

For First Time, Archbishop of Canterbury is a Woman

The Wired Word for the Week of April 12, 2026

In the News

The Church of England recently installed its new leader, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in a ceremony that has been taking place for more than 1,400 years. For the first time in history, the archbishop is a woman, Sarah Elisabeth Mullally. She is the 106th person to hold the job.

NPR reports that Mullally prepared for the ceremony by walking 87 miles from London to Canterbury, a journey made famous by Geoffrey Chaucer's classic story of pilgrimage, *The Canterbury Tales*. After she arrived, the March 25 ceremony began when she knocked three times on the west door of Canterbury Cathedral, and then entered with a group of local schoolchildren. The installation service was attended by the Prince and Princess of Wales, as well as Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

Starmer said Mullally "will play a key role in our national life," adding that he wishes her "every success." King Charles III approved of the nomination, as did Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell, who described Mullally as "a person of huge courage, wisdom, integrity and experience." Mullally replaces former archbishop Justin Welby, who resigned in 2024 after an investigation revealed that he failed to respond properly to serial physical and sexual abuse by a Christian camp volunteer.

"As I look back over my life," Mullally said in her sermon to about 2,000 people in attendance, "I could never have imagined the future that lay ahead, and certainly not the ministry to which I am now called." She did not anticipate her role as archbishop, since the Church of England only recently allowed women in ordained leadership -- priests beginning in 1994 and bishops in 2014.

"Installing Sarah as our first female archbishop would have almost been unimaginable even 50 years ago," said David Monteith, dean of Canterbury Cathedral, to *The New York Times*. "Today matters."

"As I respond to the call of Christ to this new ministry, I do so in the same spirit of service to God and to others that has motivated me since I first came to faith as a teenager," Mullally said in a statement reported by Fox News. "At every stage of that journey, through my nursing career and Christian ministry, I have learned to listen deeply -- to people and to God's gentle prompting -- to seek to bring people together to find hope and healing." She added, "I want, very simply, to encourage the Church to continue to grow in confidence in the Gospel, to speak of the love that we find in Jesus Christ and for it to shape our actions."

In addition to becoming the head of the Church of England, Mullally is the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, which includes tens of millions of members around the world. The installation ceremony reflected the church's global reach by including sections in languages such as Spanish, Swahili and Urdu.

Although the ceremony was celebratory, Mullally's appointment has sparked opposition from groups such as the Global Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (GAFCON). For more than 20 years, the global Anglican Communion (including the Episcopal Church in the United States and the Church of Nigeria, among others) has been divided over issues including same-sex marriage and the ordination of women and LGBTQ people. According to *The New York Times*, GAFCON believes that "the Bible requires a male-only episcopacy."

Emily Onyango, assistant bishop of the Diocese of Bondo, was the first woman ordained as a bishop in the Anglican Church of Kenya. She told NPR that leadership roles in the church can be harder for women. "Most people have never seen a woman church leader," Onyango said. "Everybody thinks that you should be twice as good as the other bishops to be recognized."

Onyango was one of five female bishops from Africa who traveled to Canterbury for the ceremony. "Some of us never thought in our lifetime, nor in the life of the church, we'd have a woman being elected and her saying yes to the appointment," said fellow bishop Vincentia Kgabe. "That is a historic moment."

More on this story can be found at these links:

For the First Time in More Than 1,400 years, Church of England Gets a Woman Leader. NPR

Sarah Mullally, the First Female Archbishop of Canterbury, Is Enthroned. The New York Times

Church of England Names Sarah Mullally First Woman Archbishop of Canterbury after Welby Exit. Fox News

Applying the News Story

Use the installation of Sarah Mullally as the Archbishop of Canterbury as an opportunity to discuss the roles of women as disciples, apostles and leaders in the life of the church.

