

April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 25:6-9
John 20:1-18
Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

Have you heard of a woman named Ruth Wakefield? I hadn't, until last week, when I learned that Ruth Wakefield invented chocolate chip cookies. Here's the gist of the story, as told by the *New York Times*:

In the 1930s, Ruth Wakefield ... ran the Toll House Inn, a popular restaurant in eastern Massachusetts, with her husband. Food historians have doubts, but legend has it that the cookie was an accident: Wakefield had planned to make an all-chocolate cookie by mixing melted unsweetened chocolate into a brown-sugar dough, but the only chocolate she had on hand was a semisweet bar. Armed with an ice pick, she broke the bar into little bits, mixed them into the dough, and the chocolate chip cookie was born.¹

Note that her recipe is "the one you'll still find on the back of every yellow bag of Nestlé chocolate chips."²

Until last week, it had never occurred to me that there was a time before chocolate chip cookies. They're so common, so simple, and yet so perfect; they seem *timeless*. But it turns out that God did not give them to us with a seventh day of creation. The western world marks time with years on either side of the birth of Jesus. But *B.C.* could rightly mean "before chocolate chip cookies."

I learned about Ruth Wakefield because she was included in "Overlooked," an ongoing *New York Times* series that debuted last month. The paper describes the series this way: "Since 1851, obituaries in *The New York Times* have been dominated by white men. Now, we're adding the stories of remarkable women."³ In other words, quite belatedly, the *Times* is publishing the obituaries of women whose deaths is had previously ignored.⁴

I can joke about chocolate chip cookies, but all this begs questions that marginalized groups have been asking for a while now: Whose history gets written? Who gets to write that history? What is being distorted or lost entirely?

It's past for that such questions are being asked. They're even being asked in the Church, and people are reaching back to the Church's origins. Today's Gospel reading actually gives us some fodder for that. John tells us that Mary Magdalene was the *first* person to see the resurrected Christ. But in First Corinthians, *Paul* says that Jesus appeared first to *Peter* and then to the twelve. He says that in an optional reading for today that I decided not to use. Take that, Paul.

I don't know if Paul purposely *meant* to dis Mary Magdalene. But pretty soon others began to do just that. The Gospels are clear that Mary was a close follower of Jesus. She was a financial supporter, and therefore must have been a woman of means. Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, male church leaders conflated her story with the stories of other New Testament women. They widely portrayed her, and therefore she became widely known, as a prostitute—even though the Bible never calls her one. That misconception continues today.

This is no small problem, because Mary Magdalene is arguably the second most important woman in the New Testament. Fortunately, some are beginning to reclaim her place in our tradition. It's perhaps no accident that the course correction comes with the greater participation of women in the leadership of the church.

In an article dated yesterday, and therefore published just in time for Easter and Passover, *New York Times* opinion writer Nicholas Kristoff talks about the increasing numbers of female leaders in many faith traditions. He writes this:

Saint Paul orders women to “be in submission” and adds, “It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (some scholars believe that Paul didn't write that passage, and that it was added later). Over the centuries, it was fine for women to be martyred (or, at times, to be burned as witches), but they were denied the right to become priests, rabbis or ministers.

Yet a revolution is unfolding across America and the world, and countless women will be presiding this weekend over Easter and Passover celebrations. In just a few decades, women have come to dominate many seminaries and rabbinical schools and are increasingly taking over the pulpit at congregations across the country.

“What we're seeing before our very eyes is a dramatic shift; in my mind it's as big as the Protestant Reformation,” says the Rev. Serene Jones, [a theologian formerly at Yale Divinity School and now] the first woman president of New York City's Union Theological Seminary—where almost 60 percent of the students are now female.

“We're seeing a new day of understanding of who God is,” Dr. Jones added. “When the people who are *representing God*, making God present, have female bodies, that inevitably changes the way you think about how God is.”

Dr. Jones argues that over time women will come to dominate religious leadership and that this will powerfully reshape Americans' understanding of God from stern father to more of a maternal healer and nurturer. “It changes the way you think geopolitically about the greatest truth,” she says.⁵

While we're metaphorically turning over tables in the Temple, let's remember that The Episcopal Church has its first black national leader, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. This year his Easter message includes these words:

[Economic, religious and political powers came together] to crucify the one who taught: love the lord your God, love your neighbor, and actually live that way.

The truth is the message of Jesus was unsettling to the world then, as it is unsettling to the world now. And yet that very message is the only source of hope in life for the way of the cross, the way of unselfish living, the way of sacrificial living, seeking the good, the welfare of the other before one's own unenlightened self-interest. That way of the cross is the way of love. That is the nature of love. And that way is the only hope for the entire human family.

