

ALL THE MARYS

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by Diana Butler Bass

This sermon has been lightly edited for clarity. Published by Diana Butler Bass at dianabutlerbass.substack.com.

Good morning.

I begin with today's Gospel reading from the Revised Common Lectionary, a book of readings shared widely by churches across the world. This text comes from Luke 10, versus 38 through 42. "Now, as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying, but Martha was distracted by her many tasks. So she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'"

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the world.

Now, this story, for those of us who are churchgoers and for people who may not have been in church or don't go to church very often, is actually a familiar story. A lovely, charming tale about Jesus and his encounter with two sisters: busy Martha and contemplative Mary. This text on its own would be a great way to end Wild Goose. Over the last four days, we have heard a lot about what we need to do. We are worried that there are so many tasks at hand. I can imagine leaving Goose and being Martha. Work, work, work, because the time is short, we have to get it all done. But there's Mary.

And what *could* be the message here is the invitation into what Jesus calls, "the better part." Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, contemplating, listening, receiving the teachings of Jesus. Thus, we have the charming tale, Martha, the doer, Mary, the listener, and Jesus saying, "Mary has chosen the better part." That's the sermon that I'm NOT going to preach.

Instead, my sermon is called, "All the Marys," and the faith that we have been seeking. In order to enter into the point of this text today, I want to begin with

just a short story from my own experience about my daughter. My daughter Emma was born in 1997. And when Richard and I got married, we had just seen what was then the new version of *Emma*, the film based on the Jane Austen novel. We loved it. And we found out we were having a baby girl and we immediately knew we wanted to name her Emma!

What we didn't know is that Emma would wind up being one of the most popular names for girls born in 1997. As Emma was growing up, when she went to school, there were a plethora of Emmas. Indeed, we sent her to a small independent school for elementary school and middle school, and there were three — three — Emmas. There were *three Emmas in her class of some 25 people*. For the rest of her elementary school career, she would be known as Emma B., as opposed to Emma P., as opposed to Emma S. Throughout elementary school, we would get the wrong notes, we would get the wrong assignments. People would talk about Emma, and they would say, "Oh, Emma did X, Y, Z," and it was, which Emma? Which Emma are you talking about?

And that's exactly where this text today should take us. When we hear the story about busy Martha and contemplative Mary, a question that we might not think to ask but one that we should ask is, which Mary? Which Mary is this? You might think you know. Indeed for many years, I thought I knew. I have preached any number of sermons at churches all across North America about how this Mary and Martha story is related to another story. A story in John chapter 11, a story about Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus who live in a place called Bethany. Indeed, if you go to many commentaries on the Luke 10 passage, on the Mary and Martha story, those commentaries begin by saying, "This is a story of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha of Bethany."

But if you actually look at the Bible — which would be a good idea, especially for someone who is writing a commentary — you will see that the words "in Bethany" are never mentioned in Luke's text. Indeed, if you look at a map, Bethany is actually a town, a village in the *opposite direction* of which Jesus was traveling in this section of the Gospel of Luke. All Luke says is that Mary and Martha were of a "certain village." Then there's an interesting identification of Martha where it says, "Martha welcomed Jesus to *her* home." And what's fascinating about just that little phrase, just that small phrase, Mary and Martha are sisters in a patriarchal society. If they had a brother, that line would say, "And Martha welcomed Jesus to her brother's home," because Martha doesn't

own a house. It's not Martha's home unless it is Martha's home. The only way it's Martha's home is if Martha has *no husband, no father, and no brother*.

Many readers conflate Luke 10 with John 11, where there are two sisters named Mary and Martha, and they have a brother named Lazarus, and they do indeed live in a place called Bethany. If it was the same family, Luke 10 is very confused. The village is in the wrong place and it's not called by the right name. What we actually have here is **two stories** that our imaginations have run together, which our tradition has run together, which even commentators have run together. These are actually **two different stories about two different families**. This is as if people came home from school and said, "Emma Bass did something, something, something," and it was actually Emma Presing.

It becomes a problem when you get the cast of characters wrong. So the question is: who is this Mary? Instead of spending a lot of time talking about Mary of the four short verses in Luke, I want to run over to the confused text of John 11. John 11 opens with a very simple sentence. "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany." Okay, now there we have it clearly defined, *Bethany, not a certain village*. "The village of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha." That's the opening sentence of John 11. You might think to yourself, oh my gosh what is the big deal, what's important about that?

Let me tell you the story of my friend [Elizabeth Schrader](#), who is a PhD student at Duke University right now working on a doctorate in New Testament studies.

Years ago, Elizabeth (her nickname is Libbie) was living in New York City where she was a singer-songwriter. Libbie is a cradle Episcopalian with a very lively faith life. She adores the church. She loves liturgy. She loves praying with and to the saints. And one day Libbie walked into a church garden in the city of New York seeking refuge from the city, and sat down to pray. And as she prayed, she heard a voice and the voice said, "Follow Mary Magdalene."

