

## Hidden Figures

Luke 8:1-3, Romans 16:1-7

Back in 2017, a movie was released that at least on the surface didn't look like it would be a crowd-pleaser.

It was a movie about mathematicians.

Now, I come from a long line of mathematicians,

so I have a personal affinity for stories about math geeks,

but generally those aren't the characters that movie producers gravitate toward when they want a sure-fire blockbuster movie.

But this film about mathematicians was a hit.

And when the Oscar nominations were announced that year, this movie was a best picture nominee.

Maybe you saw it.

It was called 'Hidden Figures.'

And yes, it really was about mathematicians.

About three Black woman mathematicians,

Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson.

These three extraordinary women worked for NASA in the early 60's,  
Their brilliance, the mathematical work they did,  
was instrumental in making John Glenn's orbit of the earth possible in 1962,  
the first American astronaut to do it.

John Glenn actually insisted that Katherine Johnson be the one in the  
control room to make all the calculations –  
because he trusted her mind more than anyone's.

Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson.

Three women who, as black women in a Jim Crow world, had had to  
struggle just to be educated.

Three women whose intellect made possible one of the great moments of  
this nation's history.

Three women whose names hardly anyone knew until this movie came out.  
And thus the title: "Hidden Figures."

Women who were essential to our history, but hidden from our view,  
until finally their story was told.

My sermon today is about some other hidden figures.

Our hidden figures.

I'm preaching today about women who are essential to the story of our *faith*.

but who have been obscured from our view,

hidden for centuries.

Only recently has their story begun to be told.

These hidden figures of our faith are the *female* disciples of Jesus.

Jesus' women disciples.

These women followers of Jesus are actually the focus of the Thursday Bible

Studies I'm leading right now,

and I'm choosing to share their stories with you this morning.

So, this is where you say "wait, what?"

Jesus' *female* disciples?

Because women are not who you picture when you think "disciples of Jesus."

What you picture are the people I was staring at pretty recently.

David and I were in Vatican City on the Wednesday after Easter.

Most every Wednesday, the Pope addresses the crowds in St. Peter's

Square,

and on April 12<sup>th</sup>, those crowds included David and me.

And while we were sitting there, waiting for the Pope to speak,  
we were gazing up at St. Peter's basilica.

And gazing down at us were these huge statues that line its roof:  
Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas –  
all the men we know as Jesus' disciples –  
all the guys I memorized in Sunday School and maybe you did too.

But what if the line-up was actually more like this:

Andrew, *Susanna*, James, *Mary*, John, *Joanna*.

There actually is no "if" about it.

Those names you just heard *were* also Jesus' disciples.

Which means, for one thing, that there ought to be a lot more statues up on  
St. Peter's dome.

And it means that there are a whole lot of hidden figures  
in these gospel stories we know so well.

The scriptures that I just had [Julia/Santi] read  
tell the story of those hidden figures,

those women followers of Jesus  
whose names hardly anyone knows.

The passage you heard first was all of three verses from Luke's Gospel,  
three verses that anyone reading through the Gospel usually breezes right  
past.

But if you stop and read them carefully, word by word by word,  
what those three verses tell us is pretty startling.

In those verses hidden figures emerge;  
women who step forward from the shadows of history  
and let us know that they, too, were there.

That they, too were followers of Jesus .

In an era when women were supposed to stay home and stay quiet,  
these three verses tell us that, amazingly,  
there were in fact a whole bunch of women  
who left their villages, left their friends, their families,  
and joined up with the followers of Jesus.

Who were they?

One was named Joanna, whose husband, it says, worked for King Herod.

Now, King Herod was not a big Jesus fan.

So this Joanna had to have been pretty gutsy to pack up her things,

leave the King's court,

and head down the road with Jesus.

Another woman was named Susanna, it says, and all we know is that she

– like the others – had found healing and hope in Jesus.

And then there's Mary Magdalen, who in years to come,

and in movies right up to today, always gets portrayed as a loose woman

with a crush on Jesus.

But in truth Mary Magdalen was Jesus' most devoted follower.

She followed Jesus all the way to the cross,

watched as he was buried,

and was the first person to discover the empty tomb on Easter.

Those are the three women whose *names* we're given

but they're not the only women there –

“there were many other women,” the scripture says, “many others.”

So, women disciples?

Yes. Matthew *and* Susanna, Philip *and* Joanna, Thomas *and* Mary.

Yes.

And nothing about that is all that surprising,  
when you stop to think about who Jesus was,  
the kind of Messiah he was.

Jesus consistently, and courageously,  
challenged the structures of his day.

