

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
March 26, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Lazarus, Mary, and Martha: Disciples?”
Christian Scripture: John 11:1-45



During Holy Week, specifically during Good Friday (Guilford Congregational Church at 6:00pm), we will likely hear from the Gospel of John again as it narrates the events of Jesus' death (his 'passion'). In John's gospel it states, "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple *whom he loved* standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son" (John 19:26).

In gospels, there are many mysteries. In the Gospel of John there is this big mystery: Who is this 'beloved disciple' and why is he not named? Church tradition, without much if any archival or scriptural evidence, assumes that 'John' is the disciple that Jesus loved. But, we don't *know* this. Furthermore, church tradition

assumes that the author of our gospel is just being humble and thus the beloved disciple is 'John'. Yet, we have little or no evidence that the disciple John is the author of the gospel according to John. So, this morning, I ask, was Lazarus, instead, the 'beloved disciple'?¹ And furthermore, I ask: Were Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, therefore, also disciples of Jesus?

As you all know, for whatever reason, I am interested in 'something', first and foremost, because of 'someone'. That is, I am most often motivated by biography. And this is because I love people and I love their stories. I am interested in South African liberation history because of the life and ministry of Albert Luthuli. I am fascinated by Russian history because I am currently immersed in the life and death story of the last Czar, Nicholas II. Yes, I am interested in, and have given my life to, the Christian faith because I am captivated by life story of the *historical* Jesus. While the miracle of raising Lazarus is amazing, I am more fascinated with the biographies of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

If we learn more about who Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are, the story of Jesus' passion and his death and resurrection become richer for us! Think about it.

¹ This question, hypothesis, and supposition that Lazarus (rather than John) is the beloved disciple, is not original to me. In fact, the question was first raised to my attention by, and thus this message is inspired by, Alan Rudnick, an American Baptist minister.

Alan Rudnick, "Lazarus, Not John, Was the Beloved Disciple", found at:

<https://medium.com/@alanrudnick/lazarus-not-john-was-the-beloved-disciple-a4723223a16a>, accessed March 25, 2023.

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If Lazarus was 'the beloved disciple', then Lazarus was at the cross with Jesus during Jesus' execution. In addition, if Mary was at the foot of the cross when Jesus was executed, it makes sense that Lazarus, her brother, was there too!² And if that was that wasn't enough evidence, it was Mary, Lazarus' sister who first testified and proclaimed to the other disciples the presence of the resurrected Jesus after visiting the tomb. Now, let me ask you this – who better to be disciples, and who better to testify to Jesus' death and resurrection, than the one who Jesus resurrected and his sisters who experienced the tragedy and the joy of their brother's new life! They, more than anyone else, would be the first to believe in Jesus' resurrection and be at the front of the line to proclaim it.

Jesus seemed to have a special love for Lazarus and this love well-qualifies him to be the mysterious 'beloved disciple' and thus for Mary and Martha to also be considered disciples in their own right! Let's listen to this morning's reading again: "*Lord, he whom you love is ill*". Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:4-5).

Before we conclude with Mary and Martha, let's examine how important Lazarus was to Jesus. Lazarus's role was not simply being raised from the dead in some sort of cameo performance. Lazarus was the only person we know Jesus cried over. Only three times in the gospels does Jesus cry: over a whole city,

² They were all together (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) with Jesus before his execution in Bethany (John 12:2).

Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), on the cross, when he was being tortured and executed (Matthew 27:46), and finally, over the death of his friend, Lazarus.

It seems that Jesus and Lazarus were very tight. When Jesus first heard of Lazarus' illness, he decided to return to Judea at the risk of death. In fact, his disciples protested, "Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back (John 11:8)?" Jesus was willing to risk his life to save Lazarus. And more than that, something that I have never noticed before, Lazarus seems to be the only disciple that is, by name, threatened to be killed with Jesus because Lazarus seemed to be the lynchpin for Jesus' persuasive ministry: "So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him" (John 12:10-11).

One of the things we do not know is if Martha and Mary were close to Jesus because Jesus was close to Lazarus or if Jesus was close to Lazarus because Jesus was close to Mary and Martha. To be honest, it really doesn't matter. The point is that Jesus was very close with all three siblings. They were his family, in all respects. They hosted him, fed him, fellowshiped with him. We sense from all the reclining going on in the home (John 12:2 and 13:23) that he was free, relaxed, and even 'himself' with them. When I read the gospels carefully, I see their home as his safe space, his retreat, if you will.

It seems quite feasible to me that Lazarus was Jesus' 'beloved disciple'. Yet, why would the writer of John's gospel keep that a secret? Well, if there was a 'hit' out on Lazarus, it would make sense for the gospel writer, or the source(s) who supplied the information to the gospel writer, not to 'out' Lazarus as part of the inner group of disciples.

I would like to conclude with Martha and Mary. They were also beloved by Jesus. The theme that women supported Jesus is very prominent in the gospels; it is so prominent that women could not be written-out. Yet, church tradition for millennia suggests that Jesus had only twelve disciples and all of them were male. That Jesus only have twelve male disciples, I suggest, is either invented or it was overemphasized by the patriarchy advocated by the gospel writers themselves or by the early Christian church two or three hundred years after Jesus' birth and death. My suspicions are not without evidence. It states in Luke 10:1-2 that either 70 or 72 disciples were sent out to proclaim the gospel.³ So, at a bare minimum, that there were only twelve disciples is not entirely the case, or most likely, there were disciples with a small 'd', and many of them, and disciples with a big 'D' of which there were fewer. Yet, I would content that women were disciples of Jesus. Furthermore, as it concerns Mary and Martha, there were no other disciples that

³ "Who Were the 70 (or 72) Disciples in Luke 10?", *Got Questions?*, found at: <https://www.gotquestions.org/70-or-72-disciples.html>, accessed March 25, 2023.

achieved a greater degree of trust and knowledge of Jesus than them. Except for, perhaps, their brother Lazarus, the 'beloved disciple' who was the only disciple of Jesus who received a healing miracle. And, boy, was it a whopper!

Friends, during Lent, as we approach Holy Week, there is a real need to humanize the cast of characters in our gospel stories. And though we as people of faith understand Jesus to be divine, we must also see the humanity of Jesus. He experienced deep friendships, as we do. He experienced genuine grief at the face of death, both of his own and of those who he loved. Jesus appreciated domesticity, feeling at home. He experienced the crunch of time and sought desperate means by which, like us, to prevent burn-out. Jesus is, really, someone we can follow. Jesus' footsteps are there. We can see them. Because the weight of his body imprinted them on the ground, or rather the text, in front of us. I love the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". I can hear Lazarus, Mary, and Martha sing that song now:

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!

O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,

All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".