Now, Libbie usually doesn't hear voices when she's sitting in gardens praying. This was pretty startling to her. And she wrote a song about this. It's actually called "[Magdalene](#)." And that's what happened. She wrote an incredible song about Mary Magdalene. But then something deeper started nagging at Libbie. And she thought, "Well, I don't think I was just called to write a song. I think I need to learn more." And so here she is, an Episcopalian living in New York City, and she thought, "Where do I learn more about the Bible?" And she calls

up General Theological Seminary in New York City, which is the Episcopal seminary there, and she says, "I need to learn more about Mary Magdalene. How do I do that?"

I have no idea what the person in the admissions department said exactly to her, but they did tell her that she could come to General and that she could earn a degree, a master's degree in New Testament if she liked. And she said, "Oh, I want to do that. I feel called to do that." And so Libbie signed up for the New Testament program where she studied with a wonderful New Testament professor who taught her Greek and Coptic and Aramaic, and all the stuff, and began to teach her how to translate the New Testament. And Libbie was off to the races as a master's degree student in New Testament. She couldn't get Mary Magdalene off of her mind. When it came to writing her final paper for her master's degree, she asked Dierdre Good (the professor) if she could write it on John 11 and Mary Magdalene. And Deirdre said, "Absolutely." And then she said, "Do you know that these texts have lately become available digitized? And so if you want to study Mary Magdalene, I want you to look at the earliest possible New Testament texts and try to say something new about them."

And so Libbie looked at Papyrus 66, which is the oldest and most complete text we have of the Gospel of John. It's dated around the year 200. Now this is what happens when you put a set of new eyes on an old text, Papyrus 66 had been sitting in a library for a very, very, very, very long time. We've had it for a while, but you had to go to it in order to see it. But Libbie was sitting in a library in New York City and Papyrus 66 came to her. This is an historic moment in New Testament studies. When any one of us could have access to texts that have been only be used by people if they had a lot of money, a lot of degrees, and a lot of time to travel.

And so Libbie is in the library looking at the text and she sees this first sentence. And it's in Greek, of course. "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and his sister Mary." And Libbie said, "What? That's not what my English Bible says. My English Bible says, 'Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha.'" But the Greek text, the oldest Greek text in the world doesn't say that. The oldest Greek text in the world says, "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, at the village of Mary and his sister, Mary." There are **two Marys** in this verse. And Libbie went, "What the heck? What is going on here?" And she started digging into the text, zooming in on it to try to see what she could see over the digitized version in the

internet. And lo and behold, Libbie noticed something that no New Testament scholar had ever noticed.

And that is, in the text where it had those two Marys, the village of Mary and his sister, Mary, and her sister, Mary, the text had actually been changed. In Greek, the word Mary, the name Mary, is basically spelled like Maria in English, M-A-R-I-A. And the I, the Greek letter I, is the letter Iota. And it looks basically like an English I. Libbie could see by doing this textual analysis that the Iota had been changed to the letter TH in Greek, Theta. That somebody at some point in time had gone in over the original handwriting and actually changed the second Mary to Martha. And not only had that person changed the second Mary to Martha, but that person had also changed the way it comes out in English. It says, "The village of Mary," that would've stayed the same, "and her sister, Martha." Someone had also changed that "his" to "her"; that "her" was originally a "his," but they had changed it to a "her."

Admittedly, the original text is a confused and not very good sentence. "Now, a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, at the village of Mary and his sister, Mary," it's almost like they're heightening the fact that Lazarus has this sister, Mary. They lived in this village together, and Mary is Lazarus' sister. Someone had changed it to read, "Mary and her sister, Martha."

Libbie sat in the library with all of this, and it came thundering at her, the realization that sometime in the fourth century, *someone had altered the oldest text of the Gospel of John and split the character Mary into two. Mary became Mary and Martha.*

She went through the whole manuscript of John 11 and John 12, and lo and behold, that editor had gone in at every single place and changed every moment that you read Martha in English, it originally said, "Mary." *The editor changed it all.* So that the story becomes a charming story about Lazarus and the resurrection and his two lovely sisters, Mary and Martha. Haven't we seen them before? Oh yeah, I remember seeing them in Luke 10.

But they are not in Luke. This is some editor's idea of doing what Pete Enns told us this morning. Harmonizing the text did not just start a couple hundred years ago. Somebody in the fourth century decided that John was confusing and this John fellow had bad Greek. And so the editor went in there to fix it. And he fixed it. He fixed it so good that we have been telling this story wrong ever since.

