

OPENING HYMN

"Great is Thy Faithfulness" (This Far By Faith #283, Evangelical Lutheran Worship #733)

OPENING PRAYER

God of the wilderness, Hagar was a woman alone in the wilderness, hurt by her past, uncertain of her future, afraid of what might come next. Help us to recognize the places in our lives that feel unfamiliar, unsettled or hard to navigate. Just as you met Hagar, meet us in our wilderness places, reminding us that you see us. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

We've Come This Far by Faith, TFBF #197, ELW #633

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (*This Far By Faith, Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)
- Bibles (NRSV or NRSV Updated Edition)
- Paper and coloring pencils or crayons (optional)

Bold faith on an unexpected journey

Session one

Encountering God in the wilderness

BY TIFFANY C. CHANEY

Faith often leads us on journeys we never expected—into wilderness places, across unfamiliar lands and through seasons of grief and hope. In this three-session Bible study, we'll journey with Hagar, Ruth and Mary Magdalene—women whose bold faith transformed their stories. Their unexpected encounters with God remind us that we, too, are seen, sustained and sent to carry good news into the world.

INTRODUCTION

In Genesis 16, Hagar, an enslaved woman pushed to the margins, encounters God in the wilderness. When she believes all hope is lost, God sees her, hears her and frees her.

Merriam-Webster.com offers several definitions for "wilderness," ranging from "a tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings" to "a bewildering situation." For some of us, spending time in uncultivated land sounds like the perfect way to spend a vacation. For others, it may be your least favorite vacation destination, a far cry from your favorite beach or bustling city. While we may disagree on whether we'd like to be in a geographic wilderness, most would agree that being in a bewildering situation is not at the top of our list of favorite things. This was true for me in my 20s, when I felt like I was in a wilderness season.

I was 29 years old when I went to seminary. Growing up in a Lutheran denomination that did not ordain women, becoming a pastor was not a part of my understanding of ways I could serve God. I was 24 when I first met a Lutheran woman pastor, soon after I joined my first ELCA congregation.

By that time, I was a young professional and an active layperson. Soon, I felt led to go to seminary. The problem was that I already had a significant debt load, primarily from student loans that helped me finance my undergraduate and graduate degrees. Compounding matters, I had purchased my first home a couple of years prior. If I were to quit my job to move across the country and attend seminary full time (the common structure for seminary education in 2009), I would not be able to pay my mortgage. With the country in a recession, selling my home would be nearly impossible.

I tried to rent or sell my house. The first day of classes was quickly approaching. I waited as long as I could before I called the seminary admissions office to defer my admission to a later term. I felt dejected, bewildered. I had heard from God when I applied to seminary, but the plan was not working out. It looked like my dream of moving to Philadelphia to go to seminary would have to be a dream deferred.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Think about a season in your life that was like a wilderness—bewildering, uncertain or hard to navigate. How did you feel? Where, if anywhere, did you notice God's presence?
2. What helped you keep going during that wilderness season? Was it a person, a spiritual practice, a moment of clarity, or simply the hope that the season would not last forever?

In “Harlem,” poet Langston Hughes asks:

*What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up*

These words by poet Langston Hughes (see *Harlem, Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Henry Holt & Co., 1951), published about four millennia after Hagar's time in the wilderness, still feel contemporary to her experience.

Hagar, subjected to slavery, sexual exploitation and more, is living a story unlikely to be produced as a Hallmark® movie. You may even be wondering why this story from Genesis was selected for a women's Bible study. Aspects of the story feel bewildering: *Why does God send Hagar back into her abusive situation? Is it because she and her baby will not survive childbirth in the wilderness?* Perhaps so, but it can still be a struggle to understand this.

In our lack of understanding, we have a couple of options. One is to ignore the stories we don't understand. The other is to lean into these stories and explore what might be the word from the Lord, even in the face of our bewilderment. If God sees Hagar, surely we can see her too—even if it makes us uncomfortable.

So often, Hagar's story is either discussed only in the context of Abraham and Sarah or not discussed at all. In fact, Genesis 21, the second half of Hagar's story, is omitted from the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), meaning it is never heard in preaching in congregations that stick to the RCL.

So, what happens when we choose not to overlook her story—but to center it?

Consider: What may be Hagar's dreams for her life? How are those dreams deferred by her enslavement and pregnancy? Does she long to return home to Egypt?

In her wilderness journey in Genesis 16, she is on the way to Shur, a region near Egypt. She's likely trying to get home, yet she is caught between her

homeland and the land where she is only seen as a means to an end.

We don't get to hear the voice of Hagar's dreams in this text, only the voice of the wilderness. She is running away.

Yet, God sees her. Not as property. Not as a problem. Not as a means to someone else's promise. But as a person.

There are difficult situations real women experience, bewildering encounters that leave women feeling like we are in the wilderness. And right there in the middle of these wilderness seasons, God sees us as women.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. What does it mean to you that God sees Hagar in this moment?
4. Where do you see yourself—or others—in Hagar's experience?

NAMING GOD

📖 Reread: Genesis 16:13

In Genesis 16:13, Hagar does something remarkable—she names God: *So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi," for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"*

In scripture, it is often men who name places, name moments, and speak about God. But here, in the wilderness, an enslaved woman names God for herself.

She does not borrow Abraham's language. She does not rely on Sarah's understanding. She names God out of her own experience.

El Roi—the God who sees me. Not just a God who sees generally. Not just a God who sees others. But a God who sees her.

In a world where Hagar is not seen as a full person—where she is used, controlled, and discarded—this naming is an act of theological courage. She declares that God is present in her suffering.

Bold faith is not only trusting what others have said about God. It is trusting what you have experienced of God for yourself.

For many, this can be challenging. We may have inherited language about God that does not fully reflect our lived experiences. We may have been taught who God is but not always given space to wrestle with how we have personally encountered God—especially in seasons of pain, confusion, or wilderness.

Hagar's story invites us to ask:

- How have I experienced God in my own life?
- What names for God have emerged from those experiences?
- Where have I felt seen, even when others did not see me?

By naming God, Hagar is testifying. She is saying: *This is who God has been for me.*

Like Hagar, when we name God from our own encounters, we begin to see ourselves differently. Not invisible. Not forgotten. Seen.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. What does the name *El roi*—"the God who sees me"—mean to you personally?
6. How has your understanding of God been shaped by your lived experiences?
7. If you were to name God based on your own journey, what name might you give?

SEEING GOD

📖 Read: Genesis 21:1-21

Isaac, the child of God's promise to Abraham, is born and begins to grow. Both of Abraham's children, Isaac and Ishmael, seem to be getting along and playing together.

And then, things change.

Sarah sees the children playing together and begins to feel insecure. She feels threatened by a relationship she had a part in creating. She worries about the inheritance due to her son, when God has already promised her child everything.

Yet she does not want to share. As a result, she asks her husband to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael.

