

A vertical watercolor splash graphic on the left side of the book cover, transitioning from yellow at the top to orange, red, pink, purple, and green at the bottom. The background is a light, textured grey.

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FOREWORD BY SCOT MCKNIGHT

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OVERCOMING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

EVERY CHRISTMAS, one of my family's favorite traditions is to watch the movie *Elf*.¹ One of the scenes that usually has us rolling on the floor in laughter is when Buddy the elf meets "Santa" in the department store. The scene goes something like this:

BUDDY Santa!

Santa enters. Children and Buddy cheer and call out.

BUDDY Who the heck are you?

SANTA What are you talking about? I'm Santa Claus.

BUDDY No you're not!

SANTA Why of course I am! Ho! Ho! Ho!

BUDDY If you're Santa, what song did I sing for you on your birthday this year?

SANTA Uh . . . Happy Birthday, of course.

SANTA *(To little boy on lap)* So how old are you son? You're a big boy. What's your name?

LITTLE BOY Paul.

SANTA What do you want for Christmas?
 BUDDY Paul, don't tell him what you want. He's a
 liar. *(to Santa)* You disgust me! How can you
 live with yourself?
 SANTA Just cool it, Zippy!
 BUDDY You sit on a throne of *lies*.
 SANTA *(getting angry)* Look, I'm not kidding . . .
 BUDDY You're a fake!
 SANTA I'm a fake? How'd you like to be dead?
 LITTLE BOY *(whispering)* Fake.
 SANTA *(to the little boy, laughing)* He's kidding!
 BUDDY You stink! You smell like beef and cheese.
 You don't smell like Santa.

Buddy pulls off Santa's beard.

BUDDY He's an *imposter!* *(Santa tackles Buddy . . .*
 they begin wrestling) He's a fake! He's a fake!
 He's not Santa Claus!

(A fight ensues. "Santa" chases Buddy around the store while kids scream in horror.)

This might possibly be the funniest scene in the entire movie. Santa was indeed an imposter and was found out by Buddy the elf. Strangely, I can relate to the imposter in this scene, and maybe you can too.

When I stepped into my first year at Northern Seminary in 2011, I had a nine-month-old at home, and I was serving in full-time ministry at a large church in the western suburbs of Chicago. Although I had been given many opportunities to teach and preach, and although I had good grades in college in

both Bible and theology, and although I was doing well in seminary, and though I knew God not only called me but also gifted me, I was still convinced I was a total fraud and didn't really belong in the pulpit, let alone higher education.

After my first year at Northern Seminary, my favorite New Testament scholar and author, Scot McKnight, joined the faculty. I had read several of his books and was a regular reader of his blog, and now he was going to teach at Northern Seminary. I'll never forget the first paper I submitted to him. As soon as I hit the "send" button, I had an overwhelming feeling that everything was about to come crashing down. A couple of days later when Dr. McKnight returned my paper, I was terrified to open it. I took a deep breath and clicked on the email with racing heart and sweating palms. To my total shock, he gave me an A and even said "well done." I sat at my computer screen and stared at the grade and at the feedback. But these were my thoughts: *He only gave me an A because I was engaged in class and interested in the subject. He didn't really like my paper; he just didn't want to hurt my feelings.*

Paper after paper I received As and paper after paper I was always in utter disbelief. I rarely spoke up in class like my male classmates because something stupid was bound to come out of my mouth (so I thought).

Whether it's preaching a sermon, leading a board, writing a paper, or using our gifts in any capacity, feeling like an imposter is not uncommon for women. It turns out there is an actual name for this: *imposter syndrome*. In her book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg describes it like this:

For women, feeling like a fraud is a symptom of a greater problem. We consistently underestimate ourselves. Multiple studies in multiple industries show that women often judge their own performance as worse than it actually is, while men judge their own performance as better than it actually is. Assessments of students in a surgery rotation found that when asked to evaluate themselves, the female students gave themselves lower scores than the male students despite the faculty evaluations that showed the women outperformed the men. A survey of several thousand potential political candidates revealed that despite having comparable credentials, the men were about 60 percent more likely to think that they were “very qualified” to run for political office. A study of close to one thousand Harvard law students found that in almost every category of skills relevant to practicing law, women gave themselves lower scores than men. Even worse, when women evaluate themselves in front of other people or in stereotypically male domains, their underestimations can become even more pronounced.²