Every pronoun is changed. Every singular “sister” is changed to the plural “sisters.” And Libbie has conclusively proven that in Papyrus 66 this fiddling around with the text did indeed occur. Now, if you can imagine this, finding this as a master’s degree student when you have just barely learned Greek is an amazing sort of discovery. Libbie wrote her master’s thesis on it. It was so interesting as a master’s thesis as she proved this textual manipulation that Harvard Divinity School found out about it. And they said, “Can we excerpt your master’s thesis and turn it into an article?” And so here’s this brand new master’s and New Testament student who gets her very first ever professional article published by the *Harvard Theological Review*.

From there, many scholars noticed her article -- including the Nestle-Aland Translation Committee of the Greek New Testament, an organization that is located in Germany. These are the guardians of the Greek New Testament. They are as stuffy as you can imagine. They are basically a whole bunch of very old German men who have spent their entire lives making sure the Bibles that we have in English and all the other languages around the world are the closest and most precise Bibles that we can get to the original manuscripts. They asked Libbie to come to Germany to present her research to them. And over the course of a couple days, they listen to her and they look at all the evidence that she’s compiled. And at the end, they say, “Well, we might need to change something here.”

As we are speaking, there is a debate going on in the highest circles of New Testament studies as to whether or not Libbie’s research should turn into a very long footnote that all you preachers will be reading in your next edition of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible in English. Or if they should change John 11 and John 12 and take Martha out. Now, that is probably one of the most radical suggestions I have ever heard in New Testament criticism. And, of course, in order to take Martha out they wanted more evidence. (I just heard some people yelling in the back of the auditorium, “Don’t take Martha out.”) Everybody always says, “I love Martha in Luke chapter 10.”

But these are two different stories. These are two different families. Martha will stay forever in Luke 10. She’s lovely. She’s important. Jesus loved her. She stays there. But she shouldn’t necessarily be here – in John 11 and 12.

And so people have begun to do other research pursuing and extending Libbie's work. Including other New Testament scholars and church historians.

Tertullian, one of the most misogynistic of all of the ancient church fathers, actually wrote a bit of a commentary on this passage in John chapter 11. He writes circa 200. Commenting on this chapter, he says, "*Mary, confessing him, Jesus, to be the Son of God.*"

Wait a second.

In my Bible, it says *Martha* confessed that. It says a little later on that Jesus was talking to Martha. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had not been here, my brother would have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." And Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." And Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." And Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life." One of the most important lines in the whole of the Gospel of John. "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?" Jesus asked this woman. And in this text, your English Bible, Jesus says that to Martha, "Do you believe this, Martha?" And she said to him, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah. The one who's come into the world."

Tertullian said that was **Mary**. *There was no Martha in that passage according to Tertullian.* Did Tertullian's copy of John have only Mary?

And what about how that passage begins with a story about how Martha runs out to meet Jesus, but Mary is so upset that poor Mary stays home because she can't possibly face Jesus? Egeria, a fourth century Pilgrim to the Holy Land, writes in her diary — which is one of the most important diaries we have from the ancient world from any ancient Christian — about her pilgrimage group getting to the church *in the place where Mary, the sister of Lazarus, ran out to meet the Lord.* Tertullian doesn't mention Martha. In Egeria's diary, there is no mention of Martha. Indeed, in these ancient sources, the story is a story of Mary.

John 11 is about Lazarus and one woman, one sister, Mary.

Now the most provocative question is, well, why did this editor split Mary into two women? Perhaps the editor could have been a guy with literary sense and he

just didn't like John's Greek and so he fixed it in a way that made sense to him. Or he could have been a person who was just a little worried about how this story fit with Luke's story? Maybe it makes more sense if it's a story about Mary and Martha and not just a story about Mary. So that person could have had benign motives.

Or not.

That little text from John 11, that I just read to you, is one of two Christological confessions in the Gospel. Another of those Christological confessions happens in the synoptic Gospels. It happens in Mark. It happens in Luke. And it happens in Matthew. Who utters the Christological confession in those three gospels? Anybody remember? Peter, exactly. Peter and Jesus have a conversation. And Jesus turns to Peter and says, "Who am I?" And Peter actually says, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." And Jesus turns around and says to him, "You are Peter, upon this rock I will build my church."

The other Christological confession is in the Gospel of John. And until this point, it has belonged to a minor character named Martha and we didn't even know who she was. Jesus raises her brother from the dead and they have this conversation. And then finally this woman says, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God, the one who is coming into the world." Pretty much exactly the same words that Peter has uttered in the synoptic Gospels. And then Martha disappears from history. Unimportant, unremembered, who is this?

