

Sermon for March 8, 2026

Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

Exodus 17:1-7 Psalm 95 Romans 5:1-11 John 4:5-42

## A Woman Speaks Up

I came across a book the other day that I had forgotten I had. The writer is Mary Beard and the book is called *Women and Power: a manifesto*. On this International Women's Day, I think Mary Beard has something to say to us. And on this third Sunday of Lent, John the gospel writer has something to say as well as he tells us of an important conversation between Jesus and a woman of Samaria. You certainly wouldn't call John a feminist. But it's pretty amazing when we realize that this unnamed Samaritan woman and another woman named Mary Magdalene are the first people to whom Jesus reveals himself. Not Peter. Not the male disciples. But John gives each of these women a voice.

Mary Beard thinks she may have discovered what is the first instance in Western literature of a woman being told to shut up. It's a story from *The Odyssey* by Homer. It tells of Ulysses and the long years of adventure he had in returning home from the war between the Greeks and Trojans. Penelope is his wife, the one who spends those years faithfully weaving and waiting for his return and resolutely fighting off would-be suitors.

One day, the son of Penelope and Ulysses, Telemachus, now grown up, is having a bit of a party. There is a bard singing a sad song about the difficulties the Greek heroes are having in coming back home. Penelope isn't amused and so she asks the bard to choose a happier song. Her son speaks to her in front of all the guests, including would-be suitors: "Mother, go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff...speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household." And off she goes, back upstairs.

There are many more such admonitions against women speaking in public that the writer brings to light. Mary Beard is a professor of classics in England and every time she lectures or writes an article or a blog or book she receives hateful email and letters. She's often told she should have her tongue cut out.

The men of the ancient world took pride in women who kept their mouths shut. There were a few exceptions. Women could and did speak out as they went to the lions in the Coliseum, professing their faith. And as victims of rape – at least those whose tongues weren't cut out so they couldn't talk – a few were recorded speaking out to denounce their rapist. But for the most part women of the ancient world, including Jesus' world, were denied public speech. Their sphere was the home where they spoke only with other women, gossiping about marriages and births and sex. It was men who spoke publically. That was the way they competed for honour.

To some extent, we're still stuck in a world that silences women. Did you know that Margaret Thatcher took speech lessons to learn to use the lower part of her voice so that she'd be heard in a male world? A few years after I was ordained, when I did not have a pastoral charge, I attended a Bible study in a church near here. The question was asked: "If our church were to call a woman to be our minister, how would you feel?" An older woman, a retired teacher, said she was afraid she wouldn't be able to hear a woman's voice in the pulpit. That came as quite a shock to me. Not long after, I was the guest preacher in that church. And the woman sought me out afterwards. She said, "I could hear you just fine."

Not all women are permitted to speak out in our day. Yet, we have only to watch the news or read the paper to know that many women *are* finding their voices. They are refusing to be silent about the Epsteins, the Stronachs, even a president, even a royal, when it comes to abuse women suffered. It may have taken years for the women to break their silence and speak out, non-disclosure-agreements or not. But it's happening.

One way of hearing today's story from John's gospel is to listen to a woman telling her story to Jesus and where that conversation leads. It's a hot day when Jesus is travelling from the Passover festivities in Jerusalem back home to Galilee. He's passing through Samaria and he stops to rest while his disciples go on ahead to buy food. There's a woman at the well in this hottest part of the day and she's alone. Getting water from the well is women's work, twice a day, early morning and in the cool of the evening. And they would all go together, no men allowed. So the fact that this woman is alone means something. It means she must not be on good terms with the other women. She doesn't even just tag along at the tail end of the morning chore, waiting until the last to fill her jar. She goes alone in the mid-day heat. Clearly she's been excluded from that company of women.

What could she have done to be so shunned, so alone? She lives in a city, we're told, not on a farm, so it's hard to imagine how she would make a living ...unless she is a sex worker. We aren't told that but it's not beyond consideration. Whatever the story is, this woman has no claim to that highest value in the ancient world: honour.

She isn't named but we do know she is a Samaritan. She's from that part of Palestine long cut off from Israelite religion. She is considered by faithful Israelites to be of mixed race and religion and therefore thoroughly unclean to Judean eyes. Even the ground on which she stands is considered polluted, for other gods had been worshipped there for centuries. No faithful Judean would come near her.