Because she feels insecure, Sarah wants to ban a mother and a child. Because she wants to keep everything for her offspring, she sends them away with no place to go.

And where is God in this? Right there, with them all, in the middle of the mess.

God reassures Abraham that the promise they have been living out for decades remain in place; Isaac is the heir to the promise. God also offers a promise for Ishmael, Abraham's son born to Hagar.

However, the text does not indicate that Hagar was made aware of God's promise for her child. Banished from Sarah and Abraham's home, Hagar heads back out into the wilderness.

In *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Books 1993/2013), womanist theologian Delores S. Williams acknowledges the significant risk of Hagar leaving Sarah and Abraham:

Hagar and Ishmael, expelled from the family, or "house," of Abraham and Sarah, were not only without economic resources; they were without protection in a nomadic culture where men ruled the families, tribes and clans. As mother and child wander off into the desert of Beersheba, we cannot help but wonder how their survival will be secured. Though this desert or wilderness is the site of many important events in Hebrew and ancient Israelite history, it is hardly a place where a lone woman and child ought to be wandering without sustenance, shelter or protection (Williams, 28).

Hagar's wilderness journey is dangerous, a reality she is distinctly aware of when we encounter her in Genesis 21, because she has been on this journey before. She believes her child will not make it because she has no water or food for him. She thinks all hope is lost. Yet, as her weeping reverberates in the wilderness, God is there—with both provision and a promise.

Scripture tells us (v. 19) that God opens Hagar's eyes, and she sees a well of water. Notice that the text does not say God miraculously places a new well along her path. God opens her eyes.

Perhaps God's provision was there all along, but Hagar just can't see it because she is afraid her child will die, or because she is overcome with rage for Sarah, who treated her in such an inhumane way, refusing to even call her by her name. Perhaps God's blessings were already in place before Hagar knew she'd need them, but she looks right past them because she is tired, weak and thirsty.

Despite being in a wilderness that was created by somebody else, Hagar experiences God's presence. God opens her eyes to God's answer to her situation. God keeps God's promise to care for Ishmael, not just in that moment, but for a lifetime. God is with them in the middle of the wilderness.

When have you felt like Hagar? Used and abused, perhaps not even dignified by being called by your name. Left with nothing. Villainized, when you're really the victim. Uncertain how to make ends meet. Wanting the best for your child or loved one, but unsure how to bring it to pass. When this happens, can you believe that the same God who saw you before still sees you now?

Like Hagar, we may experience wilderness seasons more than once. We may even be experiencing a wilderness season now. In Hagar's first wilderness experience, she recognizes that God sees her. In her second wilderness experience, God opens her eyes to see the provision provided to her. Like Hagar, we

too are seen by God. We also see God in the world around us. Just when we think all hope is lost, God sees us and shows us provision, right before our very eyes. God is with us, providing for today and giving hope for tomorrow.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. Thinking about a wilderness season in your life, when did you begin to see God's presence? What did that first glimmer of hope look like for you?
9. Hagar's eyes were opened to the provision that was already nearby. Looking back, have there been times when God's help or support was present before you fully recognized it? What helped you begin to see it?

BOLD FAITH ON AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

When you consider the word “bold,” what comes to mind? I often think of charismatic personalities, strong colors, being out front and in charge. Hagar's story invites us to expand these definitions.

Hagar's faith is bold, though not loud or dominant. It isn't rooted in certainty or control. Hagar's faith is formed in a wilderness she did not choose. It is shaped by circumstances beyond her control. Hagar demonstrates her bold faith through her honesty. She does not hide her pain. She does not pretend that everything is alright. She flees when she is mistreated.

As Delores S. Williams writes:

Hagar becomes the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures. Though the law prescribes harsh punishment for run-away slaves, she takes the risk rather than endure more brutal treatment by Sarai (18).

Hagar's honesty is echoed in a famous 1964 quote from civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer:

All my life I've been sick and tired. Now I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Used, mistreated and sent away, Hagar is also likely sick and tired of being sick and tired. In the wilderness, Hagar's frustration, fear and grief overflow in tears. Her tears are not a sign of weakness, but of truth-telling. It is here—in this difficult, honest place of truth-telling—that God meets her.

Hagar's faith is bold because she trusts what she has experienced of God. After her first encounter in the wilderness, Hagar names God *El Roi*, “the God who sees me.” She chooses not to borrow someone else's understanding of God, and instead names God from her own lived experience. In doing so, she claims a relationship with God that cannot be taken from her. Bold faith means trusting that our encounters with God are real and meaningful, even when others may not fully understand them.

Hagar's story reminds us that we do not need the right words to encounter God. We can show up as we are, honest about our feelings. In Genesis 21, no words spoken by Hagar are recorded, yet she is still heard in the wails of her deep grief.

After being exploited, mistreated and ultimately sent away with her child into a wilderness with few resources and no clear way forward, anyone would have a reason to lose hope. Some might argue that she did lose hope. After all, she placed her son under a shrub and stepped away, expecting his death would soon come. However, we see Hagar's bold, resilient faith in her response to God's provision. When God opens her eyes to the well of water, she moves toward it. Bold faith isn't just about believing. Bold faith is about being open to seeing and responding when God reveals what we need. How often are we in situations where God provides provision, but we are afraid to walk toward it? Hagar responds to the voice of God—an act of faith that is life-changing for her and her child.

From Hagar we learn that bold faith is the courage to be honest, to trust what we have experienced

of God, to keep going even when the way is unclear, and to respond when God opens our eyes. For in the wilderness places of our lives, God still sees, still hears and still makes a way.

CONCLUSION

As it turned out, my seminary experience was not deferred for long. Twenty-four days before the first day of seminary, I got a call from the home rental company, telling me that they'd actually found someone ready to move in. I was stunned. I called the seminary to reinstate my Fall admission. Then I rented an apartment in Philadelphia, packed my things, and moved 939 miles from Montgomery to Philadelphia. On the first day of seminary, I was present. It wasn't the last time I would face financial difficulties, but this has remained a reminder for me that God sees me, even when I'm bewildered.

Now, perhaps after hearing Hagar's story, my story of struggling to get to seminary feels not that important. Plenty of people face far worse plights than having to stay at their job, live in their house, and hold off for a while on an additional graduation. I recognize the privilege in my story. But I tell it anyway, because we all may begin to downplay our own wilderness seasons in comparison with someone else's.

All our stories matter to God, regardless of their level of complexity and difficulty. Rather than downplay our own stories, we can be especially mindful of those around us who may not have had the same privileges.

What women might find themselves in a wilderness—literal or figurative—in our communities and world today? In what ways are we called to help them and to let them know God sees them? How are we called to be God's hands and help them see their way through this season?