No doubt about it, this is a common problem for women and minorities. As a result, many women feel as though they are simply faking it. This, I believe, absolutely translates to women in ministry. Women who are capable and compelling teachers and preachers, women who are brilliant theologians and scholars, and women who are magnetic leaders are simply unable to embrace their God-given giftedness. Although a woman has clear ability and giftedness, and although others

recognize her giftedness and ability, there is an *inability* on the part of the woman to internalize that giftedness as genuine. When a woman is called, gifted, and recognized as gifted but is unable to embrace her giftedness, we see the imposter syndrome. It is not whether a woman *has a gift* but whether she can *internalize* this as true. This, in part, is due to a landscape in which males have created a culture of leadership fit for males and seemingly unfit for women.

When I was navigating a call process for a lead pastor role, my husband and I went out to dinner with some very good friends. Over dinner, we were discussing the opportunity. When I explained the job potential and began to reflect on my own abilities out loud, I explained to them how unqualified I was for the role. In fact, I went on and on and on for twenty minutes on how hilarious it was that this church was actually interested in such an unqualified individual. Our friends politely listened to me rattle on, but then at the end of the evening my friend Amy reminded me of a stunning reality. “You know, Tara Beth, I could never imagine a man saying the things that you have said tonight.” And it hit me; she was right. My old friend imposter syndrome had the wheel of my discernment process for this call. Sheryl Sandberg says it right:

Ask a man to explain his success and he will typically credit his own innate qualities and skills. Ask a woman the same question and she will attribute her success to external factors, insisting she did well because she “worked really hard” or “got lucky,” or “had help from others.” Men and women also differ when it comes to explaining failure.³

At the beginning of the call process, I was convinced that the church was interested in me for anything *but my gifts and skills*. I couldn't see that maybe they were interested in me for my twelve years of ministry in megachurches. I had a hard time admitting that I had skills, experience, and gifting to lead, shepherd, and pastor a church. I was blind to the idea that maybe they *were actually interested in me for me*—Tara Beth—a supernaturally gifted leader, teacher, preacher, and pastor, totally emboldened by the Spirit.

While there are many factors and systems that keep women sidelined in the church, imposter syndrome is one of them. I think of my friend Madison who grew up in a loving, Spirit-filled church. As a little girl, her parents read Scriptures to her, disciplined her, and made sure she went to church Sunday after Sunday. And Sunday after Sunday as she sat in the pews, she saw male preachers, male worship leaders, male ushers, male elders, male denominational leaders, and male evangelists. She saw plenty of women serving in the church, but they were usually secretaries or in the kitchen organizing meals or ministering through the prayer-shawl ministry or attending women's Bible studies.

When Madison was in high school, she witnessed her male youth pastor spend more time with the guys in her youth group and give them opportunities to even teach, lead, and preach. When Madison got to college, she joined a campus ministry led by men. One day someone came alongside of Madison and began to affirm gifts that they had seen in her. This friend told Madison that she was a gifted communicator, she knew the Bible, and she was always leading friends to

Christ. This friend encouraged Madison to pray about whether her gifts could be used in full-time ministry for the body of Christ. But Madison laughed. *That would be impossible*, she thought. When she closed her eyes and imagined herself leading, teaching, and evangelizing, she saw an imposter. Of course she did, she had no idea how to imagine a woman leading in such a way.

Madisons are in every church, every youth group, and every campus ministry. Madisons sit in our pews and wonder what their narrative is within the body of Christ, and they have a hard time seeing that the gifts they bring to the table have anything to do with participating in the great mission of God in this world. Instead, because of what they have always seen, and because of what they have always known, they see that task as for their brothers in Christ. Therefore, when Madison is called into ministry, imposter syndrome is only a symptom of the male-shaped culture that is happening within the body of Christ.

IS THAT YOU, GOD?

