

2024 Great Canadian Bible Study - The Women at the Cross

by Rev. Sandra Sutherland



As you participate in the Great Canadian Bible Study, you have the opportunity to take up an offering to help children and youth through the CBM project, Health and Mentorship for Girls and Boys in Kenya. Find more information on the project and where to send your offerings at the end of this study.

Introduction

Several months ago, I saw a painting of three women who could have been among the women who watched Jesus die on the cross. The painting made me think about the Gospel accounts of the women at the foot of the cross and how little I knew about them.

When we read about Jesus' death on the cross, we understandably focus on Jesus, not on the crowd of onlookers. Furthermore, other than Jesus' instructions to John about his mother, references in the texts to the women at the foot of the cross are marginal and their presence diminished by the fact that they "watched at a distance." The women at the foot of the cross don't really come into their own until the resurrection. But when I saw the painting of these women huddled together and braced against unbelievable heartache, I began to wonder how God wanted to speak to me through them.

Who Were These Women at the Cross?

Group activity

a) Divide into four smaller groups. Give each group one of the following Scripture passages to read:

Group One - Matthew 27: 55-56

Group Two - Mark 15: 40-41

Group Three- Luke 23: 26 - 31, 49, 55-56 and Luke 24: 1, 9-10

Group Four - John 19:25.

b) Ask each group to list the women who are mentioned in their assigned verses. You might want to write the names on a whiteboard or easel paper as they are called out. Add only the names or references that aren't already on your list.

c) Eliminate (i.e. cross through) multiple references to the same women as follows:

Historical records/research show that the mother of Zebedee's sons (Matthew) = Salome (Mark)

Mary, the mother of James (the younger) and Joses (Matthew & Mark) = Mary, wife of Clopas (John)

Jesus' mother's sister (John) = Salome (Mark)

READ Luke 8: 1-3

Group activity: Put a checkmark beside the names of women on your easel or white board who are mentioned in this Luke passage. Commentaries suggest that at least some of the women who cared for Jesus were wealthy and had the means to look after His physical needs and the physical needs of His disciples.

Discuss

What would it have been like for the women at the foot of the cross to leave their homes, travel with Jesus, and help Jesus and His disciples in material ways?

How important to God's eternal purposes was the more hidden and very practical ministry these women had?

What would have motivated them to live and serve this way?

What motivates you to serve others?

How important to God's eternal purposes are hospitality and other practical things we do to care for others? Why?

At a Distance

READ Matthew 27:55, Mark 15:40 and Luke 23:49

Discuss

Why were the women watching/standing at a distance?

At that time and in that culture, women were largely ignored. The very fact that they were women was a mark of disgrace or discredit. Sadly, these women who were so devoted to Jesus, were stigmatized because of their gender. According to the Oxford Dictionary, to be stigmatized is to be marked by a wound.

Discuss

How else would some of these women at the cross have been stigmatized or marked by their wounds? (Read Mary Magdalene's story in Luke 8:1-3 to get started.)

Jesus was, and is forever, removing the stigmas people are made to bear. He spent time loving, healing and being with people who were demon-possessed, lepers, Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, children (who were thought to be unimportant), and women (who were thought to be second class citizens).

Indeed, the way Jesus died marked Him with wounds that were physical (the marks the nails and spears made in His body), emotional (He was bullied and mocked) and social (only criminals died by crucifixion).

Discuss

How do you think Jesus' pain of being wounded, shamed, and abandoned on the cross affected the women who were watching?

How does it affect you?

Reflection Exercise – At the Cross – Matthew 27:35-56 (NLT)

Ask the women in your group to imagine themselves standing at the foot of the cross with the three Mary's and the other women.

Tell them that you will invite them to enter deeply into the account of Jesus' death through a series of prompts, pausing after each prompt to give them space to imagine and reflect.

Begin with a moment of silence.

Slowly READ Matthew 27:35 – 56

Say: As you step into this scene, let the crackling tension, confusion, fear, and overwhelming sadness engulf you. (Pause)

Say: Notice the gray sky above and the rough incline beneath your feet. (Pause)

Say: Glance at your friends and see how lost and panicked they all feel. (Pause)

Say: Let yourself feel the emotions that well up inside you. (Pause)

After a moment or two of silence and as the women in your group continue to imagine themselves at the foot of the cross... **say Amen**

Discuss

What was that experience like for you?