CLOSING PRAYER

Jehovah Jireh, God who provides, thank you for meeting Hagar in her wilderness

and meeting us in our own. You see us when the world casts us aside. You hear us when our cries feel too deep for words. You provide even when we cannot yet see a way.

In every wilderness season we experience, open our eyes to the wells you have already provided. When our path is unclear, give us courage to trust your presence. Help us to see one another, listen with compassion, and walk together toward hope. As you send us out from this place, may we remember that you see us, hear us and go before us. Amen.

Bold faith on an unexpected journey

Session one

Encountering God in the wilderness

BY TIFFANY C. CHANEY

OVERVIEW

In session one of Bold Faith on an Unexpected Journey, we will consider the story of Hagar in the Book of Genesis, as well as our own “wilderness” seasons—times that feel uncertain, overwhelming or difficult to navigate. Through Hagar’s story, we will examine what it means to be seen by God and how we can respond with bold faith.

Some participants may relate to Hagar’s experiences of displacement, struggle or injustice. As a leader, invite participants to share at their own comfort level.

By the end of this session, participants will:

- Recognize that God sees them in difficult seasons.
- Reflect on personal “wilderness” experiences.
- Identify ways God has provided, even when these are difficult to see.
- Consider what bold faith looks like in their wilderness.

RITUALS

Opening Ritual

The story of Hagar touches on themes of hardship, abuse, injustice and survival. Acknowledge that participants may connect with the material in deeply personal ways. It is important to create a safe, reflective space for participants.

Invite participants to create a covenant for how you will hold space together during this series:

- Respect confidentiality
- Share only what you are comfortable sharing.
- Listen without judgment.

You might:

- Light a candle to symbolize God’s presence in the wilderness.
- Invite participants to take a few deep breaths together.
- Play or sing the Opening Hymn.

Closing Ritual

The story of Hagar moves from distress to divine encounter. End this Bible study session by grounding participants in hope and God’s presence.

You might:

- Invite participants to name one word they are taking away from the session.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Guided Reflection: Seeing through the Lens of Hagar

Invite participants to close their eyes and enter Hagar’s story through a guided reflection.

Guide them slowly, giving them time to reflect on each of the following prompts. Say:

- Imagine yourself in the wilderness with Hagar.
- Notice the environment—
heat, silence, distance.
- What emotions are present? Fear?
Exhaustion? Grief?
- Where is God in the scene?
- What do you see when your eyes
are “opened” to see God?

After a few minutes, gently bring participants back. Invite them to reflect as a group or by journaling:

- What did you notice?
- What surprised you?
- Did anything change in how you understand the story?

2. Visual Reflection: Wilderness Mapping

Provide paper, colored pencils, and/or crayons. Invite participants to draw their responses to the following question:

- What does your “wilderness” look like right now?
- Where do you see yourself in it?
- Where might God be present?

Tell them that no artistic talent is required. Their work will not be graded! When they are done with their drawings, invite participants to share in pairs or reflect silently.

STUDY OPTIONS

Short Study (30–45 minutes)

1. Omit the Opening Hymn and sing only the Closing Hymn. Each time you meet for this study series, as a connecting thread, use the hymn “We’ve come this far by faith” to close the sessions.
2. Encourage participants to complete the Wilderness Mapping activity as a take-home exercise.

3. For the Closing Ritual, instead of asking each participant to name a word, ask 2–3 volunteers who want to share.

A little longer (60 minutes)

1. Open with Opening Hymn and Opening Prayer.
2. Walk through the study sections together.
3. Break into small groups (2–3 people) for discussion.
4. Re-gather and invite people to share key reflections from the small group discussions.
5. Before closing, complete one of the optional activities.
6. Sing the Closing Hymn and offer the Closing Prayer.

Longer version (2 hours)

1. Open with Opening Hymn, Opening Prayer, and a brief centering moment of focused breathing.
2. Engage the full study, allowing time for deeper reflection.
3. Break into small groups of 2 or 3 to discuss the questions, then come back together to share perspectives.
4. Incorporate both Optional Activities.
5. Do the Closing Ritual.
6. Offer the Closing Prayer, sing the Closing Hymn, and share a moment of silence.

OPENING HYMN

“Blest Be the Tie that Binds”
(ELW656)

OPENING PRAYER

O God who leads us on life’s journeys, as we read and listen to the story of Ruth and Naomi, help us to see how lives can be formed by love and courage. Open our hearts to recognize the people who have walked with us in our lives. Open our eyes to the ways you are present through relationships that sustain us. Open our spirits to hear your call to love more deeply, show up more fully, and walk alongside others with grace. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

God who restores and renews, help us to be people who love in action, who welcome with dignity, who make room at the table. Send us to walk with others, trusting that you are working through us to bring connection and new life. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“We’ve Come This Far by Faith”
(TFBF 197 or ELW633)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV Updated Edition)
- Hymnals (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)
- Paper and markers (optional)

Bold faith on an unexpected journey

Session two

Love and loyalty: A story of connection and courage

BY TIFFANY C. CHANEY

INTRODUCTION

Ruth, a Moabite woman, chooses loyalty amid uncertainty. As she walks into an unknown future in an unfamiliar land, her bold faith reveals how God works through relationship to bring provision, belonging, love and new life.

I have made six interstate moves by myself in the last 22 years. Some moves were to places where I knew people; most were not. Starting over is hard. It stretches you to learn new rhythms, build relationships and find your place again.

Over time, experiences like these have shaped how I understand connection both personally and professionally. For many years, a significant focus of my work in health care has been to address social drivers of health—those non-medical factors that influence a person’s wellbeing and account for as much as 80 percent of health outcomes.

One factor, loneliness or social isolation, is now nationally recognized as a serious public health concern affecting wellbeing. This is often described as not simply the state of being alone, but the absence of meaningful connection—the feeling of being unseen, unsupported or unknown, even when surrounded by others.

The American Medical Association reports a relationship between social isolation and increased

risk of mental health issues, stroke, heart disease and dementia (“What Doctors Wish Patients Knew About Social Isolation,” American Medical Association, February 23, 2026.) People can have their physical needs met and still feel lonely, which can impact their overall health.

Loneliness often shows up in transitions, in grief and in starting over. It can emerge when relationships shift, when community changes or when we find ourselves in spaces where we are not fully known. This is why addressing loneliness and social isolation is considered critical for supporting healthier communities.

Research reminds us that connection is essential—not optional. Strong social connections help people feel supported, valued and less alone. Faith communities, at their best, offer something unique: opportunities for belonging, connection and shared life, and places where people are known and supported.

The story of Ruth speaks directly to this human need for social connection. It is a story defined by loss, migration and uncertainty—but also by relationships. Ruth does not remove Naomi’s struggle, but she refuses to let her walk through it alone.

During our own time, when loneliness has grown increasingly common across age groups, Ruth’s story reminds us that bold faith often looks like choosing connection—choosing to stay, choosing to walk with someone, and choosing to trust that God works through relationships to bring about provision, love and new life.