Knowing that imposter syndrome is a side effect that many women in ministry might have to endure for at least the near future, how can we help women in ministry navigate this challenge? First, awareness is key. When doubt, fear of failure, or insecurity creeps in, we can ask ourselves, does this sound like God? Let's take a look at Scripture and discover together how God sees us.

Imagine the scene for a moment. Jesus is having a conversation with his disciples, and one of the disciples, Philip, says, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus,

probably a little flustered with Philip, says “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:8-9). And then Jesus, after explaining to Philip the unity between himself and the Father, says,

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (Jn 14:12-14)

Such a profound and even overwhelming promise from the mouth of Jesus! What could Jesus possibly have meant by this? First, notice *who* Jesus says will do “greater things”: believers. Will those who believe in Jesus actually be able to participate in the work of Jesus and even do greater things? Why yes, yes we can. Notice the qualifications aren’t based on gender, not *even on pastoral title*, but on *believing*—*no exclusions*. In other words, those who put their trust in Jesus as Lord and lean into the empowering presence of the Spirit can participate *in the same mission Jesus participated in: redeeming the world to himself*. Jesus did this through (1) miraculous signs such as healing, (2) preaching, (3) teaching, (4) prophesying, (5) evangelizing, (6) caring for the sick, (7) radical acts of love, and (8) laying down his life.

Jesus says, whoever *believes* in me will also do the works that I do. We, then, as sons and *daughters* of the King will participate in the mission of God in this world through miracles,

teaching, preaching, prophesying, evangelizing, caring for the sick, radical acts of love, and laying down our lives for others. By believing in Jesus, by being so united with him through the Spirit, we will bear witness to the world about Jesus—the world will see Jesus *in us* through our work. This is all awesome and astonishing on so many levels, but here's what I want you to get: Just as we believe in Jesus, so *Jesus believes in us*. Dear sister, Jesus believes in *you*. Maybe it's time to pause for a moment, take a deep breath, and allow those words to soak into your heart. Jesus believes in you; you are not an imposter.

Before there was Michael Phelps, there was Tom Jager—"the bullet." In his day, Tom was the fastest swimmer in the world and held the record for the fifty meter freestyle. When I was fifteen years old I was accepted into the Gold Medal Swim Camp near Albuquerque, New Mexico, with Tom Jager himself. This swim camp was only for the emerging fastest swimmers; I wasn't one of them. I was accepted into the camp because of my brother, a swimmer on the Olympic training swim team.⁴

Swim practice after swim practice, set after set, I was always the last to finish; I was the slowest. To say that I felt like an imposter at that swim camp would be a total understatement. When the day came to hike a local mountain with all one hundred campers, I was, of course, the last in line. Dead last. The altitude and intensity of the climb was more than my lungs could handle, and I found myself hyperventilating every ten minutes. Consequently, I was holding up the rest of the campers. Near the end of the climb, thinking I was about at the

end of my rope, I collapsed on a rock with nothing left to give. Ready to throw in the towel, I looked up to a line of about one hundred frustrated campers and saw 6'3" Tom Jager making his way down from the mountain to the end of the line. With his hand held out, he said, "Come on, Tara Beth, we will do this together; *I believe in you.*"

Dear sister, maybe you feel like I did on the mountain that day. Maybe you feel like you've joined a swim camp that you never should have been to in the first place. Maybe you feel like you don't belong, like you're an imposter. Hear these words: Jesus believes in you, Jesus is with you, and Jesus will equip you. And may we, his daughters, begin to *believe* that he *believes in us.*

RELEASING THE CHAINS OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

The Spirit of the living God emboldens and empowers us to be released from the chains of imposter syndrome. Imagine the day of Pentecost, when the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit fell upon *all* of God's people. Peter—filled with this Spirit—boldly stood before the masses and declared:

In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18, emphasis added)

This same Holy Spirit inspires men and women alike; there are no distinctions in God's new kingdom. The people of God are living into the eschatological vision proclaimed by the apostle Peter. Empowered by the Spirit, women are living the life of the future *here and now* just by using their gifts to edify the church (1 Cor 12:4-11; Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:11-13). Therefore, when women are included in this mission, the people of God get a glimpse of this eschatological vision as proclaimed by Jesus and the apostle Peter, and the chains of imposter syndrome are released as together we are propelled into God's glorious mission.⁵

