

The Holy Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ, according to John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The Gospel of Christ.

Reflection

Millennia ago, scriptures were shared by scribes who copied the texts by hand and distributed the copies to communities or saved them for other uses. Some of these individuals added their own special touches – comments, clarifications, and 'corrections'.

Recently, a Duke University scholar looked at a digital image of the oldest copy known to us of the text I just read. In doing so, she discovered evidence of corrections. Through shadows beneath the words, it was revealed that there was no Martha in the original text. Every reference, including to 'the sisters', originally said 'Mary'. The scholar's hypothesis is that a scribe intentionally made these changes to conflate the story of Mary here with the story of Mary and Martha hosting a dinner party in Luke. Research suggests, however, the Mary (and Martha) in this passage of John, is more likely Mary Magdalene.

We know Mary Magdalene is an important figure. She can be called the apostle to the apostles because she was the first witness of the resurrection, and the first, as revealed in the Gospel of John, to have an actual experience of the risen Jesus. In a patriarchal society, this makes Mary Magdalene a controversial figure. Some men with power and privilege, don't want that challenged by a woman. Some have even chosen to malign the memory of Mary Magdalene by claiming she was a prostitute who came to Jesus for forgiveness. By painting her in this light, her sinfulness and redemption becomes the focus of her story distracting from her role as the apostle to the apostles.

Imagine how the image of Mary Magdalene changes if she is recognised as the central figure in this story: We are told that Jesus loved her and her brother. It is Mary Magdalene who is familiar enough with Jesus that she challenges him about not being there for her family. Mary's grief overwhelms Jesus and he cries even though he knows what he is about to do.

Perhaps most importantly, Mary makes a proclamation of faith that is parallel only to the one made by Peter. 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' When Peter proclaims Jesus the Messiah, he is celebrated and identified as the rock on which the church will be built.

Mary, or as the text currently says, Martha, doesn't get any accolades for this early proclamation of faith. Her courageous statement is left in the air and Mary, the sister, comes into the conversation. Thus, a profound voice is minimised.

Imagine what would change if it were proven that Martha is Mary Magdalene. How would that reality change our view of Mary? What new understanding would that bring to the story of Jesus, God with us?

Magdalene means 'Watchful' in Latin. What if, like Peter, the Mary of Bethany mentioned here is given a name consistent with her role as friend and companion to Jesus throughout his life, death, and resurrection? What if, by going back to the original inscription, we find new evidence that Mary Magdalene had a far greater presence than we understand her to have now? What if, acknowledging a change made by a scribe millennia ago, provides an opportunity to enrich our sense of the radical love of God in Jesus who broke social rules and lifted up women?

How we tell the story is important. Changing Mary to Martha helped to support patriarchal practices for millennia. Reclaiming Mary could likewise help support reclaiming the passion, authority, and persistence of a significant woman in the life of Jesus and the life of the early Church. What we do with that information becomes our choice and possibility.

We believe that God working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. What does it look like to acknowledge the same to be true of Mary Magdalene and so many other women who were transformed by Jesus' respect and care for them? May we be open to looking with fresh eyes at familiar scriptures so that we might learn something new for our day and beyond. This we pray as we sing: 463 A Prophet-Woman Broke a Jar