What do you think the women at the foot of the cross were thinking and feeling as they watched Jesus die?

How would watching Jesus suffer and die on the cross affect the women's own experiences with suffering?

How does it affect yours?

Staying Then Returning

READ Matthew 27:61 – 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-10; Luke 23:55-56 & 24:1-10; John 20:1-18

Discuss

Why did Mary Magdalene and the other Mary stay to watch Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus?

Why did they and Salome return to the tomb after Sabbath?

Why do you think they continued to care for Jesus after He had died?

What could have deterred them from staying with Jesus after His death?

How was their devotion rewarded?

What are some of the things that either motivate or disrupt your devotion to the Lord?

Reflection Exercise – At the Tomb

Ask the women to prayerfully hear what happens next as Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and some of the women at the cross return to Jesus' tomb.

Tell them that this prayer exercise will involve listening to Luke's account several times and listening to the prompts you will share with them. These prompts will help them discern what God will be saying to each of them from the passage.

Reading 1

READ the passage: Luke 23:49-56 followed by Luke 24:1-10

Say: I invite you to be still before the Lord.

Silence – 20 seconds

Reading 2

Say: Now as we read the passage a second time, pay attention to a word or phrase, or something in the passage that you feel the Spirit speaking to you.

Read the passage

Say: What word or phrase stood out for you?

How might this word or phrase speak into your life?

Silence – 20 seconds

Reading 3

Say: Now as we read the passage a third time, listen for God's invitation: He is always inviting us in some way...to let go of something, or to take up something. To do something or be something...

Read the passage

Say: Listen for how God is calling you to respond.

Silence – 20 seconds

Reading 4

Say: In this final reading of the passage we are simply invited to be with the Lord and rest in His presence.

Read the passage

Allow some moments of silence while women reflect.

Say: Amen.

Ask: What was that experience of listening like for you?

Would anyone like to share what word or phrase stood out or how God is calling you to respond to what you just heard?

Standing Together

Each of the women at the cross had her unique relationship with Jesus. Yet it would have been incredibly lonely and difficult for them to live out their experience of Jesus on their own.

Discuss

How were these women better together before the cross? At the cross? After the cross?

How are we better together?

What are some of the issues that tend to keep us apart?

What does God want to say to us about these challenges?

End with prayer

This study on The Women at the Cross was written for Canadian Baptist Women for the 2024 Great Canadian Bible Study by Rev. Sandra (Sandy) Sutherland, a retired pastor with the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada. During her retirement, Sandy published a book called “Children on the Trail: A Child’s Spiritual Formation Guide for Churches and Parents” and trained to become a Spiritual Director. She is married to the Rev. Dr. Gordon Sutherland. They have two adult children and one grandchild.

2024 Great Canadian Bible Study Project Health and Mentorship for Girls and Boys in Kenya

Remember the funds Atlantic Baptist Women raised for the 2023 ABW walkathon for girls in Kenya? The 2024 GBCS project builds upon the walkathon project as it expands to reach out to boys. This is very important as boys also need to be taught about the physiological and psychological changes that occur during growth from childhood to adulthood. Inaccurate theories about sexuality cause intimidation, unexpected pregnancies, and a rise in the school dropout rate. As boys and girls are taught to respect one another, it is hoped that future domestic violence issues will decrease dramatically. Through this project, Canadian Baptist Ministries’ partner, the Africa Christian Church and Schools, will mentor young school-aged girls and boys by providing sex education and personal hygiene kits. Kits will contain underwear, soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and body lotion. Girls will also receive feminine hygiene products. A team of mentors, including pastors, will be established and trained to accompany girls and boys and provide them with the kits as well as with counselling on other related issues.

A video about the project can be found on Atlantic Baptist Women’s YouTube channel.

Please send your Great Canadian Bible Study offerings, made payable to Atlantic Baptist Women and designated for “GCBS 2024 Health and Mentoring Kenya,” to your ABW Provincial Treasurer. Addresses for the provincial treasurers are found on page 1 of the ABW 2023–2024 Program Resource Booklet, or contact atlanticbaptistwomen@gmail.com (506-382-3898).