

The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany, February 7, 2021
“In Remembrance of Her”
A Monologue based on Mark 1:14 and Mark 1:29-34
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

Mark 1:13 ~ *And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered (*diakoneō*) unto Him.* (21st Century King James Version)

Mark 1:29-34 ~ ²⁹ *As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve (*diakoneō*) them. ³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.* (New Revised Standard Version)



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I know you don't know me. I haven't received the recognition some of the other women have like Elizabeth, Anna, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, all the other Marys, Dorcas, Rhoda, Lydia, Euodia and Synthche, Phoebe, Priscilla, or Chloe. I wasn't even given a name in our scriptures like they were. I was just referred to as "Simon Peter's mother-in-law." I guess that's something though. Others are just called a widow, or the woman accused of adultery, or the woman with the flow of blood, or the woman at the well, or the woman in the crowd, or the woman who anointed Jesus' head, or the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. At least I'm referred to as part of a family unit, as belonging to someone: Simon Peter's mother-in-law or the mother of Simon Peter's wife. I'll have to settle on that. I take comfort though that at least the story of my encounter with Jesus was referred to in three of the Gospels: Matthew 8:14-15, Mark 1:29-31, and Luke 4:38-39. I got two sentences in each of those! Wow! That's more than an honorable mention, I guess. But there's something about me that is usually overlooked that I want to tell you about, although you'll have to wait until the end.

I've peeked in on how my story has been told down through the centuries. Usually just a passing comment here and there as a minor character in a very busy day in the life of Jesus, which started out when he arrived in Capernaum at the beginning of his ministry. Capernaum was my town. I loved living there right on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee not far from Bethsaida. It was a busy place where there was always lots going on. Yes, people found plenty to gossip about. I remember how they had been upset with the tax collector Matthew, who lived nearby and found ways to get more taxes for the Romans than we thought we owed. Hard to believe that he was Jewish just like us. Even harder to believe that he was to become one of Jesus' most passionate followers!

Did you know that in Hebrew "Capernaum" means "Village of Comfort"? Yes, it was pretty comfortable living there since there was a well nearby to draw water and the market was just up the street from where we lived. If you walked out the front entrance of our house and turned right you would get to the synagogue that was built by a Roman centurion. I thought it was beautiful with its carvings of five- and six-pointed stars and palm trees. If you turned left going out the front entrance of the house, you would get to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where my husband, may G-d bless his departed soul, worked as a fisherman. I loved living so close to the sea with those beautiful refreshing breezes. When I walked down to the shore as the sun was rising, I would see our men out in their fishing boats. I'd pray for their safety and that they would bring back a good catch of fish, not just to feed our family, but to sell at the market.

The house I lived in then was bigger than most, with a few rooms that opened up onto two courtyards, which allowed us to live as an extended family and to have lots of guests, especially on the Sabbath. We had great neighbors too and were especially close to the Zebedee family. Their sons James and John were fishers with their father and they often went out with my son-in-law Simon and his brother Andrew. That's actually whose house I lived in: the house of my son-in-law Simon, who was married to my oldest daughter.

Let me tell you how that came to be. As I said I have always lived in Capernaum. I got engaged when I was 13 and then married when I was 15. My husband, a fisherman, was a good man and I loved the life I had with him, taking care of him and our children. Being married to a fisherman brought some perks. There was always food on the table and we had a home of our own, even though it was small. But it could be stressful at times too. My husband, starting from the time he was about eight years old, would go down to the Sea of Galilee in the early evening and get in a fishing boat with other family members. Depending on the weather and especially the wind they sometimes would stay out all night with their nets in the water. When I could hear storms suddenly coming in of course I would worry. Every year we lost at least one fishing boat in a bad storm with people drowning. So few of our people knew how to swim. After fishing during the night, they would bring their boats in early in the morning. They would be exhausted. It was hard work, after all. Hauling in those heavy nets. But they couldn't come home yet. First, they would sort and clean the fish and then they would take them to the market to sell. Then they had to make sure their boat was ready for that evening. Often there were nets to mend. I always made sure that food was on the table as soon as my husband walked in the door of the house. I would ask him how things went with fishing and in town. He would ask me for some updates about our children, who would all come in and greet him. And then I would shoo the children away as my husband reclined at the table over a glass of wine before going to sleep for most of the day.