The Big Questions

1. What is your reaction to the installation of Sarah Mullally as Archbishop of Canterbury? How do you think her leadership will impact the Anglican Communion?
2. Archbishop Mullally says she wants to "encourage the Church to continue to grow in confidence in the Gospel." How is she equipped to do this? What unique challenges will she face?
3. What roles do women play in the life of your church? Are they leadership roles, service roles, or something else? How are these roles guided by Scripture, and by the teachings of your church about God? What roles are reserved for men, if any, and why is this the case?
4. Which women in the Bible and in Christian history inspire you? What distinctive gifts and perspectives do they offer you?
5. "Today matters," said the dean of Canterbury Cathedral on the day of Mullally's installation. How so?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Ruth 1:16-17 But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (For context, read Ruth 1:1-22.)

In ancient Israel, there was a famine in the land. In Bethlehem, Elimelech and his wife Naomi decided to leave the country. Journeying with their two sons, they entered Moab and lived there. Unfortunately, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi as a widow. For a while she managed to survive because her sons took Moabite wives, two young women named Orpah and Ruth.

But then the sons of Naomi died, and she felt that she needed to return home to Bethlehem. "Go back each of you to your mother's house," said Naomi to Orpah and Ruth (v. 8). Naomi loved her daughters-in-law, and wanted the best for them. "The LORD grant that you may find security," she said (v. 9).

So Orpah went back to her people and to her gods in the land of Moab, and Naomi encouraged Ruth to do the same. But Ruth said to Naomi, "Do not press me to leave you, ... Where you go, I will go; ... your

people shall be my people and your God my God." Ruth followed Naomi to Bethlehem, where she found a husband and became the great-grandmother of King David.

The word "disciple" comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which means "learner." Ruth was a true disciple in that she was a Moabite who learned about the God of Israel, developed faith in him, and then followed her Israelite mother-in-law to Bethlehem. Ruth could have taken the easy path and stayed behind in Moab, but she trusted the God of Israel and walked into an uncertain future with faith and with hope. Naomi's people became her people and Naomi's God her God.

Questions: What does Ruth teach you about discipleship? How is she a model of faith and hope, especially in the face of an uncertain future? What was so important about the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi?

Matthew 28:7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' (For context, read Matthew 28:1-10.)

According to Matthew, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the first people to visit the tomb on Easter morning. As soon as they arrived, "an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it" (v. 2). The appearance of the angel "was like lightning and his clothing white as snow" (v. 3). The soldiers who had been posted to guard the tomb "shook and became like dead men" (v. 4). They were overwhelmed with fear.

Then the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid" (v. 5). He knew what they were feeling and wanted to comfort them. His words are the most repeated command in the Bible, although it sometimes appears as "fear not" or "do not let your hearts be troubled." In every case, the message is that God is with you, offering peace in the middle of stress, danger, or uncertainty.

"Do not be afraid," said the angel, "for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said" (vv. 5-6). The very worst thing that could possibly happen -- the death of God's Son on a cross -- had been overcome by the Resurrection. Darkness had been replaced by light, and death had been replaced by new life.

"Then go quickly and tell his disciples," said the angel: "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." The women were told to "go quickly and tell his disciples" about the Resurrection. The word "apostle" comes from the Greek *apostolos*, which means "messenger." These two women were the first apostles in the sense that they were the first people sent out as messengers of the good news that Jesus had been raised. Matthew tells us that "they left the tomb quickly ... and ran to tell his disciples" (v. 8).

Questions: Where do you find comfort in the words, "Do not be afraid"? Why should Mary Magdalene and the other Mary be seen as the first apostles? What do they teach you about sharing the good news of the resurrection?

Luke 24:6-7 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again. (For context, read Luke 24:1-12.)

On Friday of Holy Week, all of the acquaintances of Jesus, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, witness the death of Jesus. According to Luke, a righteous man named Joseph of Arimathea takes the body of Jesus, wraps it in a linen cloth, and lays it in a tomb. The women see the tomb, and then they prepare spices and ointments to put on the body.

On Easter morning, at early dawn, the women walk to the tomb with the spices they have prepared. They are expecting death, not life. But when they arrive to anoint the body, they find the stone rolled

away from the tomb. When they go inside, they are unable to find the body, which leaves them perplexed. But then two men in dazzling clothes suddenly appear. The women are terrified and bow their faces, while the men say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen" (v. 5).