Women in the church are consistently underestimating themselves and the gifts God has given them, but when we look to the emboldening presence of the Holy Spirit, our perspective begins to change. Let's take a look at Acts 4, for example. The early church was fresh off its honeymoon, and opposition was now on the rise. While John and Peter were preaching and teaching, they were seized and thrown into jail. The following day, Peter and John stood before the opponents. Hear what follows:

They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the

name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is

“the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone.’

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:7-13)

Peter and John, filled with the Spirit, were given courage to stand and proclaim the gospel in the face of opposition. After being released, Peter and John returned to their people and continued to preach in the power of the Spirit, and prayed for the people of God. Notice what they prayed: “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (Acts 4:29). Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, had noticeable *courage* in the face of opposition. Not only that, but the disciples passionately believed in the *emboldening* power of the Spirit, so they prayed that other believers would speak the word with *boldness*.

Similarly, the apostle Paul, chained in prison, experiencing the epitome of opposition, writes to the Ephesians and makes this request, “Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will *fearlessly* make known the mystery of the gospel” (Eph 6:19, emphasis added).

Peter and John, and then also Paul, understood better than almost anyone the hardships that ministry brings. But hardship didn't stop them; rather, they looked to the emboldening presence of the Spirit to give them courage to proclaim the gospel in order to make Christ known, which leads us to an important point. The apostles in the early church weren't given boldness and courage just so they could *withstand opposition*, but they were given boldness and courage because they were *ambassadors of the gospel*. In the same way, *women in the church* are ambassadors of the gospel and have been given this same Spirit to use their gifts with *boldness* so the mission of God will continue to advance in this world. It is the *same Spirit* who empowered the ministry of Jesus; the *same Spirit* who raised Jesus from the dead; the *same Spirit* who launched the early church into the world's grandest movement, and it is the *same Spirit* who brings victory over the powers that chain women in the church, including imposter syndrome.

The life, fulfillment, death, resurrection, and ascension of King Jesus, and the empowering of the Holy Spirit, offer a new reality—this changes everything. The imposter point of view, if we let it, can keep women sidelined within the body of Christ, but as daughters of the resurrection, we claim the resurrection life *here and now*. As daughters of the resurrection, then, we choose power, boldness, and courage. As one of the greatest scholars on the Holy Spirit, Gordon Fee, says, “The Spirit means the presence of great power, power to overflow with hope (Romans 15:3), power sometimes attested by signs and wonders.”⁶ May women, then, be a sign and wonder of the work of the Spirit in our world.

OWN YOUR OWN UNIQUE VOICE

When I began my journey in ministry in the very early 2000s, I accepted a role as senior high youth pastor in a church in upstate New York. While I was delighted to begin using my teaching, preaching, and pastoral gifts, I was still navigating what I thought a youth pastor was supposed to look, sound, and act like. Up until then, I had never known a female youth pastor. I was discipled in a wonderful parachurch ministry, Youth for Christ, where all of the directors were male, and my youth pastor and pastor in my local congregation were male. I had *never* heard a woman preach, but I still *knew* it was my calling, and I was still confused by what it looked like for a woman to teach, preach, and lead. Shortly after beginning my ministry at the church, they graciously sent my husband and me away to attend a mega-youth ministry conference.

While we were there, I couldn't even tell you how many times my husband was approached and asked where *he* serves as a youth pastor, while I was standing right next to him. And while the conference was an edifying experience for me, it was also discouraging. I had encountered a strange subculture. Maybe you've seen this subculture of youth pastors—it's a phenomenon, really. When I walked through this mega-conference of some six thousand youth pastors, I realized that 99 percent of them were male with some sort of statement facial hair. (In the late 90s, it was a goatee with wide-legged pants; in the early 2000s, it was a soul patch with dark-rimmed glasses and skinny jeans. Today, it's likely a lumberjack beard with rolled-up jeans.) And every speaker that graced the main stage seemed to fit into this subculture

and was also hilarious, told a lot of sports jokes, and had a certain style of communicating.