But if it is Mary, the Mary who shows up in John 11 is not an unremembered Mary. Not just one of a plethora of Marys in the third-grade class. This Mary has long been suspected of being the other Mary, Mary Magdalene. *Is it really true that the other Christological confession of the New Testament comes from of the voice of Mary Magdalene?* That the Gospel of John gives the most important statement in the entirety of the New Testament, not to a man, but to a woman, and to a really important woman who will show up later as the first witness to the resurrection.

You see how these two stories work together. In John 11, Lazarus is raised from the dead, and who is there but Mary Magdalene? And at that resurrection, she confesses that Jesus is indeed the son of God. And then you go just 10 chapters later and who is the person at the grave? She mistakes him, at first, thinks he's

the gardener. She turns around and he says, "Mary," and she goes, "Lord." *It's Mary Magdalene. It is Mary Magdalene.*

Now you might say to yourself, I thought she was from Magdala and not Bethany. What is this Bethany place? That's the last bit of biblical scholarship I want to let you in on this morning.

There is an important debate going on right now about where Mary Magdalene is from. A lot of people, especially if any of you have ever been to the Holy Land, you might have gone to the little village that's right on the sea of Galilee. And there's a church there, the church of Mary Magdalene. And some very nice tourist guide has said to you, "This is the place that Mary Magdalene's from." But there's a really weird problem with that. That village wasn't known as Magdala in the first century, and so that's something they forget to tell you on the tour. And nobody is quite sure where that village would be if there was a village called Magdala. Instead of Mary being from this nice fishing village, there is good evidence to suggest that she was from somewhere else. And this text begins to suggest she is from Bethany.

Magdala. When we call her Magdalene, Mary Magdalene, is not Mary *from* Magdala. **Instead, it's a title.**

The word *magdala* in Aramaic means tower. And so now you get the full picture. In the Synoptics, Jesus and Peter have a discussion. In that discussion, Peter utters the Christological confession. As a result of the Christological confession, Jesus says, "You are Peter the Rock." In the gospel of John, Mary and Jesus have a conversation, and Mary utters the Christological confession. And she comes to be known as Mary the Tower.

Between these two confessions, are we looking at an argument in the early church? Peter the Rock or Mary the Tower?

But the John account was changed. The John story has been hidden from our view. All those years ago, **Mary** uttered those words, "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

When Libbie told me of her research, and this story of the confession, we were sitting in a Starbucks in Alexandria, Virginia. I started to cry and I couldn't stop. She had just told me a story that I always intuited existed. When she told me the

pieces and how they fit together, and as soon as she said, “Mary the Tower,” I said, “I know. I know this to be true. This is the truest thing I have ever heard about the Gospel.”

Mary is indeed the tower of faith. That our faith is the faith of that woman who would become the first person to announce the resurrection. Mary the Witness, Mary the Tower, Mary the Great, and she has been obscured from us. She has been hidden from us and she been taken away from us for nearly 2,000 years. This is not a Dan Brown novel. This is the Nestle-Aland Translation Committee of the Greek New Testament. This is the Harvard Theological Review. This is some of the best, most cutting edge historical research in the world. And we are living in the moment of most radical transformation in the understanding of the Gospel accounts, of who Jesus Christ is, and who holds authority.

The Feast day of Mary Magdalene just happens to be this coming Friday (July 22). Celebrate Mary Magdalene with abandon. Celebrate this story that I just shared with you – celebrate all the Marys. But don’t mix them up. Don’t mix them up. We can leave Wild Goose and be thinking of the lectionary text about Mary and Martha -- and it is a beautiful text, and it is a charming story. I’m not getting rid of Martha from Luke. For those of you who have identified with Martha over the years, nobody’s taking away your Martha story. It is still a meaningful story of activism and contemplation. And it has a lot to do with what we have just gathered here to do over the last four days. You can take that message with you, hold it in your heart, and know that the scripture speaks to it. Take rests as you’re working towards justice.

Or, or perhaps **and**, you can leave here with a question: What if the other story of Mary hadn’t been hidden? *What if Mary in John 11 hadn’t been split into two women? What if we’d known about Mary the Tower all along? What kind of Christianity would we have if the faith hadn’t only been based upon, “Peter, you are the Rock and upon this Rock I will build my church”? But what if we’d always known, “Mary, you are the Tower, and by this Tower we shall all stand?”*

This year at the Goose I invite you to imagine, imagine that possibility that is opening before us, never visible to our ancestors since that text was first altered hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, more than a millennia ago. *What does that church look like? What does a Christianity of Mary the Tower look like? And what in the world might that towering faith have to say to this moment of*

crisis in which we live? I do not know the answers to these questions. But what I do know is that all of this matters. And to share this with you all here, my friends, at Wild Goose, who I know can receive this story as world-bending and heart-stretching as it is, is a joy -- and that you will imagine with me.

The first sign we saw when we drove into this year's Wild Goose: IMAGINE. The last word you're getting from me: IMAGINE.

Amen.