Share or reflect:

1. When have you experienced a season of “starting over”? What made starting over challenging? What helped you to navigate it?
2. During times of transition or uncertainty, what kinds of relationships or communities have helped you feel a sense of belonging?

LOSS AND LOYALTY

📖 Read: Ruth 1:1–21

The book of Ruth is set “in the days when the judges ruled,” a time marked by chaos and disobedience in Israel. It was a season that could feel unpredictable and fragile. It is in that kind of world that this story begins.

Ruth’s story is shaped by migration. A famine had forced Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi, and her family to leave Bethlehem—the “House of Bread”—and travel to Moab for food. There, Ruth married one of Naomi’s sons and joined the family. What began as a temporary move becomes an extended stay, and over time, Naomi loses her husband and both of her sons. Alone with her daughters-in-law, in a land other than her homeland, Naomi feels grief settle in.

At Naomi’s lowest point, feeling dejected and empty, she decides to return home. She prepares to go back to Bethlehem carrying her grief, uncertainty and a deep sense of loss. In an act of love, she urges her daughters-in-law to stay behind, hoping they might find security where they are.

Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi. Ruth’s words to Naomi (vv. 16-17) are often quoted in church contexts:

Don’t urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you.

These words—beautiful, poetic and admirable in their loyalty—are also costly. Ruth occupies a vulnerable position—navigating a new place, new people and new expectations—while carrying her own loss. She is leaving her homeland to walk into an unknown future.

Sure, Naomi and Ruth were heading back to Naomi's home, the land that she and her husband had left years ago, but there was no way to know how they would be received. Would Naomi be welcomed with open arms or would the people in her homeland gossip about her? Would they wonder among themselves what went wrong?

Maybe they would believe that God had punished her family for leaving and going to a place where the people worshipped other gods. Maybe the people would be mad at Naomi. She and her husband left them behind in Bethlehem with no food. And what would the people say about Naomi bringing Ruth, an immigrant from Moab, with her? Would she be welcomed or shunned?

Despite the many questions, Ruth travels with Naomi anyway. In the midst of an otherwise grim situation, Naomi has a gift from God: accompaniment and companionship. For good or bad, Ruth joins her story to Naomi's story. Ruth chooses to be intricately linked to Naomi.

Ruth is also choosing to be uncomfortable in order to accompany Naomi. She is choosing to be a stranger in a foreign land—to leave behind all she's known to go to a place she's never been, with no assurance of security. She is choosing to rely on the kindness of people she doesn't know when she could have gone to her own family. She chooses to find a new sense of identity and belonging. Ruth chooses to be Naomi's companion during what was likely the loneliest time of both of their lives.

True companionship makes a difference in the tough seasons of life. It means going on a journey together even when the going gets tough. It means lodging together even when the accommodations are uncomfortable. It means making your people my people—even when your people get on my last nerve.

This is the kind of love that sustains us. This is the kind of presence that holds us and builds us up through life's most difficult moments. Naomi has that kind of companion in Ruth.

Share or reflect:

3. What stands out for you about Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi?
4. Imagine Ruth arriving at your congregation today, new to your community from another country and carrying her own story. What might her experience of welcome look like? Where might she feel embraced? Where might she still feel like an outsider?

A GLIMMER OF HOPE

📖 Read: Ruth 1:22

Chapter 1 of Ruth is heavy. It is filled with loss, grief and uncertainty. A famine forces a family to leave home. A husband dies. Two sons die. What began as a search for survival turns into a season of deep sorrow. Without a careful reading, the entire chapter can come off as hopeless.

There are 21 verses of bad news. Then comes verse 22: "They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest." Ruth 1:22 is my favorite verse in the book of Ruth. It doesn't sound like much at first. It doesn't resolve Naomi's grief. It doesn't erase what has been lost. Their circumstances have not fully changed.

But it is a clue. It is a signal, a glimmer of hope, a sign of God's provision.

As Dr. Wilda Gafney writes in *The Widow's Cry*:

And then like an old TV serial, this chapter of their story ends on a cliffhanger. They return at the beginning of the barley harvest. Harvest means that they have been successfully able to grow crops in Israel. Harvest means that there will soon be barley to grind into flour and bake it into bread and Bethlehem will once again live up to its Hebrew name as the House of Bread. (See <https://www.wilgafney.com/2024/08/04/the-widows-cry/>)

What looks like an ending is also a beginning.

Naomi arrives empty—but provision is already on the way. Before she knows it, the conditions for her survival—and eventually her restoration—have already been set in motion.

That is often how God works. Not always with a dramatic change in an instant, but with subtle shifts we might miss if we are not paying attention—shifts like a door opening, a relationship forming, a resource becoming available or a small sign that something new is possible.

Glimmers.

On unexpected journeys, hope does not always announce itself loudly. Sometimes hope shows up in small, subtle ways, easily overlooked if we are focused only on what has been lost.

Ruth 1:22 causes us to consider: Where are the glimmers in our lives? Where might God already be at work, even before we can fully see it?

Share or reflect:

5. When have you experienced a “glimmer of hope” in the middle of a difficult or uncertain season?
6. When life feels overwhelming, what helps you pay attention to small signs of hope?

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

 Read: Ruth 2:8–12

As Naomi and Ruth settle into Bethlehem, the barley harvest has begun—but harvest does not automatically mean security.

Ruth is still a widow. She is still poor. She is still a migrant in a place that is not her own.

So Ruth goes to the fields to glean—gathering what has been left behind, so she and Naomi can eat.

Gleaning was not random generosity. It was a system built into the law—a way God instructed the community to care for those who were poor,

widowed, or displaced. Landowners were told not to harvest the edges of their fields, leaving space for others to gather what they needed.

Ruth enters the field not knowing how she will be received. She was in a vulnerable position, especially for a woman, especially for a foreigner. And yet in Boaz’s field, she finds more than provision. She finds care.

Boaz notices Ruth and learns her story. He sees her not simply as a migrant, but as a person: someone who has shown loyalty, someone doing what she can to survive. He responds by going above and beyond, giving generously and making space for Ruth to have a seat at the table with dignity.

Boaz’s actions remind us that God’s provision often comes through human hands—through systems designed for care, and through individuals willing to live into them with compassion.

Ruth and Naomi are women enduring economic hardship. Ruth works long hours just to survive, relying on a system that, while designed for provision, still leaves her vulnerable. This remains the reality for many women today. Poverty creates instability and exposes those already marginalized to greater risk. The question this text raises is not only whether people will survive, but also whether they will be treated with dignity.

The story of Ruth is similar to the stories of many refugee and immigrant families today who often arrive having left everything behind—home, income and community—to enter a new place where they must begin again. Like Ruth, they are not just navigating geography; they are navigating systems, culture and belonging.

