

Luke 10:38-42; John 11:28-34; 12:1-8

Women in the Kingdom: The Bethany Sisters

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / April 10th, 2022

Martha is hard at work preparing for dinner in the kitchen. She is dicing the carrots, washing the salad, and setting the table with her very best wedding china, which she's only used 2-3 times before. She got a roast from the local butcher, but she's having trouble keeping her eye on it. She's just too busy, and she's worried it's going to burn. And if it burns, dinner will be ruined, and all her guests in the very next room will go hungry. Where is Mary!

Martha peaks around the doorway, sweat dripping on her brow as she wipes her hands on her apron. In the living room, she sees Rabbi Jesus, her honored guest, sitting in the big-leather comfy chair. That's perfect. He deserves the place of honor. She looks at the sectional and finds his twelve disciples and her brother Lazarus all either sitting along the sofa or relaxing on the floor. Also good. Nothing but the best for Jesus, his followers, and her brother, the breadwinner of the family.

But then she spots her sister, Mary! Air-head Mary is literally sitting at the feet of Jesus, her knees pressed up against her chest, looking up to Jesus, an expression of wonder and awe on her face, soaking it all in. Martha just about loses it! She's been the host. She's taking care of Jesus! Isn't that what they, as the women, should be doing? But Mary, Mary is acting like one of the men! Mary is pretending to be a disciple, and if she pretends to be a disciple, who knows what she might do next!

Mary should be in the kitchen serving, just like Martha! And so Martha stops what's she's doing, walks elegantly into the room, and when Rabbi Jesus turns his head to her, she asks, ever so sweetly, with just a splash of New-England bite, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?" And then she adds, more forcefully, "Tell her to help me!!"

Mary looks up at her sister Martha with a look of shock and dismay on her face. Martha hardly gives her a glance but directs her attention to Jesus. Jesus looks at Martha for a moment, and in that moment, Martha's determination begins to fade. She can see it in his eyes. She's not going to like what he says. "Martha Martha," Jesus says, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." (see Luke 10:38-42)

And like slowly letting the air out of a balloon, Mary deflates with a squeak. By all outward appearances, Martha was right. Martha was the homemaker, preparing dinner for the guests. As a woman, Mary should have been helping Martha. But Jesus saw beyond the busyness, saw beyond Martha's role, saw further into Martha than Martha ever thought possible. Jesus doesn't condemn Martha, but he does call her, just like he's calling Mary, and just like he's calling you. What will Jesus say when he calls you? Are you ready to hear his voice? Are you ready to head his call?

Jesus doesn't rebuke Martha for serving. Not at all. Rather, Jesus calls her not to judge Mary. I think he may also be calling her to enjoy his presence, to slow down and listen to him, a call we can all hear. Who are you judging? What expectations are you placing on others? How might Jesus subvert your expectations?

Mary is crying. She's not just crying. She is weeping. Tears are rolling down her face. Her gut aches. She is gasping for breath. It comes, she breathes, but then she remembers. Her brother Lazarus is dead. And the tears come again. They come rolling, streaming gushing down her face till she's all cried out. And then she sits there, hollow, rocking, tired, exhausted, angry, guilty, depressed, dry.

Not ten minutes earlier, Mary saw her sister Martha slip out of the room. Mary knew where Martha was going. He has finally arrived, Rabbi Jesus, the one she loved and admired so much, who could perform miracles and heal the sick. But she wasn't going out to meet him because when she and Martha had sent word to Rabbi Jesus that their brother was sick, he hadn't come. Now, several days later, he had finally come, but it was just too late. Her beloved brother Lazarus, the one she grew up chasing around Bethany, exploring the rocky hillside outside of town, building forts, and sharing deep conversations about God as they grew older, her brother Lazarus had died, and Jesus could have saved him.

The reason it stung so much is that Rabbi Jesus had made Mary feel like one of his own, loved, honored, respected. He had invited her to sit at his feet and learn just like one of the disciples. He was preparing her for something great. She didn't know, but what she was learning excited her. Maybe she could teach others what he was teaching her. Maybe she was just supposed to learn, and that would be enough. But when Jesus didn't come, all those feelings unraveled.