I'm sure that you know that back then marriages were arranged. They were business transactions almost. My father arranged my marriage and I can tell you it was a happy one, although much shorter than I would have liked. We had seven babies altogether and four who survived over the course of twelve years. All four were girls! We worried about their dowries. I remember so clearly the day my husband came home and told me that he thought that Simon, who lived just down the street from us, would be the perfect match for our oldest daughter, who had just turned thirteen. She was free spirited, intelligent, curious, and loved to laugh.

She needed a husband who also had a sense of adventure and was extroverted. We all knew that Simon had a warm and charismatic personality. He was gregarious, social, and loved to schmooze. He seemed to emerge as the leader in any group he was in. He also loved G-d, was a very devout Jew, and his religion was important to him, as it was to our daughter. Physically strong and healthy, he worked hard in his family's fishing business alongside his quieter brother Andrew.

As my husband and I talked about Simon that morning over breakfast as a possible match for our oldest daughter, the only thing we could come up with that we weren't so sure about was that he sometimes seemed to operate by the seat of his pants, letting his heart and mood dictate his next move or statement before stopping to think it through. "Impulsive" might be the word I am looking for. He could be handful, but our strong-willed daughter could help keep him on track. Our daughter was open to a possible engagement to Simon. When my husband went to speak with Simon and his family, they enthusiastically agreed to the match. Before long they were engaged followed by a joyous wedding that was celebrated for days on end.

I'm so glad my husband could witness our daughter's happiness and see her husband Simon becoming more and more successful in his fishing business with his brother Andrew and also see him taking his attendance at the synagogue seriously. I'm especially grateful that he was able to meet his first grandchild! Then, one day, my husband came back from his night of fishing and complained that he was not feeling well. He looked pale, grew weaker and weaker, and lay for days in bed, unable to go out to fish. His forehead was hot to the touch and I sat by his bed day and night holding cool cloths of water to his forehead to try and bring his fever down. But to no avail. He took his last breath as I held his hand. This beautiful husband of mine who had worked so hard to support his family now lay lifeless beside me. I gathered the children and called my sisters to help me prepare his body, covering it in a white burial cloth, as family and neighbors came in to sit shiva, all wailing, sharing my sorrow. I put on the black clothing that I would be required to wear from then on, marking me as a widow, even though I was still young. What would I do? I had no sons to help support me, only daughters, all unmarried except my oldest child.

It was then that I realized how kind Simon was. He and my daughter immediately reassured me that I would be taken care of. I did not need to be afraid for my future like so many widows of that day. Indeed, they wanted me, needed me to come and live with them. After my husband was buried, I and my four daughters moved into a room in

Simon's house and became part of an extended family there that included besides my daughter, her child and Simon, also his brother Andrew, his wife, and children. Because it was one of the larger homes in the area people often congregated there, the women talking in one of the courtyards while the children played, with the men gathering in the other. Yes, that is how it was then. Men and women were separated. We could only talk to men outside our own family when one of our male family members spoke on our behalf. Women didn't have legal rights then like you do today. Before marriage we were considered the property of our father. When we married we were the property of our husband. We stayed in our assigned places in our homes, serving our husbands their meals, and eating in another place with the other women and children on our own. We worshipped on our own side of the synagogue, but that didn't really bother me. It gave the women a chance to catch up and we didn't have to worry about nursing our babies when they cried and could let our children play. We knew the roles we women had to play by taking care of our households and serving the men. Fortunately, both my husband and my daughter's husband Simon were kind. That wasn't always the case for many other women though.

But then, about a year after I lived in Simon's house, I started not to feel well. At first I just felt a little weak. I didn't have the same energy I had before when I delighted in getting up early before the sun rose and the rooster crowed, drawing water, putting wood on the fire, grinding the grain to make the day's bread, waking up the children. I loved being able to take care of my family and helping the members of Andrew's family too. And then the fever set in and I had to take to the bed. I lay in bed many days. It bothered me so much that I was not able to be of service to my family. My purpose in life had been to take care of them. My greatest joy, above all else, was to get everything ready for the Sabbath: house cleaned and swept, clothes cleaned, and a special meal prepared so that I could light the Sabbath candles, the children could be blessed as special prayers were said, and we could all relax and delight in G-d's beautiful creation. The Sabbath was such a precious gift from G-d to all of us.

