

Joanna's Easter Story

Hespeler, 17 April 2022 © Scott McAndless – Easter

Isaiah 65:17-25, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, Luke 24:1-12

The Gospel of Luke tells us about a very particular group of women who went out to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning. They were "**Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women.**" But here is the interesting thing. This is not just a random bunch of women that the gospel writer is talking about at this point. Luke actually went out of his way, to introduce these women at an earlier point in his story. And here is what he says about one of them back in chapter eight. He tells us that she was **Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza.** (Luke 8:3)

Chuza's Wife?

And I know that, at first glance, that might not seem to mean anything at all, but think about it for a minute. This was a woman who was married and yet she was apparently traveling all over the Galilean countryside with a bunch of men to whom she was not related. I know that, if that were to happen today, it might hardly raise any eyebrows, but think about what that meant for a woman back then. Back then, that would have been considered wildly inappropriate conduct for any woman at best. All sorts of sordid accusations would have certainly been made.

And then there is the question of who Joanna was married to. She was married to Chuza who was a very important official of King Herod – that is Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee. Herod is someone who we are told was literally trying to kill Jesus at one point in this gospel (Luke 13:31). So, do you really think that Herod's top official, Chuza, was good with the idea that his wife was wandering all over the Galilean countryside with a guy that his boss wanted to kill? Somehow, I do not think so! So, what was Joanna's story?

The Women Go to the Tomb

As she made her way towards the place where he had been buried together with Mary Magdalene, the other Mary and the other women, Joanna was undoubtedly the one who wept the loudest and was the most inconsolable. Jesus had done so much for each one of them. Mary had had such a huge number of problems that it had been said of her that she had been beset by seven demons. But, of all of them, Joanna had been the one who had felt the most unsafe and alone until Jesus had reached out to her.

A Bad Marriage

Joanna had been given to her husband, Chuza, at a very young age by her parents. Chuza was at least two decades older than her and he had already been married twice before. Joanna was never told what had happened to the other wives, why they had died so young, but once she had gotten to know her new husband a bit, she began to have her suspicions.



Chuza was very wealthy and a very powerful official in the king's court. Much to her surprise, Joanna found herself the mistress of a very prosperous household, with many servants at her beck and call. She had jewels and fine clothes, and she tried to do her best to be kind to all the people of the household.

But Chuza was also a very cruel and demanding man. I will not tell you all of the ways that he mistreated his wife and most of the people of the household. I will just tell you that Joanna quickly found her life to be filled with fear and dread. So hard was her life, that her health began to fail, and it was as if she was fading away.

Sympathetic Servants

But then, one day, the servants decided that they simply could not allow this to go on anymore. They had already watched as two mistresses had faded and died under their watch. They came together and made a plan to save this one who had been so kind to them.

Servants, it turns out, know a great deal about their masters. These ones knew enough about Chuza and, in particular, about how he managed the affairs of his master, King Herod, to cause him a few problems. There were secretaries who kept his accounts for him and other slaves who managed the king's storehouses on his behalf. They had known for some time that the steward had been embezzling from Herod.

The Servant's Plan

The plot was fairly simple. The proofs of Chuza's deceptions were assembled and sent to the king anonymously by means of the trusted slave of another lord who was the distant relation of one of the secretaries. Of course, Herod was furious when he received it! Soon, a summons from the king arrived at the house—a summons that could neither be ignored nor refused. He fretted and complained, but Chuza had no choice. He packed up immediately and headed off to Herod's court. He would not be able to return for weeks.

Once he had left, the servants went and explained everything to their poor mistress. It was not easy, but they persuaded her that she needed to escape and save her own life. She did not leave empty-handed but took with her some jewels and fine fabrics—not because she desired these things, but because she knew that they could be exchanged for money. It also felt as if she was at least getting some revenge on her husband by taking these things from him.

A Harrowing Journey

Two servants went with her—personal slaves who were very devoted to her and to whom she had grown very close. They were debt slaves from the region north of the Sea of Galilee and their task was to conduct her safely to Capernaum at the northern tip of the lake. The route was very carefully planned, and the travelers were hosted in the slave quarters of many prominent houses without the masters of those households even being aware.

When they arrived at Capernaum, Joanna gave the two slaves their freedom (a small thing for her to give them in exchange for taking such a risk for her sake) and they left her with many tears and cries of blessing, clutching manumission papers in their hands.