There is a process of adjusting—learning how to live in a new place, finding work, understanding new systems, helping children settle into new schools, and building relationships from the ground up. What makes the difference is not only resources. It is people.

This is why I deeply appreciate the work of organizations like Inspiritus, a Lutheran Services in America

member organization, on whose board of directors I serve. In Spiritus offers many impactful programs, including First Friends. The First Friends program pairs congregations with refugee families who are navigating life in a new culture. Through First Friends, congregations walk alongside families as they continue to build their lives, helping them to navigate everyday realities simply showing up consistently. It is not about rescuing. It is about accompanying. It is about making sure people are not left to figure things out on their own. Adjusting, learning systems and building relationships all take time. What makes this adjustment possible is not just access to services, but connection.

Scripture shows us how Ruth is seen, supported and welcomed into community. We were never meant to walk through this life alone. Together, we participate in God's plan of accompaniment. This is true in Ruth's life, and we are still called to make it true today.

Ruth's story is not just a story from long ago. It is a story we see playing out in our world every day. Like Ruth, there are people in our communities who have left behind what is familiar (home, family, language, stability), who are navigating what it means to begin again.

Some arrive by choice.

Others arrive by necessity.

Some are seeking opportunity.

Others are seeking safety.

And like Ruth, they are not just navigating a new place—they are navigating systems, expectations, and the question of whether they will be welcomed or remain on the margins.

The difference between survival and belonging is not just resources. It is people.

People who notice.

People who make space.

People who choose to go beyond what is required and extend dignity, care and connection.

Ruth found that in Boaz's field.

So where are those places of connection in our communities today? How might we be called to recognize and help create these places?

Share or reflect:

7. What risks might Ruth have been facing as she entered the fields to glean?
8. Where do you see systems today that are designed to support people? Where do they succeed? Where might they fall short?
9. What would it look like to participate in God's work by helping to create not simply survival, but dignity and belonging for others in our own communities?

RESTORATION, LOVE AND NEW LIFE

📖 Read: Ruth 4:13–17

By the end of the story, we see the fruit of Ruth's journey. What began with Ruth choosing loyalty now unfolds into something more. She begins to find love, not just in relationship, but in community and new life.

Ruth and Boaz are married. A child is born. What began as survival begins to look like stability. What began in uncertainty begins to take shape as something new.

Through Ruth's courage, her loyalty, and her willingness to stay, Ruth becomes part of a larger story than she could ever have imagined. The child born in this moment, Obed, becomes the grandfather of David, whose lineage ultimately leads to Jesus, the fulfillment of God's redeeming promise. Through Ruth—a migrant woman, a widow, an outsider—God is weaving a story of redemption. Her story extends far beyond her own life.

Ruth does not begin this journey knowing how it will end. Through her openness to relationship and community, Ruth's bold faith becomes the thread that connects loss to new life. Ruth's presence brings restoration not only to her own life but also to Naomi's life and to the wider community around them.

Share or reflect:

10. How does Ruth's story challenge the way

we think about who God uses in the work of restoration?

11. Where might God be inviting you to take a step of faith, even if you cannot yet see the outcome?

BOLD FAITH ON AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

The love woven throughout Ruth's story is captured in the Hebrew word *hesed*, used throughout the Book of Ruth, describing a love that is steadfast, faithful and active.

Hesed is not just something we feel. *Hesed* is something we do. It is the kind of love that shows up in real, tangible ways. It is the kind of love that stays when it would be easier to leave, the kind of love that takes responsibility for the wellbeing of another.

In this story, we see that kind of love most clearly in Ruth. Ruth demonstrates bold faith from the very beginning of her journey. She stays when she could have left. She goes when she does not know what lies ahead. She commits herself to a people, a place, a future that are not her own. Ruth's faith is not rooted in certainty. It is rooted in relationships.

That is *hesed*. A love that commits, even without guarantees. A love that moves forward, even without clarity.

Ruth chooses to accompany Naomi. She chooses to provide for them. She remains open to what God is doing, even when the path is unclear. Ruth's faith is lived out in everyday decisions, in showing up, in staying present, in continuing forward. That is what makes it bold. Ruth was willing to stay, willing to love, willing to walk through uncertainty.

And Ruth is not the only one who embodies this kind of love. We also see *hesed* in Boaz. Boaz does more than what is required of him. He notices Ruth. He makes space for her. He ensures her safety and preserves her dignity in a system where she could have easily been overlooked or harmed. In Boaz, we see that *hesed* is not limited to one person—it can shape a whole community.

And through both Ruth and Boaz, we begin to see something even deeper: *Hesed* is not only how people care for one another. *Hesed* reflects how God cares for us through one another. God often works through people willing to stay and show up.

In a time when many people experience loneliness, Ruth's story reminds us that faith isn't lived in isolation, but in relationship. Bold faith shows up. Bold faith stays. Bold faith creates belonging. Bold faith also makes room. It pays attention. It refuses to let people remain unseen or unsupported.

Sometimes bold faith looks like crossing into unfamiliar spaces. Sometimes it looks like committing to people who need us. Sometimes it looks like refusing to let someone walk alone.

Share or reflect:

12. Where have you experienced *hesed*—a love that stayed with you and supported you?
13. What might it look like to practice that kind of love in your relationships right now?

CONCLUSION

With each move I have made—each new place, each unfamiliar beginning—I have had to find community again. Along the way, God has been faithful. Through colleagues, church communities, sorority sisters and friendships formed over time, I have experienced the kind of companionship that sustains.

These relationships have been life-giving, not because they removed every challenge, but because they ensured I did not have to walk through those seasons alone. Ruth's story reminds us that this is often how God works—not always by changing our circumstances immediately, but by placing people in our lives who walk with us, support us and help us find our way forward. 🌿

Bold faith on an unexpected journey

Session two

Love and loyalty: A story of connection and courage

BY TIFFANY C. CHANEY

OVERVIEW

In session two of “Bold Faith on an Unexpected Journey,” participants consider the biblical book of Ruth and how we connect during uncertain seasons. Through Ruth’s story, we see how God works through relationships to bring provision, dignity and new life.

By the end of this session, participants will reflect on:

- Experiences of change or starting over
- Relationships in seasons of uncertainty
- How bold faith shows up through connection

RITUALS

Opening Ritual

Create a welcoming space.

You might:

- Light a candle as a reminder that God is present
- Play or sing opening hymn
- Pray the opening prayer

Remind the group of your shared covenant:

- Respect confidentiality
- Share only what you are comfortable sharing
- Listen without judgment

Closing Ritual

The story of Ruth moves from bitterness to joy. End this Bible study session by grounding participants in hope and community. Invite participants to name the lessons they are taking from this session.

- Name one relationship they are grateful for.
- Share one word that reflects what they are taking away.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Walking the road: Journeying together

Ruth’s story is a journey. Help participants experience that movement by creating a simple “path” around the room to reflect the journey Ruth and Naomi made as they walked together back to Bethlehem.

