

(for May 2, Easter 5)

### **Views from the Pews: The witness of the women**

Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdalene before any other person. He then trusted her to tell his followers of his return. The idea that a woman could be a valid witness to such a pivotal event is no problem to us, but was unheard of in 1st Century Palestine. Women's testimony was disregarded, both personally and in a court of law. That Jesus chose to reveal himself *first* to Mary and the other women says much about his equal valuation of all persons.

The witness of the women (never denied, however inconvenient) helps to confirm the gospel accounts as true, because an invented story would *never* have considered casting women in such a critical role. Moreover, modern genetics explains the pivotal significance of women to the gospel message in previously unimaginable ways.

The body cells of every adult are regularly replaced during their lifetimes. Every time, genetic copying errors (mutations) accumulate damage to body cells, reducing energy, immune defences and mental agility, but bodily damage ends with death. Meanwhile, the cells that later become sperm and eggs are kept separate, set aside from well before birth. Throughout life, the independent lineages of sperm and eggs remain largely protected.

A woman makes her full complement of around a million egg cells before she is born, and releases a few of them at intervals until menopause. A man makes millions upon millions of sperm cells every day. Since the sperm are made at a vastly greater rate, the mutation rate is higher in them, whereas in eggs the self-checking processes operated by armies of repair enzymes are slower and can be more comprehensive.

The processes of fertilisation compare and re-match the two separate copies of each gene, drawn by the two partners from their respective bloodlines, to create an embryo. This matching process acts as mutual proofreading, thereby finding and deleting many errors. Sex is therefore a life-giving process, twice over. It ensures that most of our offspring are born alive, *and* freed from most deadly genetic defects. 'Mutation unites, as nothing else, scientific and spiritual views of the human condition... It gives the idea of "a corruptible body raised in incorruption" a new and precise meaning', says geneticist Steve Jones. By this definition, women did not only witness the Resurrection; they still defeat death, generation after generation.

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