteller, I do not know that this story happened exactly this way, but I do know that this story is true.

It was a long time ago when I went on my pilgrimage. When it began, I didn't know that was what I was doing. It seemed like I was just trying to live and stay afloat. My name is Eliana, which in Hebrew means "my God has answered." When I was young, I thought my name was quite ironic, because it didn't seem to me that God was answering anything, not even my simplest questions or needs.

I was born in Capernaum, a busy trading port and customs center on the north end of the Sea of Galilee. My family lived in one room in the oldest part of town. My father worked, when he could, unloading the boats at the port. My mother was frail. Like most of the people around us, we hovered between being poor and being destitute. When I was thirteen, my parents and both my brothers died within one week when a terrible illness swept through the city. I was suddenly an orphan, and, according to tradition, my mother's older sister and her husband had to take me in. Begrudgingly, my uncle did so, but, in his presence, I always felt like an intruder, just a bit above a beggar. I feared that he would hand me off in marriage to someone I didn't even know. My uncle owned fishing boats and, to me, he seemed rich among people who had little. My aunt and uncle shared their home with several generations of relatives, including their three sons, their son's wives and their grandchildren. Though my aunt Susanna was always kind to me, I was overwhelmed by all the people in that house, and I was hidden inside my grief. I refused to go out of the house, so my aunt assigned me to help prepare the meals, thinking that might jolt my spirits. But it didn't.

I went on this way for quite a while, until my uncle finally forced me to go to the synagogue with the family one week. I was so angry at God, over the loss of my family, that I just sat there in a miserable, clenched shell. At first, the chants and the prayers just flew around me like disconnected white noise. It was the words of the Psalm that finally reached through my wall of defenses, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day? Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death. Show me your steadfast love, so that my heart may rejoice in your salvation." Those words seemed to be written just for me. I could pray them silently; I could say them out loud, and they were true. I won't tell you that I was instantly healed, but some deep impasse inside me had been broken open.

When we went back to the synagogue the next week, a man stood up to read from the scrolls, and then he spoke. His voice was confident and clear, yet so calm; his eyes seemed to focus right on me; and there seemed to be light all around him. He talked about the good news of the kingdom of God: it is like yeast bubbling up in the dough; it is like a tiny mustard seed growing into a big shrub with large branches; it is both around us and within us. As I listened, I could feel God's spirit like yeast rising in me; I had an image of my grief shaded and protected by the branches growing from the small seed of faith. I was drawn to this man and to what he was saying; I wanted to know more. After the service, everyone was talking about him; his name was Jesus.

In the weeks that followed, I found that I could now pray for my parents and my brothers and for myself. I was like a child, beginning to walk, like a pilgrim seeing a winding path of faith opening up in front of me. During those same weeks, my Aunt Suzanna went off for hours at a time, sometimes for all day. When I learned that she was going off to meet Jesus, I asked to come with her.

And so I walked along with her to nearby villages where crowds gathered to hear him. She always took food and whatever money and provisions she could spare to help provide for Jesus and his friends. As I listened to him speak, even in those public places, in those large crowds, his message was somehow always personal. I knew that I was being called to a journey of awakening.

Walking with my aunt on those days when we went to hear Jesus became times of blessing for me that melted the barriers between us. As the weeks went on, my life, even my thoughts, seemed to have color again. My sense of God's presence became deeper and also expanded more often to include the people around me. And, let me tell you, there were all kinds of people around me in those crowds. I saw Levi the tax collector who my uncle hated, and Rahab, the woman who had four husbands and had left each of them. I saw Bartelmus the blind beggar and his cousin who was always drunk as well as Abigail who had to be carried there because she couldn't walk herself. I saw women with babies, elders, people of all ages and walks of life. At first, it was very scary for me, so I would stay toward the side or the back of the gathering.

One day, we were near the sea of Galilee. Jesus had spoken to a huge crowd and the afternoon was growing long. He called all his friends together and asked if there was enough bread to feed these people before they began walking home. I was too far back to see exactly what happened, but then Susanna came to me with two

baskets of bread. "Pass them with me," she said. And there I was, walking among all these strange people, giving them bread. I thought they might grab for it, fight over it, or worse yet, grab me. But they didn't. When I finally had the courage to lift my eyes and look at them, I saw ..... well, I saw people, just people, who had their own sorrows and burdens, who were on their own journey, who were in need of healing and love, just like me. In that hour, I stepped out of the shadows of my own story, and in that sharing and giving, I was no longer worried about myself. I felt taller, stronger, empowered, and, most amazingly, I felt like someone who could help, who could give others what they needed.