Adaptation: If there are physical limitations within the group (or if space is limited), invite participants to close their eyes and imagine each movement instead of physically walking.

Guide participants to walk, roll or visualize (as they are able) this journey:

- Take a step, while reflecting on leaving what is familiar
- Take another step, walking into uncertainty
- Pause, reflecting on carrying grief

- Step again, choosing to stay with someone
- Keep moving, arriving without knowing what's next

Afterward, invite reflection:

- What part of that journey felt most real to you?
- Where did you feel resistance?
- Where did you feel courage?

2. "Where You Go, I Will Go"
— A partner blessing

In pairs, each person takes a turn speaking Ruth's words to their partner:

Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.

Then switch.

After both have shared, invite reflection:

- What did it feel like to say those words to someone?
- What did it feel like to hear them?
- Who has been that kind of presence in your life?

3. Table of belonging

This activity explores who has a place at the table. Set up a few chairs around a table.

Ask the group:

- Who feels welcome at this table in our church?
- Who might hesitate to sit down?
- Who might not be invited at all? (Note: As each person or group is named, invite some participants to add chairs to the table to hold space for those not currently invited)

Reflect together:

- What changed when you made space?
- Where might God be calling us to widen the table?
- What does it take to move from simply helping people to truly welcoming them?

STUDY OPTIONS

Short study (30–45 minutes)

1. Open with Opening prayer; omit Opening hymn.
2. Ask one discussion question from each section.
3. Invite a few takeaways.
4. End with Closing hymn and Closing prayer.

A little longer (60 minutes)

1. Begin with Opening hymn and Opening prayer.
2. Break into small groups of 2–3 for discussion questions.
3. Come back together to share perspectives.
4. Incorporate one optional activity.
5. End with Closing hymn and prayer.

Longer version (2 hours)

1. Begin with Opening hymn and Opening prayer.
2. Break into small groups of 2 or 3 for discussion questions.
3. Come back together to share perspectives.
4. Incorporate all optional activities.
5. Close with Closing hymn and prayer.

OPENING HYMN

“Take My Life, That I May Be”
(ELW 583)

OPENING PRAYER

God of resurrection and new beginnings, to you we come, sometimes certain, sometimes unsure, sometimes hopeful, sometimes grieving. Like Mary Magdalene, we seek you in places that feel unclear. Open our eyes to recognize your presence. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our hearts to receive your call. Send us out ready to bear witness to the life you are bringing forth in the world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of compassion, you call and send your people, even into spaces that are uncertain and not always ready. Give us courage to show up, strength to stay, boldness to speak and humility to listen when you speak through others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“We’ve Come This Far by Faith”
(TFBF 197, ELW 633)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship, This Far By Faith*)
- Bibles (*NRSV Updated Edition*)
- Sticky notes, pens (optional)

Bold faith on an unexpected journey

Session three

Proclaiming resurrection in hope

BY TIFFANY C. CHANEY

INTRODUCTION

There are moments when we are called into something we did not plan, and we are asked to step forward.

Twenty years ago, I preached my first sermon—except I didn’t know I was going to preach until shortly before I was supposed to do so.

I was at a young adult discernment retreat that my pastor, the Rev. Lamont Wells, had invited me to attend. I had been considering ways I could serve more in the church. A few days before the retreat, Rev. Wells had asked if, during the closing worship, I would be willing to “share a scripture and tell my story.” I said yes, though I was nervous. I spent the next couple of nights preparing.

By the time I arrived at the retreat on Friday, I felt ready. I had settled on what I would say and was looking forward to the experience over the next couple of days. Until the Rev. Dr. Arthur Lewis, a respected Lutheran pastor and educator, came up to me and said: “I hear you’re our preacher for Sunday!”

I remember thinking, *I’m sorry ... what?*

“Telling my story” turned out to be me preaching. That night and the next, I stayed up revising and editing. I didn’t have everything figured out. I didn’t feel fully ready. But I knew I had been asked to share how I had experienced Jesus.

Being sent to share an experience with Jesus is at the heart of Mary Magdalene's story.

Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ in a moment of grief and confusion. She is called by name and sent to proclaim. Her bold faith shows us how God meets us where we are and sends us to share good news.

FAITHFULNESS BEFORE THE TOMB

📖 Read: Luke 8:1–3; Mark 15:40–41

In Luke 8, Mary Magdalene is named among the women who traveled with Jesus during his ministry. She is one who walks with Jesus, supporting the work of the ministry alongside others. Before Mary ever arrives at the empty tomb, she has already been on a journey.

Mary is described as one who has been healed, freed from seven demons that once had her bound. The text does not tell us exactly what those demons were, and it does not define her by them. Instead, it points to the depth of her transformation.

In biblical tradition, the number seven often signifies completeness. This detail is likely less about identifying her past, and more about amplifying the fullness of her healing.

Mary's story begins with her restoration. From this place of transformation, she follows, serves and remains. She is a disciple. She encounters Jesus, experiences transformation, and commits to following him. She travels, participates and contributes.

In Mark 15, we see Mary again—this time at the cross. While many have fled, Mary remains. She stands at a distance, witnessing the crucifixion. She does not turn away from the suffering. She stays present to the pain, loss and reality of what is unfolding.

By the time we meet her at the tomb in John 20, we know that Mary is a faithful witness. Her presence at the resurrection is not accidental. Even in the face of death, Mary continues to show up.

The Gospel writers differ in their details of what happened at the tomb—who arrived first, what was seen, and how the events unfolded. But all four Gospels agree: Mary Magdalene was there.

Her faithfulness before the tomb prepares her for what she will encounter at the tomb. She has practiced staying. She has practiced following. She has practiced showing up. So when the moment comes—when others leave, when the situation is unclear, when grief is overwhelming, Mary does what she has always done. She shows up, and she stays.

Share or reflect:

1. How does knowing Mary's story before the resurrection change how you understand her role at the tomb?
2. Where have you seen faithfulness over time prepare someone for living into God's call for them?
3. How have your past experiences with God shaped your willingness to show up in difficult moments today?

SHOWING UP IN UNCERTAINTY

📖 Read: John 20:1–10

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early, while it is still dark, carrying grief and uncertainty. She has witnessed loss. She is trying to make sense of what has happened. When she sees that the stone has been removed and the tomb is empty, her first response is not hope but confusion. She assumes that someone has taken Jesus' body.

Peter and John run to the tomb. They look. They observe what has happened. And then—they leave. The text tells us they return to where they were staying.

Mary does something different. Mary stays. She remains at the tomb, not because she understands, but because she does not. She lingers in the place of

unanswered questions. She does not rush past what she cannot yet explain.

Mary encounters the risen Christ because she stays present in the moment. There is something powerful about staying present in places others might move past—staying with the questions, with the grief, with what has not yet been resolved.