Alone in Capernaum

As she watched them go, Joanna realized how alone she was now. She had no friends and no family. No one would dare to help her. She had the precious things that she had brought with her but could not safely sell or trade them for what she needed. She might easily have ended up robbed and beaten to death on the side of some road, or perhaps forced to ply the trade of a prostitute just to survive, if no one had come to protect her. All the same, she could not regret having chosen to live, for a little while at least, free of the tyranny of her husband.

No one should have helped her. To assist a woman who had fled from her husband—and especially a husband as powerful as Chuza—would have been madness for anyone.

A Rescue

That is exactly what the followers of Jesus told him when he heard about her. Peter actually tried to forbid Jesus from even approaching her. But Jesus said to him, “Simon, if I had been governed by fear I would never have even begun.” With that, Jesus simply pushed his way past the Rock that stood in his path and moved directly towards the woman who looked so very lost in the town square. From that day on, Joanna was part of the group, and no one ever questioned it again.

What his Death Meant to her

So perhaps you can understand why Joanna was so distraught on that early morning of the third day after his crucifixion. When she had been at her worst, most lost and alone, he had seen her for who she was. Everyone else had seen her as a problem, a risk. As a woman who was on the run from her husband, she was damaged goods because she would never be able to escape her husband’s power and influence.

But Jesus had seen none of that. He had only seen a beloved child of God. His open embrace of her was the bravest thing she had ever seen anyone do, and yet he done it without fear and without hesitation. The very idea that such a brave man could even live in the world had given her enough hope to go on living and to actually find the first true joy she had ever known in her life in this community of women who had come with him to Jerusalem.

But now his lack of fear, his willingness to do the right thing no matter what the cost, had brought him to this. If the world could destroy such perfect love as was found in him, what would happen to her?

The Incident at the Tomb

The women came to the place where he had been buried. You have all heard about what happened next. The tomb was open. They immediately feared that it had been plundered or, worse, that wild animals had gotten to the remains. Their worse fears seemed to be confirmed when they discovered that his body was gone.

But then, even while they were still in shock, trying to understand what they were seeing, two strangers appeared seemingly from nowhere. They were dressed all in white and their sudden appearance was overwhelming. Already struggling with grief and confusion, they now found themselves filled with fear and terror.

But then the men began to speak, **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”** said one. **“He is not here, but has risen,”** added the other. And then they began to speak to them of some of the things that Jesus had said about what was to happen when he went to Jerusalem. And then they were gone—disappeared so quickly that the women were left wondering if they had imagined the whole thing or if it had been a vision.

Joanna Makes Sense of it

The women stood in confusion for some time. It was not immediately clear to them what all of this meant. But it was Joanna that was the first to start to make sense of it all. For suddenly, in the midst of all of the darkness that had been overwhelming her, she could see the possibility of a little bit of light.

When she had been utterly defeated and alone, as good as dead, he had brought her back to life by giving her a place where she belonged. Now he had been defeated in turn. But what if his defeat were able to be turned into a new victory beyond hope and beyond reason. Even the possibility seemed to change her perspective on everything.

What the Resurrection Means

On this day we celebrate that Jesus, once killed, was raised up to new life. And we talk about what that means. We talk about forgiveness, how we can be forgiven for our failures, shortcomings and defaults because of his suffering and his resurrection.

We talk about reconciliation as Jesus brings together all of the warring parties of the earth and demonstrates to us all that violence and power do not bring victory, but his submission does.

Sometimes we talk about how his rising means that we also may be raised and that gives us the hope of heaven. But we mostly think about it in terms of what Jesus’ resurrection accomplishes for us and for people like us.

Raised for Joanna

But we need to realize that Jesus was raised for Joanna who escaped an abusive marriage. He was raised for Mary Magdalene who had been so damaged by the suffering of her life that it had been said of her that she had had seven demons before she met him. Jesus was raised, above all, for the broken ones of this world.

He did it because he was often the only one who was brave enough and loving enough to reach out to them when no one else dared. Throughout his ministry, he had already put his life on the line many times by standing up for people who had no one else to help them. So, of course, when the time came, he was willing to literally lay down his life for them because he knew that no one else would.

Jesus came back for the Joannas and Marys because no one else would. That is how much Jesus cares for those who have been broken by this world. If we want to know the true power of his resurrection, then I would suggest that the best way to do that is to take up that same task—to stand up for the rejected and scorned of this world. As we come alongside them, I promise you that we will see such power in action.