



# “Faith of Our Mothers”

Text: 2 Timothy 1:307

*a sermon by Kevin Scott Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We’ve got quite a bit going on in worship today. We are celebrating the Ascension of the Lord and welcoming the members of our communicants’/confirmation class into the membership of the church. Throw into the mix that it is Mother’s Day and that deserves a mention or two. So, the preacher has a number of strings to weave together this morning.

The Ascension of the Lord brings the Easter cycle to a close. The Jesus-on-earth story is coming to an end. Ascension stories always tell us something about the one ascending – and the story of Jesus’ ascension tells us that his mission is now complete and he is returning to God. Jesus is exalted in the ascension and his lordship is once more confirmed.

At the ascension, whether you read the story from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, in one way or another, the instruction is given that the disciples (students) are now apostles – those who are commissioned and sent forth. In Luke’s story, with which we began our worship this morning, we read:

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things...”

“You are witnesses to these things,” and witnesses tell the stories of what they have seen and heard. The newly commissioned apostles are charged to go to all nations and tell the story they have lived, continuing to proclaim Jesus’ message and live out Jesus’ mission.

So, to celebrate the Ascension of the Lord with the welcoming of newly commissioned members of the church is appropriate and fitting. Two of the three threads for the day have come together. Now, let's consider the third string.

That third string concerns a fellow named Timothy. From what we can tell, Timothy was a friend and companion of the Apostle Paul. In Acts 16:1, we're told that Timothy was the son of a Jewish woman, while his father was Greek. But questions remain. Was the letter actually written to Timothy? Was the letter written by the Apostle Paul? When was the letter written? These kinds of questions continue to be researched and debated.

But the text itself tells us something interesting. We read, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." We don't know if Lois and Eunice converted to Christianity or remained faithful Jews. It really doesn't matter.

The point is that Timothy is who he is today because of Lois and Eunice. Their faith - that is to say, their trust - in God was passed down to Timothy. Timothy's "sincere faith" (which you can translate as "unhypocritical faith") was the result of the authentic faith of his mother and grandmother - a faith lived out each day, observed, and practiced. Regardless of whether or not Lois and Eunice were Christians or Jews, their witness to Timothy helped him become who he was - a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

The mention of Lois and Eunice reminds us that women have been at the very center of the church's life and ministry, long before the church was the church.

Go back to the days of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. When the infant Moses is born, his mother, Joachebed, and sister, Miriam - along with the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah - defied the law of Pharaoh and allowed the boy to live. Miriam went on to be viewed as a prophet among her people. Deborah was a judge, a prophet, and military leader. Hannah was the mother of Samuel and gave him to the Lord to serve God all the days of his life. And that list goes on and on.

Go to the pages of the New Testament and you find women playing key roles in Jesus' ministry and in the ministry of the early church. The first messengers of Christ's resurrection were women. There were women who accompanied Jesus and the disciples, providing support and care. Go through the pages of the gospels, Acts, and the epistles, and you'll find quite a company of women: Anna, Elizabeth, Dorcas, Lydia, Joanna, Mary, Martha, Priscilla, Rhoda, and Susanna - and if you don't know who they were, it's time to find out.

Women have been at the heart of the story of our faith from the earliest days. They have played consequential roles, sometimes even heroic roles, in order for the good news of God's love to be shared and passed on to new generations of disciples.

Many of us were raised in the church, maybe not this church, but in a church. In those churches, there were women who played the major role in teaching us the faith. Our Sunday School teachers were primarily women. Our youth group leaders were primarily women.

In this church, some of you will remember teachers from along the way. Blanche Jung, Candy Thompson, Mary Dannettell, and many others who have gone on to the next adventure with God. And there are many who have instilled the faith, and continue to pass on the faith to the latest generation: Sue Buthod, Gail Reicken, Joan Fedor-Bassemier, Emma Nicholls, Francie Hubbard, Erin Carver, Jerusha Van Camp, Jenny Singleton, and I'm sure I'm forgetting some - but do you get the point? If it were not for women in the church, I'm not sure that there would be new disciples having their faith formed and shaped and guided.

I've told you this story before, but some of you weren't here that day, so here it comes again. When I was growing up at the Parkwood United Presbyterian Church, in Allison Park, Pennsylvania, there was a row of women in the sanctuary on the right hand side. They sat together every week in exactly the same row. I heard it called "the widow's row," one day, and asked my parents what that meant. "The husbands of all the women in that row died," I was told, "and they sit together so they don't have to sit alone." Made sense to me.

At the head of the row, right on the aisle, was Mom McKay. That's what everyone called her. Her given name was Florence. She had taught Sunday School for years, was an every-Sunday worshiper, and had a Bible that was so well-worn that we thought it had been autographed by the Apostle Paul.

Many years later, after my family had moved to the country and we joined another church, after college and seminary, after being ordained, I was called by the Oakmont Presbyterian Home and asked if I would preach a chapel service on a Sunday afternoon. When you are an Associate Pastor you grab at any chance to preach, so I said yes.

The day came and I made my way to Oakmont. I got there with time to spare and went to the pulpit of the chapel to get organized. When I looked up, there, on the right hand side, sporting her tell-tale hair bun, was Mom McKay. I couldn't believe my eyes. I walked down to her, she grabbed me and hugged me, and I was eight years old again.

Mom McKay is one of the reasons I'm here today. Elizabeth Wightman, my choir director at Parkwood Church, is one of the reasons I'm here today. The late Dr. Bardarah McCandless of Westminster College, is one of the reasons I'm here today. The Reverend Dr. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, retired professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, is one of the reasons I'm here today.

And that is to say nothing of Ora Ethel Stirling Dobson Fredley, my maternal grandmother, who would want all of those names mentioned, and Ora Lillian Fredley Fleming Hardt, my mother. They are Lois and Eunice to my Timothy, though I am getting a little long in the tooth to be comparing myself to young Timothy. They were my first teachers in the faith, and to them I owe everything.

Now, I tell you all of that, because there are those women in your lives too. And I want you to begin bringing them to the front of your mind. I want you to recall their faces, maybe even hear their voices. I want you to bring them to this moment and realize that you are who you are because of them.

The faith we have is the “faith of our mothers.” Some of them were related to us through biology. Others were related to us through the waters of baptism and the Spirit. But there were women who played a role in you being you. They taught you by word and example. They answered questions you thought were stupid and they encouraged you to keep going.

The “faith of our mothers” is living still. It flows through our veins. It echoes in our ears. It comforts us when we are hurting. It challenges us when we are complacent.

And on this day, when we are called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and commissioned to be the messengers of the good news of the gospel, we are reminded of the women who handed that good news to us.

For the women who shaped us – for the faith of our mothers – for the calling to be witnesses to the love of God – we give thanks. For now and evermore. Amen.



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