Is Jesus dead? No, he is not, according to the men. The women, however, are not able to absorb this news immediately. "Remember how he told you," say the mysterious men in the tomb, "while he was still in Galilee, that [he must be] crucified and on the third day rise again." The women begin to recall his words, and put together how both death and resurrection are part of the plan that Jesus had laid out for them.

So the women return from the tomb and tell this to the eleven disciples, and to the other followers of Jesus. Here, it is significant that Luke takes the time to identify the women by name, saying that "it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles" (v. 10). This is eyewitness testimony, says Luke, made by women who are well known and trustworthy in the community of Jesus' followers.

But in spite of their testimonies, the women are not believed. Their words seem to the apostles to be "an idle tale," and they do not believe them (v. 11). Only Peter runs to the tomb to see the evidence for himself, and then he goes home, "amazed at what had happened" (v. 12).

Questions: How do the women in this story act as leaders of the community? What is the significance of Jesus telling them that he must be crucified and then raised to new life? Why do you think the apostles consider their report to be "an idle tale"? When, if ever, do you see such responses today?

John 20:2 So [Mary Magdalene] ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (For context, read John 20:1-10.)

John says that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark, and saw that "the stone had been removed from the tomb" (v. 1). This discovery upset her, since she assumed that grave-robbers had been at work. So she ran to Simon Peter and to John, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Notice that she calls Jesus "the Lord," and she says to them that "we do not know where they have laid him." By calling Jesus "the Lord" and using the plural "we," she is identifying herself as part of the community of Jesus' followers. Clearly, there were more than twelve disciples, and not all of them were men. Mary knows that Jesus is Lord, and she is following him faithfully.

Peter and John take Mary seriously and respond to her by running to the tomb. John peers in and sees the linen wrappings, but he does not go in. Peter arrives, enters the tomb, and sees both the wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head. Strangely, the cloth is "rolled up in a place by itself" (v. 7). That is a clue that the disappearance of Jesus was not a robbery, since a grave-robber would not take the time to roll up a cloth and carefully lay it aside. Then John enters the tomb, and the gospel says that "he saw and believed" (v. 8). He saw that the tomb was empty, and he believed the truth of Mary's story.

Questions: Where do you place Mary Magdalene in the community of the followers of Jesus? Why did Peter and John respond to her as they did? How would you respond to Mary's story?

For Further Discussion

1. "I was born, baptized, confirmed in the Lutheran Church," says TWW Team Member Liz Antonson. "I was ordained as a minister [in] The Salvation Army. For 12 years I was the wife of a pastor in the

Charismatic Pentecostal denomination that had a heavy submission teaching. By default, I was the pastor of a small independent Pentecostal Church for 20 years. In each of these Protestant expressions the view of women in ministry was extremely varied. From these experiences, I know how needful it is for a clear and practical teaching on the topic of women in ministry in the church." How would you summarize your beliefs about women in ministry? On what is your perspective based?

2. A recent Vatican study group called for broader access to positions of authority for Catholic women worldwide and for the church to confront what it described as persistent patterns of clericalism and "machismo." When, if ever, have you encountered patterns of clericalism and "machismo" in the church? How did you respond, if at all? Where have you seen women held back from church power, in the past and today?

3. TWW Team Member Bill Tammeus quotes Mary Foskett, a professor of Religious Studies at Wake Forest University: "the New Testament as we know it would simply not exist were it not for the proclamation of women." Respond.

4. "Hildegard von Bingen made many advances in theological writings, worship music (reportedly the first to use harmony), art, science (natural medicines in particular), and yet we barely hear her name," notes TWW Member Mary Sells. What women of history, church or laity, have you discovered who made contributions that surprised or delighted you? Are there women role models that inspire you to greater faith and worship? Be specific.

Responding to the News

In this season of Easter, pay special attention to the role of women in the life of the church. Give thanks for the faith, hope and love of the women who first shared the good news of the Resurrection, and the women who continue to do so today..

Prayer

God of new life, we praise you for women who continue to inspire us to live as disciples. May we listen to them, believe them, and follow where they rightly lead us. In Jesus' name. Amen.