

Re-telling John 4 from the perspective of the woman from Samaria

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It is a joy for me to be able to speak of him. For that noontide by the well I truly discovered joy. Life had never been easy for me. Indeed, until that day when a stranger happened to stop at the well where I drew my water I had never really known life. I had always had to struggle. The well was deep and it was hard back-breaking work to draw up the water on which I and my family depended. Unlike the other women in her town I had to go there to draw at noon – the hottest part of the day. When I had tried to go to the well in the early morning, the other women either shunned me – which was bad enough – or even called me names and picked up stones to throw at me. It was my bad reputation: I had had five husbands – some had died, some I had escaped after they beat and abused me. Now I lived with a 'protector' – and suffered the jibes of 'tart' in silence.

Normally I expected – and hoped – that I would not meet anyone at the well, but that day there was a man sitting there looking as tired and thirsty as I myself felt. He was a Jew, I could see by his clothes. Well, in that case, he was bound to ignore me, since I was a Samaritan woman. If he were a good Jew he wouldn't have anything to do with me, firstly because I was a Samaritan, then a woman, and he would be able to guess at my reputation because of the time of day. But instead he asked me for a drink, and when I asked him why he started to talk with me. He was answering all my questions: all those questions that poured out of my frustration, and tiredness and unhappiness. I hadn't felt like this – so human – in years: it was almost as though I was sitting there drinking deep of a heady draught which I had not had to draw myself - and which refreshed the depths of my soul as well as my lips and tongue. The man was going to change my life, and it had already begun.

Did I say he was going to change my life? It was much more than that. He gave me the gift of life itself. I will always remember that day. The first moment I saw him, sitting by the well as I came to draw my water. It was like a dream out of the ancient tales - the handsome stranger who asks for water from a woman and then takes her to be his bride. But in the stories the woman was always a young and innocent virgin, not thoroughly soiled goods like me that no upstanding, good man would want even to be seen with. But he had wanted me, he had needed me, he had even used me – and for that I was grateful.

I still chuckle to myself when I think about his disciples. They had gone into the city to buy bread, and when they came back there was their revered leader talking to this disreputable woman. I could see that they were longing to ask him what he was up to, the question was just hanging out of their mouths. But they didn't dare ask it. He was like that: gentle, and yet with the kind of authority that didn't brook unnecessary questions. Yet he hadn't thought my questions were unnecessary – he had answered them, even encouraged the asking.

And then he had used me. No, not in the way so many other men had used me over the years. He had respected me too much for that. For him I was a person, a human being, not a sex object, a channel for men's desires. He had asked me if I would go and tell my people about him – he made me the messenger of his good news. Me, the dregs of my city, I had become the one who changed all their lives. Why was it they had listened to me when I went with the message, when normally they turned their backs and stopped their ears as I approached? Was it the lightness of my step, the light in my eyes that had commanded attention? But they did listen, and came to see for themselves – they made my Saviour their own, they too discovered the one who was Bread and Water of Life. That day I drank deep of the draught he had offered and I believe that I will never be so hungry or thirsty again.

After those few strange days I never saw him again, but I heard word of him from time to time. Then one day, about two years later, the grim news filtered into town that he had been put to death – crucified – in Jerusalem. They told me how, just before he was arrested, he had broken bread with his friends and pledged them his body. They told me, too, how when he had hung on the cross one hot noontime in Jerusalem he had asked for water once again, for he had been thirsty unto death. It seemed that the living water he had offered had sprung deep out of his own side.