A half-hour later, Martha came back in. Mary, still surrounded by mourners, and rocking silently in tears, didn't even look up. She was too angry to hear what the Rabbi might want. But then Martha, her sister, spoke. "The Teacher is here," Martha said, "and he is asking for you." At that moment, Mary's heart softened. She realized, "My Rabbi is calling me. My teacher is here. I must go." She picked herself up, broken heart and all, and walked quickly out the door.

Her mourners gathered their things and came after her, thinking she was going to the tomb. But Mary of Bethany couldn't see them. Mary didn't notice. She was going to her Rabbi, her teacher. **John 11:32** says, "When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (NIV) Once again, Mary has come to the feet of Jesus.

When she first came to his feet, she came to learn in joy and excitement. Now she has come to learn in sorrow and grief. Do you need to come to the feet of Jesus? Jesus always welcomes us to come and sit at his feet, no matter what season we are in, whether joy or sorrow, happiness or grief. When she first heard the Rabbi's call to sit at his feet, her sister Martha tried to hold her back. But this time, no one has held her back but herself. As Mary charges Jesus with his absence, she feels the sting of death.

What Mary did not know is that just moments before, Jesus had declared to Martha that he has the power to overcome the sting of death. When Jesus came to Martha, he said, "Your brother will rise again." To which Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." But...

John 11:25 (NIV)

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He gave life to Mary when she was pressured to not listen and learn and be one of his disciples. He gave life to Martha as he delivered her from the tyranny of the urgent, from being consumed by the good expectations she placed upon herself. Jesus has come to bring life to us and to a man wrapped in burial cloths, dead four days, Lazarus.

Jesus sees Mary weeping and is deeply moved. He asks, "Where have you laid him?" And when they bring Jesus to the spot, he says, "Take away the stone."

Martha is horrified! "You wouldn't save him, and now you're going to desecrate him?" But Jesus wants Martha and Mary to see the glory of God. And all they have to do is believe. Jesus wants us to see the glory of God as well. All we have to do is believe.

Then Jesus prayed to his Father and "called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" And he does. Tears of sorrow turn to tears of joy. Grief turns to laughter. Mary and Martha embrace their brother Lazarus. Who has

death stolen from you that you need to embrace again? I have a list of those I desperately need to embrace again. Only Jesus can call them from the grave. Be like Martha and Mary and believe. Believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Don't let others' opinions of you hold you back from Jesus' calling. Don't let your opinion of yourself or Jesus hold you back. Come to him. Come to Jesus.

Six days before Passover, Rabbi Jesus returns to the home of Lazarus. He returns to Martha and Mary. And guess what, Martha has given Jesus her finest. It says, "Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor." Martha prepared it and served, always wanting to serve. I bet Mary helped too, but she also slipped out, slipped out to get her extravagant thank-you gift for Rabbi Jesus.

As Jesus is reclining in the very best seat at the table, Mary comes back into the room, this time carrying an alabaster flask (Matthew 26:6-11; Mark 14:3-8). Alabaster is a soft white mineral you could carve into a jar and fill with ointment. Mary knelt down at the feet of Jesus, and the room grew still. Perhaps she had brought water to wash Jesus' feet. He'd just traveled to Bethany, and this was a way for her to show appreciation for raising her brother from the dead. But when she removes the lid and pours out the flask's liquid, it's not water that comes out, but what looks like dark brown, olive oil, thick, rich, and flowing. This is pure nard. This is incredibly expensive, a year's salary. This may be Mary's inheritance.

She takes her fragrant offering, and she pours it on his feet, and she takes her hair, and she wipes his ankles, and the tops of his hairy feet, and his toes. And the home fills with the fragrance of this intoxicating perfume. It's as if Sephora opened every bottle and let the showroom floor fill with the scents of perfume. Mary is telling the gospel, not in word yet, but in deed. She is proclaiming that Jesus is the king. Long ago, the prophet Samuel anointed Saul, then David (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13). Messiah means "anointed one." Mary is anointing Rabbi Jesus as king, king over the world, king over death itself.

