

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019
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Isaiah 43:16-20
Psalm 126
Philippians 1:4b-14
John 12:1-8

There are a lot of Marys who show up in the gospels.

There's Mary, the mother of Jesus of course. She was there from the start. And Mary Magdalene. She the second-best-know Mary in the Bible (though she herself has been widely misunderstood).

According to John, these first two Marys were at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. And they were joined there by another Mary: "Mary, the wife of Clopas" (whoever he was).

John says that of those three Marys, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone on that first Easter. Matthew says Mary Magdalene and another woman, described vaguely as "the other Mary," went to the tomb together that morning. Mark says it was Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, along with a woman named Salome. (And some say Salome was just her last name; her first name was also Mary.) Luke says Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, went to the tomb, along with Joanna and some other unnamed women.

All of which is to say that Mary was a common name back then. And with so many women named Mary, it can be hard to keep them straight. They get easily confused and, down through the centuries, they have been too-often conflated with one another.

There's a Mary in this morning's gospel, but she is none of others already mentioned. I would ask us to pay attention to THIS Mary this morning.

We first meet her in Luke. It's a different gospel, but it's clearly the same Mary. Jesus is the dinner guest on that occasion. And while Martha is keeping busy in the kitchen, Mary sits at Jesus' feet to listen to what he has to say.

So Martha serves. And Martha stews. And finally Martha complains to Jesus: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me with all the work ...?" (Luke 10:40).

Jesus responds to Martha, telling her in essence: "Martha, Martha, you are worried about too many things; one thing only is necessary. Leave Mary alone. She's chosen the better part, and it won't be taken from her." Rather than be constrained by social norms of the time that narrowly defined the roles of women, Mary sits at the feet of her rabbi, like a disciple. I take it to mean that Jesus encourages Mary not to be confined within a box imposed upon her by others. He sets her free to live ... to live the life that calls out to her, not to be locked in a box of what others prescribe for her.

It looks like maybe the two sisters have worked out their differences in this morning's gospel from John. It's a different gospel, but it's the same two sisters. That seems clear. Martha is still Martha. "Martha served ..." we're told. And Mary ... well, Mary is still quite wonderfully contrary.

I'll come back to her, but first we should notice that this morning's gospel reminds us that the sisters had a brother too. Lazarus. And the reminder that he was the one "raised from the dead" reminds us of what happened shortly before the dinner in this morning's gospel.

The long and the short of it is that Lazarus took ill, so Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, asking him to come back to their home, not for dinner this time, but to heal their brother (whom Jesus also loved). But Jesus waited too long to come, and Lazarus was dead (and four days in the tomb) by the time Jesus got there. And so he went to the tomb where they laid him. And there Jesus wept.

And then he speaks to some of those in the crowd who came out with Jesus to the tomb. He tells them to take away the stone that blocked the entrance into the tomb. Martha tries to talk Jesus out of the idea, saying he'd been dead for four days and there was a stench. Or, as it's said in the old King James Bible, "Lord, by this time he stinketh" (John 11:39). But Jesus is not dissuaded. The stone blocking the exit from the tomb is removed. And Jesus calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb. And he does.

And then, after Lazarus emerges, Jesus says to those looking on, "Unbind him, and let him go."

"Let him go." In another context, the same would be translated as "forgive him." And that may be something to ponder: how forgiving another might let that person be freed up, to let them go from whatever lay in the past between the you and them; and how accepting forgiveness offered us might be a way toward living less bound up ... freer, lighter.

That's what St. Paul says in our epistle this morning:

... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

In any event, that moment (when Jesus says, "Unbind him, and let him go.") reminds me of what Jesus said to Martha that time Mary sat at the feet of Jesus. He told Martha to leave Mary alone, not to lock her in a box. So, too, here Jesus comes along and releases Lazarus from the box of the grave. For not even death, it seems, will confine the disciples of Jesus. And Jesus sets him free to live and breathe the goodness of life again.

That's the backstory for us to consider this morning. Jesus has once more returned to the home of Mary and Martha ... which is also the home of their brother Lazarus. The dinner is in Jesus' honor. They're celebrating the one who sets them free.

And then along comes Mary.

Once upon a time, Mary sat at Jesus' feet, assuming the position of a disciple; now she kneels at Jesus' feet, bending down to the position of a servant.

And she takes a pound of costly perfume. Pure nard, we're told, meaning that it's not been cut with less potent spices to make it go farther, not watered down. And it's not the cheap stuff either. It's outrageously expensive perfume, costing 300 denarii (about a year's wages). She anoints the feet of Jesus. And she wipes his feet with her hair. The fragrance would have filled the house – soaking down into the floor, seeping into the corners of the house and into the fabric of linens. It would have been absorbed into the clothes of the guests ... even into their skin, the aroma in their nostrils as they leave that day.

A reflection on the scene from the Iona Community puts it this way:

The place smelled like the perfume department of a mall. It was as if somebody had bumped their elbow against a bottle and sent it crashing to the floor, setting off the most expensive stink bomb on earth. But it happened in a house ...ⁱ

It happened in a house where maybe the smell of death lingered. Maybe Lazarus, so recently released from the tomb still "stinketh," and Mary wanted to replace the stench with the fragrance of the perfume. And, as Jesus suggests, she knew this would be her last chance to prepare his live body for imminent death and his own grave.

Either way, though, it's a lot of perfume. And she shouldn't apply it so ... provocatively.

It feels all wrong. It's over the top, too much. It seems inappropriate.

Judas, for his part (and maybe he speaks for others at dinner that night), is appalled ... incensed!

He would have stopped her if he could. He clearly hopes Jesus will constrain her.

But Jesus disappoints Judas and his righteous indignation. He refuses to give in to his discomfort. Jesus says to Judas (and any who sympathize with him), "Leave her alone."

He does so, in the first place I think, because the alternative is to let the sensibilities of others hold her back, tamp her affection, shut off her devotion, stifle her discipleship. Jesus wouldn't let Martha do that to her sister. He wouldn't let death do so to Lazarus. Why would he start now?

Once more, Jesus will not put her in anyone's box of propriety. Instead, he sets her free.

He sets her free not merely to live and breathe. Jesus sets her free to love. In this anointing of Jesus she is showing everyone – in spite of the discomfort of some – what love looks and smells like. Because love so deep, so profound, must not merely be talked about. It has to be demonstrated until it fills all the senses.

And in her example of love, she anticipates the example Jesus will give just a few days later. And the discomfort of Judas this morning will be echoed then, too. Except then it will be Peter. Jesus will gather to celebrate the Passover meal with his disciples. He will remove his outer robe and tie a towel around his waist. And he will take a basin of water and he will bend down to wash the feet of his disciples. Peter will be appalled. It will feel wrong to him. It will feel inappropriate.

Maybe Jesus was paying attention to THIS Mary, showing her love for all the world to see and hear and smell, showering her love on her Beloved, the one who has her free to live and to love.

For THIS Mary and THIS Jesus both show us that we are set free – set free to live and to breathe, and most of all set free to love until the sweetness of life fall all the senses of all in this world.

ⁱ Quoted @ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent5c> -- accessed April 4, 2019.