To be clear, this is not about staying in situations that cause harm. This is not about remaining where there is danger, abuse or injustice. Mary is not remaining in harm. She is staying present to her grief, in a moment that is uncertain and not without risk.

Mary remains present, engaged and open. She weeps. She searches. She stays. And even in her grief, she is moving. She looks. She turns. She speaks. She asks.

Sometimes faith does not look like certainty. Sometimes it looks like remaining present, remaining open and remaining engaged with God, even when clarity has not yet come.

Share or reflect:

4. When have you remained present in a difficult or uncertain season, even without clarity or resolution?
5. What might it look like in your life to stay engaged—not stuck, but present—with something that is still unfolding?
6. What helps you to discern the difference between staying faithfully present and remaining in something you need to leave?

SEEING THROUGH THE LENS OF EXPECTATION

 Read: John 20:11–15

ELCA pastor Angela Shannon offers this striking poetic reflection on Mary Magdalene's experience at the tomb:

“For Mary of Magdala”

Hope dwells at the tomb.

Oh, how I have kept vigil in what seems like endless darkness.

*More than the watchman waits for the morning,
Stalking twilight amongst the shadows,
Where, O God, are you to be found?*

I can't see for looking ... So desperately.

Can scarcely hear above the wails and lamentations of my own voice.

Blinded by tears I ask, 'Sir, how long have you stood there? From where did you come?'

The Word before all sounds,

The Logos before all languages calls my name.

And suddenly, I am no longer entombed but resurrected.

Triduum

—Rev. Angela Shannon

© 2002 Angela Lynn Shannon. *God's Faithfulness on the Journey: Reflections by Rostered Women of Color*, <https://resources.elca.org/racial-justice/rostered-women-of-color-gods-faithfulness-on-the-journey/>, accessed 3/29/2026.

Although Mary is looking, she can't yet recognize what is right in front of her. Not because Jesus is absent, but because she is looking for death—not life.

How often do we approach life, expecting disappointment? Expecting loss? Expecting things to remain as they are?

Grief narrows vision. It trains us to expect absence, instead of presence. Grief may even make it difficult to recognize that God is already at work. Sometimes we hold vigil by the tombs of problems in our lives; we stand there, weeping over problems Jesus has already solved. The Lord stands right there with us, as with Mary, but we do not recognize him because tears cloud our vision.

Mary's lack of recognition is not failure; it is human. Resurrection does not depend on her recognition. Jesus is present—whether Mary sees him or not. Jesus meets her in her grief. He does not withdraw. He stays. He speaks. He calls. The issue is not that God is absent, but that we are looking through the wrong lens. We are looking for what was, while God is revealing *what is becoming*.

Sometimes we look so hard for what we expect to find that we have difficulty seeing what is already present. In that space—between grief and hope, between searching and seeing—we find ourselves where Mary stands.

The turning point in Mary Magdalene's story comes when Jesus speaks her name: "Mary." This helps her see that Jesus knows her personally, shaking her from grief to joy. Then Jesus sends her on a mission as the first witness to the resurrection, charged with sharing the Gospel. Mary sees what she could not see before: Jesus Christ has indeed claimed victory over sin and death, just as he told her.

Mary Magdalene's willingness to see beyond her limits allows her to serve in new, unexpected ways. Jesus sends her to be apostle to the apostles, to be the one to tell the good news of his resurrection. Mary announces, "I have seen the Lord." Her vision has been enlarged, transformed.

Resurrection is not only an event to remember—it is a reality we are invited to recognize.

It shows up in places we thought were finished, in situations we assumed would not change, and in moments where grief has the final word—until it doesn't.

Like Mary, we may not recognize it at first. But resurrection is already at work.

The question is not whether God is moving, but whether we are able to see God moving.

In your life, what have you overlooked that God may be revealing in a new way today?

Share or reflect:

8. What does it mean to be called by name by God?
9. Where might your expectations be limiting your ability to recognize what God is doing right now?
10. What practices help you remain open to God's presence, even when you struggle to recognize it?

CALLED BY NAME, SENT TO PROCLAIM

 Read: John 20:16–18, Luke 24:10–11

Mary is called by Jesus. She is entrusted with the message of resurrection. Yet the Gospel of Luke records that her witness, along with that of the other women, is not immediately believed.

This is a reality that continues today. For many women in ministry, we are called by God yet sometimes questioned by people simply because of our gender. We are prepared and equipped, yet we are asked to prove ourselves in ways others are not. Even so, we continue to show up—to preach, to lead, to care, to proclaim.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has marked more than 55 years since the ordination of women and more than 45 years since the ordination of women of color. Across the ELCA, women now make up a significant portion of rostered ministers, yet disparities remain in leadership, placement and compensation. Women are more likely to serve in smaller congregations and specialized ministry settings, while men remain more represented in senior leadership roles. Compensation gaps persist across ministry contexts. Reports have also documented that nearly half of women in ministry have experienced some form of harassment or bias in their work (*50th Anniversary Ordination of Women Survey Report*, <https://resources.elca.org/gender-justice-and-womens-empowerment/50th-anniversary-ordination-of-women-survey-report-2/>).

Being called does not always mean being fully received. Many women experience a deep sense of call from God while also navigating questions about authority, belonging and voice. This is not a new struggle. We see it in Mary Magdalene's story.

Mary is told to go and tell. Yet she is not immediately heard. However, Mary does not wait for permission. She does not wait until she is believed. She goes, proclaiming: "I have seen the Lord."

In *A Is for Alabaster: 52 Reflections on the Stories of Scripture* (Westminster John Knox Press 2023), the Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence reflects:

She lets go of him, the Jesus she knew and loved, and she goes out—not to write the church's first creed, but to preach the church's first sermon: 'I have seen the Lord.' No doctrine. No explanation. Just testimony to what she saw and what she believes. And there is no guarantee that out there in the world, people will accept it, no guarantee at all that they will hear her as a credible witness. Given who she is and who she used to be, they probably won't. But Mary is the one who showed up at the tomb, so she's the one who is sent. Now there is only the hope that her life as a disciple will confirm what she says, which is that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Go and tell.

Mary's witness is not rooted in being believed. It is rooted in being sent.

Share or reflect:

11. Can you recall a time when you sensed a call on your life, but others did not fully recognize or receive it? How did you respond?
12. Where do you see voices being dismissed or overlooked today? How might we respond differently?

13. What would it look like to both speak your witness and make space for someone else's?

BOLD FAITH ON AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

It would be easy to try to criticize Mary Magdalene when she first encounters Jesus at the tomb. Easy to shake our heads, knowing that Jesus was right in front of her and she could not see him. Instead of judging, we can pay attention to what Mary does.

Even without understanding, Mary shows up. She comes to the tomb early, while it is still dark. She comes in grief ... in uncertainty ... and despite the risk.