But then one of the disciples objects, a thief named Judas. He doesn't care about the poor, but he says it should have been sold to give to the poor. Really, he just wants the money. He wants the power, the riches for himself. But Jesus rebukes him, "Leave her alone," Jesus says, "This perfume is for my burial."

Raising Lazarus from the dead had cost Rabbi Jesus everything. As soon as Jesus did this, the Pharisees and Sanhedrin began a plot to kill Jesus, eventually leading to the 30-shekels of silver they pay Judas.

In order for Lazarus to come out of the grave, Jesus has to go into his. In order for you to come out of your grave, Jesus had to go into his. And Mary, it seems to me, recognizes the risk Jesus took and, as an act of immense gratitude, anoints him with her most costly treasure, everything she has.

Today is Palm Sunday; it's the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But it's also the day we begin to prepare our hearts for the coming crucifixion. As we think about the story of the sisters from Bethany, Martha, and Mary, we hear our savior calling. Rabbi Jesus gifted Martha for service, and she did so well, even when sometimes she forgot to enjoy Jesus himself. And Jesus also gifted Mary to listen, learn, and become one of his disciples—and to boldly declare through her anointing his lordship and death. People tried to hold her back, but Jesus called her. How has Jesus called you? Maybe he's called you to serve, or to listen, learn, and proclaim? He's called us all to be his disciples.

How might you prepare for Easter? On Easter, Monica is going to talk about a different Mary, Mary Magdalene, and her story. How might you get ready for Easter? By serving like Martha? By being with Jesus like Mary? By believing in Jesus' death and resurrection? Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Let's pray.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA. You can listen to his other sermons at CornerstoneWestford.com.

Service & Sermon

You can watch the [full service on Facebook](#) or [only the sermon on YouTube](#).

Discussion Time

Ice-Breaker – What’s your go-to chore that helps you relax, if any? (i.e., dishes, laundry, cooking?)

Prayer – Do you have a prayer or praise you’d like to share? Let’s pray for one another.

Sanctuary – Re-read Luke 10:38-42. What do you notice about Mary and Martha? Does anything stand out or impact you in a different way?

Foyer – Re-read John 11:28-34. What do you notice about Mary and Martha? Does anything stand out or impact you in a different way?

Conference Room – Re-read John 12:1-8. What do you notice about Mary and Martha? Does anything stand out or impact you in a different way?

Application – How does Jesus value and challenge both Mary and Martha? How is he doing the same for you?

Recap – What’s your one-sentence takeaway from today?

Follow-Up

Dear Church,

Thanks for listening to this past Sunday’s sermon, *The Bethany Sisters*. One way to reflect this week is to read back through our three passages: Luke 10:38-42; John 11:28-34; 12:1-8. A great way to study this text is [using the NET Bible](#), which has a parallel commentary and notes. To follow up on Sunday, you could:

- **Reflect** – Find a brief phrase from the three texts listed above. Take time to be silent, pray, and meditate on that phrase. What does that part of the story teach you about God? About yourself? About loving your neighbor?
- **Questions** – Did you feel like you have some unanswered questions, especially about John 12:1-8 (Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet)? Monica Romig actually gave a talk on this passage at a Christian-college group, InterVarsity, at Boston University (BU), all the way back in November 2013. If you’d like, you can [listen to that here](#).
- **Wrestling** – We all agree on what the Bible has to say about women in ministry, right? Of course not! If you’re in the midst of wrestling with this issue, Pastor Ben Feldott of Cape Cod Church shares his personal wrestling with this issue and why he believes women can preach in church. [Listen here](#).

Thank you for exploring these resources as the Holy Spirit leads. I am looking forward to eating donuts at 9:30 AM and worshipping at 10:00 AM (both on the Westford common) this Easter with you.

In Christ, Pastor Jonathan

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