Jesus turned the religious world of his time upside down.

He told people not to get hung up on dogma and rules.

He insisted that all that really mattered was Love,

Love of God and Love of neighbor.

So of course he would be *that* Messiah who dispensed with the rules  
and welcomed women as his followers too.

And there were definitely rules about women.

No speaking in public, please.

No worshiping with men,

no asking questions about faith,  
no talking to the priests of the temples.

Then along comes Jesus and what does he do?

He treats women like – well, people.

There was the time he went to dinner at his friend Lazarus' house,  
and told Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha  
to come on out of the kitchen and sit with the guys,  
ask all the questions they want.

Nobody did that.

And then there was the time when Jesus stopped at a well to get a drink,  
and started talking to a woman who was also there.

Before you knew it, he'd shared with her that he was the Messiah,  
something he hadn't even told his *male* disciples yet.

They were a little peeved.

Jesus just keeps doing stuff like this.

The way he approached women was absolutely shocking  
to his ancient Jewish culture.

It was a complete break from the traditions of his time and his faith.

So, having a bunch of women among his disciples?

That's pretty consistent behavior for this Messiah.

Matthew *and* Susanna. Philip *and* Joanna.

Yeah, that's our Jesus.

Later on, much later on,

after Jesus' resurrection,

those same women played key roles in the spread of the Christian faith.

You can find lots of clues that some of the earliest preachers of the church were women.

Women hosted worship in their homes.

And it's clear from the Letters of Paul that many of his most trusted fellow missionaries were women.

That second scripture passage you heard [Julia/Santi] read was from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome.

And it lists a whole *host* of women church leaders that Paul was working with: he mentions Phoebe, a deacon of the church,

Prisca,

Mary – another Mary, there were a lot–

and Junia, whom Paul calls “prominent among the apostles.”

That’s quite a statement.

And then things changed.

As Christianity caught hold,

and the church grew, women once more slid into the shadows.

Their stories stopped being told –

Their names became –hidden .

How come?

How did something that started with a Messiah who welcomed women

turn into a church that didn’t let women lead worship,

didn’t let them break the bread and share the cup --

didn’t let them baptize or preach –

and still in most places doesn’t.

How did Susanna and Joanna and Junia slide into the shadows

and become *our* hidden figures?

*What happened?*

No one really knows.

Women in leadership was too countercultural, maybe;  
too controversial.

So churches started being told *not* to let women have authority.

Even the texts of the stories were altered.

That woman named Junia that Paul mentioned?

An 's' was added to the end of her name to make it Junias, which was a  
man's name.

And the stories that were handed down and written down  
were told of Peter but not Phoebe,  
of Paul but not Prisca,  
of Matthew and Mark not Susanna and Joanna.

Jesus' incredible acceptance of women was ignored or forgotten,  
and those women who had followed him faithfully and courageously  
became our hidden figures.

Only in the past few decades,

only in the time that I've been in ministry,

only in this era have scholars started to notice again that Jesus' treatment of women was astonishing.

Only in this time have people of faith started to pay attention to Joanna and Susanna and Salome and Martha and Mary Magdalen.

Only in this time has anyone noticed that Junias used to be Junia –

In fact the Bibles you have in your pews were the first translation to bring her back.

So, does any of this matter all that much?

Or is this just kind of “Da Vinci Code” intrigue, interesting to hear about, but not that important.

*Does this matter?*

I suppose you can guess my answer.

Yeah, this really does matter. It really does.

It matters to each one of us as Christians, as women AND men, to know that each one of us, each one of us,

counts fully and is fully cherished by our Savior.

It matters to me, and every woman who feels called to ministry.

It matters to know that our call is true,

and that our stories, too, belong in the story of the church.

That we aren't going to be hidden figures.

It matters to all the women

who even now, in churches across the spectrum,

are being told that their gifts of leadership are not wanted

because, well, they're women.

It matters to be able to say well, actually,

Jesus Christ himself *welcomed* them.

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Almost 34 years ago, come August,

this church invited me here.

Greenfield Hill Church said "yes, Alida, you belong in our pulpit."

It would be impossible to overstate how important that was,

not just to me, but a lot of people who witnessed that.

And who continue to witness it.

Just last month, a visitor to worship told me, with tears in her eyes,  
that she had never seen a woman in the pulpit before,  
and she was overwhelmed by how emotional it was for her.

I am so proud to be part of a congregation that,  
then and now, and every day,  
lives out Christ's welcome.

It does matter, what we do here.

It does matter.

In God's eyes, no one is a hidden figure.

Amen.