I lay there that Sabbath day that is mentioned in the holy scriptures, my body drenched in sweat from fever, feeling almost delirious, afraid, and very sorry for myself. I wondered whether I would take my last breath that day and join my husband in the afterlife, so weak did I feel. My daughter came in to see me very early that morning, to help me sip some water and swallow some soup, to wash my face. She was one of the only ones who had seen me over the past few weeks, since no men were allowed in my room. She sat beside me and told me a strange tale that she had just heard.

Her husband Simon had been out with his brother Andrew fishing that night, casting their nets, when along came a man named Jesus, who was from Nazareth, saying ***“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”*** (Mk 1:15). Jesus called out to them and said ***“Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”*** (Mk 1:17). And guess what? Simon and my brother-in-law Andrew got up at once and started following him. And if that is not strange enough guess what happened next? As they were following Jesus, their best friends James and John got out of their boats, leaving their father and the hired men behind mending the nets and followed him too.” “I don’t know what has gotten into them!” my daughter said. “But they brought this guy Jesus to meet everyone at the synagogue for our morning service and I’m going to go over there right now to see what is going on.”

My daughter left the room to rush to the synagogue and I pondered what she said. I knew that Simon was a very religious man. Like so many of us who were tired of the Romans pushing us around, taking our hard-earned money for taxes to pay for Herod’s continual building projects, Simon was waiting for the Messiah about whom the prophets had spoken. Simon had thought it might be the man called John, who was baptizing people in the Jordan River after they confessed their sins. But it could not be John, since he was arrested the other day. Who could this new guy be that would lead to Simon, Andrew, John, and James suddenly to put down their fishing nets and follow him? John and James had just left their father behind. Did we need to worry about Simon leaving my daughter and our family behind too?

As I was thinking about these things my daughter came rushing into my room, all excited. “Mother,” she said. “You won’t believe what just happened!” “That new guy Jesus came to our synagogue and Simon asked him if he would like to give a teaching to the congregation. There was a huge crowd gathered there since people wondered who this stranger was. Then Jesus stood up and began teaching about true religion not being about sacrifices at the Temple but taking care of the widow and orphan, the poor, the oppressed, and even proclaiming a year of jubilee when all debts were to be forgiven. But then that strange guy we have always found so disturbing and have been afraid of, the one we thought was possessed by a dangerous spirit, started shouting at him to get away, that he was trying to destroy them, calling him both Jesus of Nazareth and the Holy One of G-d! Well Jesus turned to him, looked him straight in the eye, and said ***“Be quiet! Come out of him!”*** (Mark 1: 25) And something like a loud shrieking noise came out of his mouth and immediately the guy calmed down, like a little child, and he seemed sane and normal as can be.

We were all totally amazed and I heard people saying that Jesus didn't teach at all like the scribes we are used to, but he taught as one with authority. And, what's strangest of all is that he did this on the Sabbath, when no one is ever allowed to do any kind of work."

When my daughter left my room, I wondered who this man could be who healed on the Sabbath. That was against all the laws of our religion. Would he be punished for this? What would happen when the priests heard? I was so weak and my fever so high that I fell into a deep sleep. The next thing I knew I felt someone holding my hand. It seemed that energy was rushing through my body, from my hand, through my feet, my limbs, my torso, up to the top of my head. It felt as though light was pulsing through me healing every pore of my being. And with it I could feel my fever suddenly breaking after so many long weeks. I felt so strong, like I could soar in the air. I felt healed, whole, healthy and filled with indescribable joy. I wondered whether I was dreaming, or on my way to see my husband in the afterlife. I began to smile and opened my eyes, thinking I would either see my husband in heaven or my daughter in the room I was in. But I saw neither of them. Rather, above me, with his hand in mine, was a young man who exuded love, light, and a healing calm. His presence was like none I had ever encountered. I don't know how he got in my room, since men are not allowed there but, as he looked at me with such kindness in his eyes and, with his hand still in mine, he gently lifted me to my feet. And then I stood and walked and then ran around the room as though I had never been sick, with the same energy I had when I was a young child. I laughed and walked out of the room to be greeted by my daughter, Simon, their children, my other daughters, Simon's brother Andrew and his family, James and John and the entire Zebedee family. "This is Jesus," my son-in-law Simon told me. "We met him this morning while we were fishing. We plan to help him with his ministry. We told him that you had a fever and asked if he could help you. We allowed him into your room, hoping he could heal you. We can see he did! Thanks to be G-d!"