Session after session I began to feel more and more like an outsider. But, like most youth pastors, I was a learner and wanted to take what I had learned to my students in upstate New York. Instead of simply taking some great information about youth ministry, I also took with me the assumed image of youth pastors. I tried to be funny, and that never worked; I tried to be sporty, and that was awkward; I tried to be loud and outgoing, and that was exhausting; I tried to be trendy, and that was uncomfortable. The more stops I pulled, the more masks I wore, the more I tried to be somebody I was not, the more I dreaded ministry. Bless the church in New York, they saw a shifting Tara Beth and loved me anyway!

The point is this: when a ministerial culture is created by men, women are often unsure of their footing and therefore unsure of how they are to look and act. It's no wonder so many women feel like total frauds! But whoever you are—male or female, minority or privileged—hear this: God has given *you* a voice that is *your voice*. God has gifted you in ways that are unique to you. Hear the wise words of pastor Mandy Smith:

When we as leaders have an important message or a huge task, we pull out all the stops—lights, music, production. But over and over, when God has some serious business to take care of, he goes small and obscure. . . . Whether or not we talk about it, we're aware of our own limitation. This is especially true when we're faced with the challenges of ministry. We're reminded every day how we're

not witty or educated or talented enough. And when we get that sinking feeling of knowing our own limitations, when we're dragged down by the weight of our own emptiness, we want to do whatever we can to fix it. We desperately work harder, hoping that if we're perfect this time it will be okay. We wear ourselves out, trying to match a preconceived ideal. . . . And the more desperate we feel, the more we try to mask how far in over our heads we are, hoping no one will be able to tell.⁷

When women see those who serve in ministry, we quickly realize we look different from the rest. Furthermore, not all women fit into a single mold! I grew up with a mom who stayed home with her kids from the time we were little until high school. She loved to bake, garden, craft, and carefully decorate the house. Jackie Roese describes it with creativity in her book *Lime Green*. She describes types of women through colors:

Coming to Dallas as a brand new Christian who had never been around other Christians nor really attended any church, I quickly learned Christian women are supposed to be light pink. That's the color I saw when I went to my first Women's Bible study in North Dallas at Northwest Bible Church. I'm known for saying, "Texas women know how to be women!" That's what I saw. Women, dressed to the nines with shoes, bags, and jewelry to match. Their makeup tastefully done. Their fingernails well manicured. Many of the older women had nicer figures than my twenty-something shape. (I later learned you can buy that better shape.)

The women seemed quieter, nicer—True Blue Southern Belles. I, on the other hand, just got off the boat, so to speak, from New York. Sarcasm, directness, and swearing were normative for northeasterners. . . .

My hair was unruly. I never learned how to manage my wild mane. . . . I didn't wear makeup, I never had a manicure, nor did I own a fancy purse. I found backpacks to be way more functional. I felt like I was in a foreign country. . . .

Over time I found myself thinking, *If I'm going to be a good Christian woman, then I need to be more like them. I need to get some makeup, a red purse, and I need to be nicer and quieter!*⁸

Later, Jackie learned that she wasn't *light pink* but perhaps lime green. In the body of Christ, we have orange, yellow, magenta, red, sage, and every color of the spectrum. As Jackie beautifully illustrates, all colors are equally called to participate in the mission of God.

The most tempting route might be to pull out all the stops and not be *who* we're called to be. It took me years to figure out that I didn't have to be somebody else; I only had to be who God created and gifted me to be. I preach in a certain way only because of how I was formed in a very specific context, a very specific family, and a very specific culture. Many years later I realized that although I am not a funny storyteller or a jokester, I am an emotive preacher; and although I don't engage people through sports, I do engage them as a nurturing pastor; and although I am not an authoritative leader, I am a relational leader. I am who I am, and I have been gifted as I am, and I'm not sorry for it.

Sisters in Christ, it is my hope that you lead, teach, preach, shepherd, evangelize, and equip in the way that only you—in the Spirit—can do. *And do it with confidence; do it with gusto.*⁹