

Over the course of our lives, I think we all accrue a good landlord story or two. I've heard of landlords who confiscate security deposits over nonexistent stains; some who refuse to install locks on doors, and still others who allow plumbing issues to continue for weeks.

I think that my landlord story, though, takes the cake. Kevin was a tall, gangly unkempt man who had a habit of lurking about our property. He would show up at 6:30 in the morning, reminding us to cut our grass; he knocked on the door when he didn't like the look (or the skin color) of our friends; and he regularly tried to force-feed us his own brand of conservative theology.

And so one day while getting the mail, I was unpleasantly surprised to find Kevin leaning on the mailbox.

"So," he drawled. "I hear you're going to be a lady-pastor."

This was two months before I headed off to seminary to become, as he put it, a lady-pastor.

"Yes, Kevin, I hope to be an Episcopal priest."

"Well," Kevin continued, "You know what Paul says, don't you?"

I was silent.

**“Paul says that women shouldn’t speak in church. That it’s a disgrace.”**

**At this point in my life, I did not know that Paul said that about women speaking in church, and so I silently prayed for Kevin to go away, as he eventually did.**

**But his words about Paul stayed with me, and over the course of my seminary education, I learned that Kevin was right. The words that we hear today from 1 Timothy, along with other similar passages, have formed the basis of the conservative, Protestant argument against women’s public involvement in church affairs. “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission,” commands Paul. “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”**

## **SILENCE**

**In 1874, the first triennial meeting of the National Women’s Auxiliary was held in New York. In church, women were not yet allowed to speak as readers, and certainly not as preachers or celebrants. Down the hall, women taught Sunday school to children; up in the choir loft, women sang psalms; but from the pulpit, not a woman’s voice was heard.**

**I would like to give them their chance now. In the great communion of Episcopal mothers and sisters who precede us, two Episcopal laywomen stand out as shining examples of spectacular achievement, Paul's injunction be damned.**

**Anna Julia Hayward Cooper was born in 1858 to a woman who was a slave. Despite spending her first years of life as property of another human being, Cooper began to flourish with the end of the Civil War. As a student at Saint Augustine's Episcopal school for former slaves, Cooper thrived while taking advanced math and studying Greek. At the age of 34, she published an autobiography of her experience, which is known as a precursor to the black feminist movement. Soon thereafter, Cooper began studies at Columbia University. Finally, at the age of 65, she completed her doctoral degree at the University of Paris Sorbonne, making her the fourth African-American woman to receive a PhD. Throughout her life, Cooper was a devout Episcopal laywoman, concerned not only with her own personal relationship with God, but also with the administration of the church and the place of women in it.**

**A second voice speaks to us from more recent history: As a committed Episcopal laywoman in the Diocese of Washington, Dr. Cynthia Wedel served from 1955 to 1961 as a member of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church. Shortly thereafter, she was appointed by President Kennedy to serve alongside Eleanor Roosevelt on the Commission on the Status of Women. In 1970,**

**Wedel was appointed the first female president of the National Council of Churches, and shortly thereafter, the second female president of the World Council of Churches. As a devoted ecumenist, Wedel cofounded the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, which seeks to encourage the Church's involvement in political dialogue.**

**As we hear the voices of Anna and Cynthia, we are reminded that we are members of a long line of Episcopal women who have spoken, both in the pulpit and out; but as we hear Luke's account of the Resurrection, we are reminded that the line extends much further than the beginning of the Episcopal Church. As they stood at the empty tomb on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women were among the first to hear the good news; the first to proclaim the living Christ; the first Gospel-bearers to the world.**

**Why would Jesus pick women as his Gospel-bearers? Why not pick a king, or a rabbi, or a military commander? I believe that Jesus chose these women to bear his message of hope because their voices, their words were more powerful because they understood the joy of liberation. As women who otherwise would not have had a voice in society, these women were chosen to be Christ's voice in the world, chosen by God who was born of a woman, the first woman to literally bear Christ into the world.**

**A Gospel message which is only proclaimed by those who are powerful, who have ever only known comfort, is a weak Gospel message. It is when the prisoner proclaims release, when the sick person proclaims healing, that the message has its fullest power.**

**“God said to me: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’” writes Paul in 2 Corinthians. Hopefully we can redeem Paul a little here. “So,” he continues, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”**

**Born out of a weakness in the institutional Church, and out of the strength of women, the ECW and Episcopal laywomen everywhere have sought to lift up women’s voices so that Christ may be made more fully incarnate, both within the Church and without. My challenge to you today is to continue this work of Christian liberation. In an era when women in the Episcopal Church have broken nearly every barrier to full participation in the body of Christ, where might this liberation occur? In a little while, I will have the opportunity to lift up the voices of women in Southern Sudan, where women struggle for education, for equality, for opportunities to participate more fully in the life of the church. In places like these, where our Christian sisters continue to walk the road to freedom, we can be companions on the way.**

**In every American passport, on page 26 and 27, Anna Julia Cooper’s words speak to us from history: "The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or a class - it is the cause of humankind, the very birthright of humanity." As women, as Episcopalians, as**

**followers of Jesus, we use our power to lift up the voices of others; to bring God's message of love and liberation to others; and to continue to seek the perfect freedom offered to us in the Kingdom of God. May God be glorified in our strength, and in our weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell more strongly in us as we continue to follow him on the way.**

**Amen.**