Whereas before I had questioned how James and John could leave their father in his fishing boat to follow this man named Jesus, or how Simon and Andrew could consider this, now I fully understood. I wanted to follow him too. Something in me knew, beyond any doubt, that he was the one we had been waiting for. And so I began doing that which brought me the most joy. I served Jesus and my extended family the Sabbath meal, knowing that this Jesus had just broken another law of the Sabbath by healing me and I was breaking a Sabbath law by preparing this meal. It felt so freeing to do so!

But that isn't all I want to share with you today. This is the part of the story I've saved for last that I want you followers of Jesus in the 21st century to understand about me. People have thought I was a just a subservient woman because, after I was healed, I began serving those around me, as though I was a lesser being just dutifully filling the role that all women of my day did because we were the mere property of men. But you've missed the point completely! What I did wasn't mere service. It was **ministry**. The men who translated our scriptures from the Greek into English got it all wrong. Most of your translations say about me that "*Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*" But the Greek verb in the sentence about what I did after Jesus healed me is *diakoneō*, which doesn't mean "serve" but it means to "minister." Yes, I happily served those around me a meal that evening and offered hospitality but what the scriptures are trying to say is that I began to minister to those around me as a follower of Jesus. Just so you know I'm not just some foolish woman who is trying to be self-important, I would like you to go and read Mark 1:13 which uses the same word *diakoneō*. It says: Jesus "***was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto Him***" (21st Century King James Version). But when it comes to me, instead of saying that I ministered they said that I "served," or "cooked for them," or "waited on them," seeing me just as woman fulfilling her duty as though my life had not been transformed.

I guess it is hard to believe that a woman would actually be called to minister by Jesus. You still have problems with this today in all those churches where women aren't allowed to be ordained or even teach Sunday School to adults or pray in public. I guess you were uncomfortable with the role Jesus was calling me to, so you didn't translate that word correctly in the sentence about me. Instead of saying that I began to minister, you said that I began to serve. Not that there is anything wrong with serving! Remember how our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ told us repeatedly that he had come not to be served but to serve and we should do likewise (e.g., Mark 10:42-44). Yes, I happily served that Sabbath meal to my family and friends that day. But, to set the history straight, that day after Jesus healed me, I began to minister.

Did you know that the word *diakoneō* also means "deacon"? That is what Jesus called me to be and that is what I did as I then went on to open up Simon's house as a gathering place for Christians for the rest of my lifetime. It had to be me rather than my daughter. Do you know why? Because she became one of Jesus' first disciples as she traveled alongside her husband Simon Peter to preach the good news of the Gospel even after

Jesus' death and resurrection. They were even part of the group who brought the teachings of Jesus to Corinth in Greece (1 Corinthians 9:5). As I said earlier, my daughter was open for a life of adventure alongside her husband, who, although he continued to be impulsive and to stick his foot in his mouth, would become the rock of the church. We all loved seeing them when they returned to Capernaum sharing stories about how Jesus taught and healed, suffered, died, and was resurrected! And to you in the 21st-century, thanks for listening to my long tale but I ask that you please go on to set the record straight about who I am: not just Simon Peter's mother-in-law who was healed by Jesus and who then served but rather the very first Deacon of any gender in Christianity!

Closing Prayer: With open minds to new learnings and grateful hearts we give you thanks for Simon Peter's mother-in-law who, after being healed, became the very first deacon of our Christian tradition. In doing so, she also modeled that we are called to be servant leaders as we love God and neighbor as self. In the precious name of Jesus, the one who called her, claimed her, healed and commissioned her we offer up this prayer. Amen.