So I sailed along on my path of discovery for several months, soaking in what I heard Jesus say, watching what was happening to people who came to him. A few months later, as Jesus was sitting and teaching among a group of people, the religious authorities in that town brought before him a woman who had been caught in the very act of adultery. The law of the time required that she be stoned to death, and the authorities, to test Jesus, wanted to know what he had to say about that.

Jesus looked at them and then looked down and wrote on the ground with his finger without a sound. When the authorities continued to question him, he stood up and said, "Let anyone of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And he sat down and once again wrote on the ground.

I was frozen with fright, hardly able to breathe. What if they actually stoned this woman to death in front of me? What would I do? What if they took the stones and threw them at Jesus instead? My heart sank to my stomach and my stomach to my feet; my hands were shaking.

But when they heard his words, the authorities and some of the people in the crowd who had picked up stones, simply walked away, one by one. When they were gone, Jesus stood again and said to the woman, right in front of us, "Is there no one here to condemn you?" She looked around and said, "No one, sir." And he said, "Neither then do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

I couldn't believe it! This was more than a message of compassion and salvation; this was the actual doing of compassion and forgiveness. It was the act of redemption, right there in front of me. His words, that I had heard many times before, "As you judge others, so shall you be judged," had just come to life before my eyes. And Jesus did this all without anger, without recriminations, without violence. He did it quietly, simply, by being himself and speaking the truth. It was clear to me what the next step on my pilgrimage was to be. I was now on the path to find my voice, so that I could speak the truth of my faith and of my life with understanding and with courage.

Looking back, I should have known that no pilgrimage leads in a straight line to a simple ending. When Susanna told me that she was going with Jesus' disciples, both men and women, to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, I was sure this would be the pinnacle of his ministry. And I was crushed when my uncle would not allow me to go with her. Nothing I could say or do could dissuade him and finally Susanna herself agreed that it would be better for me to stay home.

Two weeks later, Susanna returned. I hardly recognized her. She was limping and exhausted, both distraught and agitated. I could not believe the story she told of

Jesus arrest and crucifixion. It was horrible to hear; I could not imagine what it had been like for her to be there. She told also of going on Sunday morning to the tomb, with all the other women who had been with Jesus, and finding it empty. None of the disciples knew what to do, so they all left, afraid of what might happen to them if the Romans began rounding up Jesus' friends. While I never saw Jesus alive again, I heard that some of his disciples had experiences of seeing him.

"It is all over," I thought. All that awakening, that hope, that faith – lost, gone, done. What was left? How would I ever make sense out of what had happened? As the months went by, people continued to speak of Jesus, and his words were kept alive not only among his friends but also in conversations at the synagogue. One Sabbath, as the Rabbi read that Psalm again, I could hear Jesus' voice answering each question – How long, O Lord, will you hide your face from me? *The spirit of God is right there with you, rising in you like the yeast in bread.* How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart? *Rest your sorrow in the shade of the branches grown from the mustard seed of faith.* Give light to my eyes, show me your steadfast love. *The Kingdom of God is within you.* Suddenly, it all came around full circle for me.

I had thought that Jesus' brutal and tragic death was the destruction of everything I had believed in. I learned, instead, that tragedy and loss are an inescapable part of the spiritual journey. And I learned that tragedy and loss do not cancel out the light and the hope that have preceded them. Jesus' death didn't wipe away his teachings, his healing, his love and compassion, his ability to embody the holy and show us a path to God. I discovered I had not lost everything, because what I had found on my pilgrimage was my own self. Jesus once said that he was the mirror – and that is exactly what he was for me. Even though he was no longer alive, I still had myself, the person I had become because of what he called forth from within me.

My pilgrimage of faith has been about the journey itself. My times of walking on stones – all the grief and loss of my life – and my times of walking on the flowers of discovery and light - are all integral and equally important parts of my pilgrimage. That rhythm of gain and loss is beyond anything I could control, but what I learned was the willingness to find, even in the bitterest of losses, what remains to be lived.

And I found my courage and my voice. If you listen to these words from a letter written to a man named Timothy, perhaps you will hear the echo of my ministry, as it came to unfold: "You are called to rekindle the gift of God that is within you, for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love."

May you, my friends, also find what you seek on your own pilgrimage. May you come home to a sense of faith, come home to your true and courageous self.