The reality is, the way of Jesus was a threat to the way that the world is, and hope for the way the world can and will be.

But on that third day after the crucifixion, when by the titanic power of God, by the power of the love of God, Jesus was raised from the dead— God sent a message and declared that death does not have the last word. Hatred does not have the last word. Violence does not have the last word. Bigotry does not have the last word. Sin, evil do not have the last word. The last word is God, and God is love.⁶

As we hear these words, we might suspect that Presiding Bishop Curry's leadership is bound up with his embodiment as a black man.

When I work with people preparing for ordination, one thing I discuss with them is how they might "put on" the priesthood? As I see it, each person inhabits the role differently. How they inhabit the role determines how they will function with others as a leader in the Church. I believe that every ordained person has a large degree of choice in how they inhabit the role—in how they wear the clerical collar, so to speak—but only if they choose to be intentional about it. The first step in being intentional is understanding one's own embodiment and how it shapes their experience of, and their being in, the world.

Here in The Episcopal Church, we believe in the priesthood of *all* believers. Therefore *you* are a minister of the church, and what I say to seminarians also applies to *you*. You might not wear a clerical collar, but you inhabit a role, one about which you too can choose to be intentional.

In a few minutes we will participate in renewing our Baptismal Covenant. The Baptismal Covenant encapsulates the essential beliefs and practices of the members of the Body of Christ. Please pay close attention to it, especially the six promises at the end. Those promises are about our relationships with God, but only as that is affected by our relationships with the rest of God's creation.

I think it's important to remember this, because we don't follow Jesus in isolation. We are not astronauts in spacesuits, floating weightless and encapsulated above the Earth. On Earth, though, we do sometimes let ourselves occupy bubbles—for example, bubbles of race, of class, of national origin. We can even occupy bubbles of educational level—that's one that we Episcopalians are quite skilled at constructing. If we're not careful, those bubbles become something like spacesuits. In the end, such isolation is mentally, physically, and spiritually harmful.

To keep things balanced, let's hear from Roman Catholic priest and popular theologian Richard Rohr, and old white guy. He offers this: "Most of us probably grew up thinking that the Resurrection was a one-time miracle about Jesus, an anomaly that proved he was God. I believe that Jesus is actually naming and revealing what is happening everywhere and all the time in God. Jesus' resurrection is a statement about how reality works: always moving toward resurrection." He continues: "Resurrection is not a miracle as much as it is an enduring relationship. The best way to speak about the Resurrection is not to say, "Jesus rose from the dead"—as if it was a self-generated miracle—but to say, "Jesus was raised from the dead" (as many early texts state). The Eternal Christ is thus revealed as the map, the blueprint, the promise, the pledge, the guarantee of what is happening everywhere, all summed up in one person so we can see it in personified form."⁷

When Jesus was resurrected, each of his disciples had their own mini resurrection, and each of them had to figure out what to do with that new reality. I think that every Easter brings a mini resurrection to every one of us. And we *get* the opportunity to figure out what to do with our new reality.

May this Eastertide bring to every one of us a rebirth as common, simple, perfect, and timeless as a freshly opened tulip—or a chocolate chip cookie fresh out of the oven.

Notes

¹ Included with a recipe for Toll House Chocolate Chip Cookies, *The New York Times* Cooking section, available at <https://cooking.nytimes.com/recipes/1019232-toll-house-chocolate-chip-cookies> (accessed March 31, 2018).

² Ibid.

³ From the introductory pages of "Overlooked," a series from the New York Times, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/obituaries/overlooked.html> (accessed March 31, 2018).

⁴ The full story (or belated obituary) about Ruth Wakefield is by Sam Roberts, "Overlooked No More: Ruth Wakefield, Who Invented the Chocolate Chip Cookie," March 21, 2018, *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/obituaries/overlooked-ruth-wakefield.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news> (accessed March 31, 2018).

⁵ Nicholas Kristoff, "God and Her (Female) Clergy," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/31/opinion/sunday/easter-passover-god-women.html> (accessed March 31, 2018).

⁶ "Presiding Bishop Curry: Easter 2018 Message from the Holy Land," March 26, 2018, available at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-curry-easter-2018-message-holy-land> (accessed March 31, 2018).

⁷ Richard Rohr, "Dying into Life," July 5, 2016, published by Center for Action and Contemplation, available at <https://cac.org/dying-into-life-2016-07-05/> (accessed March 31, 2018).