

## BOOK REVIEW

Charlotte S. Riley, *A Mysterious Life and Calling from Slavery to Ministry in South Carolina*, edited and with an introduction by Crystal J. Lucky. Madison, WI: U Wisconsin P, 2016. 126pp. \$24.95.

African-American voices from the nineteenth century are hard to find. Literacy was illegal for the majority of the population who were enslaved for the greater part of the 1800s, while those who were free born or emancipated kept diaries, wrote letters and published newspapers. Those valuable documents that survived are available in select archives and special collection around the country.

However, scholars continue to dig and search in obscure locations to recover voices of men and women whose daily lives shed light on how African Americans experienced life under the gloomy sky of chattel slavery. The recovery of the Reverend Charlotte S. Riley's diary—published as *A Mysterious Life and Calling from Slavery to Ministry in South Carolina*—provides a unique window into the life of an African-American woman who worked as a preacher, teacher and postmistress.

The slim volume of Riley's narrative expands the scholarship on African American women preachers whose lives, bookended between enslavement and gender bias, firmly established the vertical relationship between men and women in the Christian church. Unlike popular narratives of Amanda Berry Smith, Julia Foote and Zilpha Elaw, Riley's "handling of her own unhappy marriage expresses her striking discursive skill" (ix). Riley did not mince words or desire a suitable narrative; she was plain and explicit in sharing her thoughts on paper with all truth as she experienced it.

Crystal J. Lucky, the book's manuscript editor, in preparing the Riley work scoured the shelves of Wilberforce University's Stokes Library archival holdings. Wilberforce holds the vast majority of African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) records, and produced one of the earliest AME publications, the *Recorder*. Moreover, the documents from various regional conferences throughout the denomination chronicle the business of the church covering all aspects of life from education to religious instruction. The Wilberforce holdings probably contain more precious voices. We are thankful for the recovery of Charlotte Riley's voice.

Riley—born enslaved in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1839—learned to read and write within the Christian world of Presbyterian and Methodist households. The appeal of the Methodist church and a divine calling to ministry were elements of her spiritual awaking. The diary started in 1896 when Riley was 57 years old. The narrative is instructive, reflective and direct. Her introduction informs the reader she is writing a narrative at the behest

of her friends: “Trusting their opinion in the matter, that it may do good to some one . . . for surely we can produce from our side of the stage an actor in merit and in labors of love—a true exemplar, a mysterious character, worthy to be noted” (33).

Riley’s instruction to African Americans in general and women, particularly regarding health and safety, were crucial. Communicable diseases, accidents and incidents often maimed, crippled or killed. She suffered numerous health challenges and broken bones. Under medical advice, she attempted to schedule period of recuperation, but her drive to preach and teach the Gospel did not allow broken bones or pulsating migraines to quell her desire to do God’s work.

Riley’s narrative provides links between national and regional personalities throughout all aspects of Methodism. She traveled and corresponded with and preached to men, women and congregations and other gatherings of black people. Manuscript editor Lucky painstakingly provided annotated notes about people, places and events that shed shafts of light into the interconnectedness of the Christian community, contributions of women to Christian ministry and self-actualization of one woman.

In commenting on her appointment to the clerical office, Riley commented: “[B]eing in the army 33 years, unapproachable, is no small gain for a woman fighting the battle single-handed and alone in weakness, affliction, poor and oppressed, but with God on my side I go valiantly onward, fearing no defeat. No one knows what they can not do under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, whose office is to teach us in all our ways, and lead us into all victory” (96). This is the legacy of pioneering Christian women preachers; Riley’s star joins the constellation of those foremothers whose written thoughts survived and now inspire their heirs both of the spirit and the letter.

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