

Pentecost 17, September 23, 2012 (Mk 9:30-37; Jer 11:18-20; Js 3:13-18; Ps 54)

My name is Elizabeth. My husband Andrew was one of the first disciples called by Jesus. Because he followed Jesus, I did too. And what a life it was!

It was certainly exciting! Everywhere we went, people crowded around the Lord, pressing in to touch him, to receive perhaps some of the power that was so much a part of him.

From the first Jesus was known as a great healer. He could lay his hands on a withered arm or a crippled leg and make it whole. Or place his fingers in a deaf man's ears and cause him to regain his hearing. He could even speak to demons and force them out of people!

I want to tell you about one incident towards the end of our journey together, but first you must know what happened in the week before.

My brother-in-law, Peter, had gotten in trouble with Jesus. Jesus wanted to know what people thought of him, and Peter said, **You are the Messiah!** I don't think any of us had dared to believe that before—but once Peter said it, we all knew it must be true.

Then all of a sudden Jesus began saying things we didn't want to hear. He said he was going to suffer and be rejected and be *killed*, and after three days he would rise again.

Poor Peter couldn't stand the thought of such a misadventure, and he tried to persuade Jesus not to go to Jerusalem. He got a good scolding from Jesus, I can tell you that!

About a week later the Teacher went up a mountain with Peter and James and John—the three who were always with him. What they saw there they were supposed to keep to themselves. But Peter told my Andrew it was very strange. Moses and Elijah appeared on that mountaintop next to Jesus, and they were all three shining with a blinding light!

Peter told Andrew they weren't supposed to talk about it, but brothers will be brothers. Jesus wanted it kept secret **until the Son of Man had risen from the dead**. There it was again, that uncomfortable, unnecessary idea that our Lord was going to be killed.

Just a few days later we were nearing Capernaum. Although we women usually lagged behind the men I wanted to speak with Andrew, so I moved close enough to hear Jesus' words. I was shocked to hear him say the same thing again!

The Son of Man is going to be turned over to human hands, he said. He will be killed, and after three days he will rise. The words imprinted themselves on my mind, and I'll never forget them.

Even my husband's brother, Peter, didn't dare speak against this foolishness after his last scolding. Truly, no one really grasped then what Jesus meant.

Trying to distract themselves from such bleak thoughts, the men began talking about other things. I heard Philip and Bartholomew laughing at Matthew and Thomas, but then the laughter stopped and voices were raised.

You didn't even listen to what he said! cried one of them. Another shouted, *What do you mean? I was the one who explained it to you!* Then a loud voice cut in: *He chose me, not you;* and another broke out in anger, *No, it was me he chose!*

Quickly I dropped back with the other women—let the men do the arguing! We had enough to do with the children.

We arrived at the house Peter shared with his mother-in-law. As usual, we women began preparing the evening meal. I heard Jesus ask the men what they'd been arguing about on the road.

And I heard the loud silence that answered him. They were embarrassed he'd overheard their argument about who was the greatest. And into my mind flashed his teaching of a week before, when he first declared he must die:

If you want to be my disciple, you have to deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you have to lose it. But if you *give up* your life for the sake of the good news I bring, you'll save it.

It was looking more and more as if we didn't understand Jesus at all. And then he did something even *he* had never done before! He reached over to Andrew and lifted our youngest daughter out of his arms, cuddling her to his chest. She was sleeping soundly, as were most of the other children.

His words then confirmed that strange way he thought: **If you want to be first, you must put yourself last and be the servant of all. Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And if you welcome *me*, you're welcoming God himself!**

It really *was* strange! In our world back then, children were the most vulnerable members of society. They were the "last of all" in social standing. They weren't outcasts, but they didn't count for anything. When Jesus said those words about welcoming *him* when we cared for a child, he was speaking of a reality we couldn't comprehend.

Our little daughter had no status at all outside our family—but it seemed that Jesus was bestowing on her the same value he gave to everyone else. And he was telling his disciples—and us women—that if we truly wanted to follow him, we would need to welcome and care for the –what is it your pastor says? "The last, the least, the little, the lonely, and the lost."

In that moment I realized Jesus was turning all our ideals and values upside down! It went against everything I'd seen and believed for most of my life—and I began to think that this was what Jesus had been trying to teach us as long as we'd been with him.

Looking back, I realized it wasn't the leaders of society or the synagogue Jesus associated with. It was the poor, the sick, the crippled, the outcasts—the ones called *sinners* by the Pharisees. He always reached out to help the needy, the ones who had no one else to speak up for them.

I remembered how he'd always welcomed us, the wives of those who were working with him to bring in the kingdom of God. Even though other men of our culture ignored or scorned women, we who walked with Jesus were never made to feel unimportant.

I almost laughed then. Those foolish men, the ones who'd been arguing about who was the greatest! Didn't they see it? Instead of looking up to heaven and desiring to be highly exalted, they should be looking down and around them, seeking out the poor, the insignificant, the least important ones. *That's what Jesus had always done!*

In God's eyes, we're all children. We have nothing to boast of except the love and value God gives us. Isn't that a miracle of love?