Jesus has just been publicly executed. His followers are at risk—so much so that the other disciples have locked themselves behind closed doors. Mary has every reason to be concerned, yet she goes to the tomb anyway.

Her love for Jesus outweighs her concern for herself. She is willing to face what she might encounter. She is willing to step into the unknown. She is willing to try. Because even before she understands resurrection, she is committed to her relationship with Jesus. Even in her confusion, she continues to act. She looks into the tomb. She speaks. She asks. She searches.

When she encounters someone she believes to be the gardener, she is still trying to care for Jesus' body. She is still trying to do what love requires of her, even when the situation does not make sense. How can she move the stone? How can she carry his body? She does not know. But she is willing to try.

That is what makes her faith bold—not that she has everything figured out, but that she keeps moving forward anyway. At every stage of the journey, Mary is willing to take the next step. She shows up, stays, seeks, responds and proclaims. Bold faith begins with the willingness to speak of what we have seen, even when we are unsure how it will be received.

As Mary reminds us, bold faith is not about having all the answers. It is about being willing to walk with God, one step at a time.

Share or reflect:

14. What does it look like to take the next step in faith, without full clarity?
15. Where is God inviting you to show up, even when it feels unsure or risky?
16. How has love or commitment sustained you in moments when understanding was limited or still unfolding?

CONCLUSION

When I consider my first preaching moment 20 years ago, the truth is that if I had been directly asked to preach at that retreat, I probably would have been afraid and said no. But being asked to “share a scripture and tell my story” felt different. It felt possible. It felt like something to which I could say, “Yes.”

In many ways, this is what Mary does. She is not sent with a fully developed sermon. She is sent with her experience: “I have seen the Lord.” Her witness is simple, personal, true and enough.

I have had the opportunity to go to seminary, to study, to grow and to continue developing my preaching. But I have never forgotten where it began. It began with my story—shared from a small brown notebook—about how I had experienced Jesus in my own life.

It matters that a woman is the first to proclaim the resurrection. Jesus does not choose based on who will be most easily believed; he chooses Mary.

Jesus chooses someone who has been present. Someone who has followed. Someone who has remained when others left. Mary has walked with him in ministry. She has stood at the cross. She has come to the tomb. Her witness is not based on a single moment but is grounded in a relationship over time. God often entrusts revelation to those who

have been faithful in the journey—those not perfect, not fully prepared, but present.

This impacts how we understand calling. Being called is not always about who seems most qualified. It is often about who has been willing to stay and grow on their faith journey.

Mary’s story reminds us that the work of the church is not only to proclaim, but to receive. Receiving requires intention. It requires humility. It requires us to examine whose voices we are quick to affirm and whose voices we question.

To receive means creating space for testimony that may challenge our expectations. It means listening beyond our assumptions. It means recognizing that God may speak through people we did not anticipate.

The church is called not only to send witnesses, but to become a community ready to hear them. When we honor each other’s stories, we create space for God’s voice to be heard more clearly among us all.

Even when the community is still learning how to listen, Jesus does not wait. He sends Mary anyway. Likewise, Jesus sends us—whether the world is ready or not.

In this three-session series, we have journeyed with women through the wilderness to a new homeland, and from an empty tomb with good news. Walking with Hagar, Ruth and Mary Magdalene reminds us that God meets us in every season of the journey. We are not alone. We are seen. We are sent. As we continue our own unexpected journeys, may we do so with bold faith, trusting that the same God who met Hagar, Ruth and Mary Magdalene is still meeting us, calling us, and sending us to bring good news into the world.

Bold faith on an unexpected journey

Session three

Proclaiming resurrection in hope

BY TIFFANY C. CHANEY

OVERVIEW

In session three of “Bold Faith on an Unexpected Journey,” participants will reflect on what it means to be called, to remain present in uncertainty and to proclaim how we have experienced Jesus. Through Mary Magdalene’s story, we see that bold faith is not rooted in knowing all the answers. It is rooted in showing up, staying engaged and responding when God calls.

Some participants may connect with themes of grief, uncertainty, being overlooked or being called into something they did not feel prepared for. Create space for people to share at their own comfort level.

By the end of this session, participants will:

- Reflect on what it means to remain present in uncertain seasons
- Consider how expectations shape what we’re able to see
- Recognize the significance of being called and sent by God
- Identify ways bold faith shows up through witness and response

RITUALS

Opening Ritual

Mary’s story begins in grief and uncertainty yet moves toward recognition and calling. Create a space that allows participants to enter the story honestly.

You might:

- Light a candle to symbolize God’s presence even when it is not yet recognized
- Play or sing the Opening hymn
- Pray the Opening prayer
- Invite participants into a brief moment of silence to center the group

Remind participants of your shared covenant:

- Respect confidentiality
- Share only what you are comfortable sharing
- Listen with care and without judgment

Closing Ritual

Mary’s story ends with her proclamation: “I have seen the Lord.” Invite participants to reflect about the prompt: “Where might God be calling you to share what you have seen?”

Invite participants to share one word that reflects what they are taking away from the session.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Witnesses on the Journey:
Listening to Testimony

Select two or three reflections ahead of time from *God’s Faithfulness on the Journey: Reflections by Rostered Women of Color*, found here: <https://gathermagazine.org>

cdn.elca.org/cdn/wp-content/uploads/Gods_Faithfulness_on_the_Journey.pdf

Read excerpts aloud (invite different voices if possible).

Listen for themes: calling, challenge, faithfulness, community.

Reflect in small groups:

- What stood out to you?
- What does it mean to keep speaking, even when your words are not fully received?

Regather the whole group and ask:

- What do these stories teach us about being called and sent?

2. “I Have Seen the Lord” — Practicing witness

Mary’s witness is powerful. What’s our witness?

Invite participants to complete this sentence: “I have seen the Lord in...”

Participants may share aloud with the group or write their responses on a post-it note and stick them on a wall for shared witness.

3. “Go and Tell”

Invite participants to consider:

- Who in your life might need to hear a word of hope?
- What is one way you have experienced Jesus that you could share?

Write a short message of hope to send someone via a written card or text message after the session.

STUDY OPTIONS

Short study (30–45 minutes)

1. Omit Opening hymn; begin with Opening prayer.

2. Ask 1–2 discussion questions.
3. Invite a few participants to share perspectives.
4. Encourage completing first activity at home.
5. Sing Closing hymn and pray.

A little longer (60 minutes)

1. Begin with Opening hymn and prayer.
2. Break into groups of 2 or 3 for discussion.
3. Regather and share key reflections.
4. Incorporate one optional activity.
5. End with Closing hymn and prayer.

Longer version (2 hours)

1. Open with Opening hymn and prayer.
2. Break into small groups of 2 or 3, then return to share perspectives.
3. Incorporate all three optional activities, or stick to the first activity and read more of the stories.
4. Close with the Closing prayer and Closing hymn.