And yet Jesus does. He's thirsty. And so he initiates a conversation with this lone woman of Samaria. "Give me a drink," he says.

Yikes! Is Jesus going to take a drink from this unclean woman's hands? Is he going to use her personal, polluted cup? Even she is stunned at the thought. He's on the road from Jerusalem and so she mistakes him for a Judean, even though he's actually a Galilean. She says, "How is it that you, a Judean, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

What follows is the kind of conversation John loves to record in his gospel, one in which there are two levels of meaning. It's that anti-language Bob spoke of last week. She's talking about water from a very old well. About H<sub>2</sub>O, we'd say. He's talking about living water. She's talking about the thirst that is a parched and dry throat. He's talking about a thirsting, a longing for life that is meaningful and has dignity and restores wholeness. He speaks about the spring that he will give people, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. This is the way Jesus has begun talking to his disciples; it's a sort of code he's giving to his small anti-society group of friends.

Now she's really stumped – and we are too. We're only in chapter 4 and we haven't yet gotten used to this coded language that John's Jesus teaches his followers. They live, after all, in what we would call military dictatorship. Dissent carries a life sentence. His followers have to stay under the radar if they are to survive and secretly gather people to help Jesus with his mission.

The new language Jesus teaches takes a while to get the hang of. It's only for insiders and this woman is still an outsider. She still thinks they're talking about a bucket of well water. She's like Nicodemus, who's

mystified by Jesus telling him he must be born again, born from above. Those whom Jesus gathers will live a new kind of life with language familiar only to the Jesus followers. They are to have a new allegiance, a new loyalty. The most important thing is that they'll see each other not as defined by certain social classes – peasant, artisan, fisher, Pharisee, woman or man; not as crippled or whole, blind or sighted, slave or free. Those barriers are coming down as Jesus gathers his followers. They'll see each other as no longer shameful and excluded but as honoured and included.

Certainly this woman of Samaria has been shamed in her life. If she were on good terms with the other women of her extended family, she'd be home gossiping as they prepared the mid-day meal and talked about whose betrothals have been sealed, who is having a child or who has just lost one. Women and men never talk together except when the immediate family gathers for a meal. They certainly never talked together about sex. But that's what this conversation at the well is about. She's had five husbands and is presently living with a man to whom she's not married. Whether this information is about her life as a sex worker or about the ruthless power of men who've married and divorced her, this man and this woman, alone in public, are talking about something only women together speak about. This is the clearest expression we have in the story of the way Jesus is breaking down barriers among those who want to follow him. Women aren't restricted to girl-talk. He gives this woman a voice.

And look how she uses it! Having found her voice this woman leaves her water jar, runs back to her city, and begins peaking in public, in the market square, telling people she has met a man who knows all about her and still accepts her. And she says she thinks he could be the Messiah. Because of her testimony, John writes, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus." And John writes that Jesus stays in that unclean city two days.

We get the sense that this woman will never be silenced again because she sees who Jesus really is and what that means: the thirst, the hunger, the longing of forgotten people being satisfied, their brokenness made whole. When Jesus tells them, months before harvest, that the reaper is already at work and is gathering fruit for eternal life, they know he's not just talking about grain or grapes but about the abundance of life they have because they believe in him, rest in him, abide in him.

This woman's life is transformed. She has a voice and now many others' lives are also transformed, just as they will be by that other woman's voice. Mary Magdalene also speaks out on that Easter morning, using her voice to witness to who Jesus is, the Christ, the Saviour.

Like our forebears in this ancient story, we too are living in two worlds at once: an Empire (which could be called the Empire of Buying) and the Empire of the Heavens. We are almost secretly part of an anti-society of healing and transformation. We tell the Jesus story to each other not to be lulled into a state of false well-being or false hope, but to engage and energize one another. Here we have what the larger society bemoans the loss of: the village where everyone knows everyone, where children can play freely and safely; where the old are respected and cared for.

Maybe what we need if we are to show who we are here at MacNeill is a veranda! Can you see us on the veranda, with lemonade and cookies, conversing with those who pass by? We are that village, that family, still devoted to breaking down barriers and inviting in those we meet on the road. Let's give thanks that we continue to explore how best to share the story of our ministry here at MacNeill; to welcome and affirm all who would come to us to share our ministry; to encourage each one here to speak about the gift of Jesus Christ in whom we all belong. Amen.