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Home > Theology Topics > Women and Theology > this page

- [CRI/Home](#)
- [Site Contents](#)
- [Daily Readings](#)
- [Bible Topics](#)
- [Worship Topics](#)
- [Ministry Topics](#)
- [Lectionary](#)
- [Church Year](#)
- [Theology Topics](#)
- [Non-English](#)
- [PhotoTour](#)
- [New Additions](#)

[Search This Site](#)

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Mary and Martha Sisters Who Served

Shawna R. B. Atteberry

In Luke 10:38-42 we meet Martha and Mary who are apparently two single sisters living together. While John's Gospel tells us about Jesus' resurrecting Lazarus from the dead (John 11), Luke makes no mention of Lazarus.

10:38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 10:39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 10:40 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 then to help me."

When Jesus and the twelve come into their village Martha welcomes them into her home. At his point, often interpretation pits sister against sister to elevate "being" with the Lord (Mary) above "doing" for the Lord (Martha). But this approach misses what Luke is doing in this narrative. As Fred Craddock points out, the "radicality" of this story should not be overlooked: "Jesus is received into a woman's home (no mention is made of a brother) and he teaches a woman" (Craddock, 152).

For the first century Jew, sitting at someone's feet did not bring to mind children sitting at the feet of adults listening to stories. Sitting at someone's feet meant higher, formal education. Jesus was known as a rabbi, a teacher. To sit at his feet meant that one was being trained as a disciple (cf. Luke 8:35). Mary was not quietly sitting contemplating all Jesus said. She was in active training with the other disciples (Grenz, 75). This was an unusual activity for women. It was Martha, not Mary, who was doing what women were supposed to do: be good homemakers.

In first century Jewish thought the women's sphere was the home. A woman learned everything she would need to know to be a wife and mother and run a household. She was not required to learn the Torah or to engage in religious activity that would take her out of the home for an extended period of time. This included the three feasts men were commanded to attend in Jerusalem (Spencer, 47). Jewish thought also believed that something done that was obligatory carried more merit than an act that was not obligatory, so learning the Torah and studying carried no merit for a woman (Spencer, 48). The only way a woman could earn merit was to perform those acts that were obligatory for her: be a wife and mother. In Jesus' time there was no reason for a woman to be sitting at a rabbi's feet. Mary should have been helping Martha.

When Martha came to Jesus in verse 40 and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to

[Women and
Theology](#)

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Martha](#)

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help me," she was expecting Jesus to agree with her and send Mary to help her. The verbs used to describe Martha show that this was probably no small gathering. Martha is distracted, she asks for someone to help her, and Jesus tells her she is worried and distracted by many things. Martha is doing exactly what she should be doing: entertaining and feeding her guests, and by all the cultural expectations of the day, Mary should have been helping her. That was her proper place. But Jesus responds:

10:41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 10:42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

With these words Jesus set the traditional belief of a woman's place on its head. Jesus turned the priorities of a woman's life upside down with his belief that women should learn the word of God. By placing the study of the word of God above the socially and culturally imposed gender role of homemaker, Jesus made it clear that "a woman is greater than what she does. She has worth and dignity apart from childbearing. Her status is not dependent on her relationship to a man or her role in society but is dependent on her relationship to God (Cowles, 86-7). Jesus affirmed what God had done in creation: woman was "a human being in her own right" apart from any roles imposed on her since creation (Cowles, 87).

In John's Gospel we meet Mary and Martha again. This time they are mentioned with their brother Lazarus. In John 11 Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. In chapter 12, six days before Passover, Jesus returns to Bethany and is having dinner with the siblings.

12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 12:3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 12:4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 12:5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 12:6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 12:7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 12:8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

As in Luke, Martha is serving. Mary is once again at Jesus' feet. In a wanton display of affection Mary anoints Jesus' feet with perfume that costs a year's wages. When she is condemned for this waste of good money, Jesus defends her saying that she has prepared him for his upcoming death. There are those who say this anointing for death is an unintentional or "unconscious" prophetic act; Mary simply anointed his feet out of her gratitude for the raising of Lazarus (Brown, 454). Jesus was the one who gave it the prophetic meaning.

But is it that simple? In Luke we saw that Mary sat at Jesus' feet as one of his disciples. Given that John elaborates on the intimate relationship between Jesus and the three siblings, we can also infer that Mary is a disciple in the Johannine tradition as well. Jesus has been telling the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem and would die there by the hands of the religious leaders and be raised on the third day, a teaching his male disciples did not listen to or understand (cf. 2:19-22). What if Mary got it? What if she listened, and she believed what Jesus had said? He was going

to Jerusalem to die. Her act of extravagant love is not solely one of gratitude, it is a symbolic prophetic act (Owen, 145). Mary sees what the others do not and prophesies what lies ahead for Jesus: the grave (Owen, 145). The single woman who sat as a disciple at the feet of Jesus, now anoints his feet proclaiming what is ahead for him. As Jesus defended her right to be a disciple, he now defends her prophetic act, which prepared him for his death.

Mary is not the only perceptive sister. Martha's faith and understanding of Jesus are seen in the previous chapter.

11:20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 11:21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 11:22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

When Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus has been buried, Martha is the first to meet him. She states her absolute conviction that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had come sooner.

11:23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 11:24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 11:26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 11:27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Jesus assures her that Lazarus will be resurrected, and Martha voices her belief in the resurrection of the last days. Jesus then 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?" (John 11:25-26). Mary's response of faith follows, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (v. 27). "Martha's statement in John is virtually identical to Peter's confession reported in the other three Gospels" (Cunningham and Hamilton, 121). -1- Peter's confession does not appear in John; Mary's does. In Matthew's version of Peter's confession, Jesus says that his church would be built upon the rock of this confession of faith.

This foundational confession of the church was declared by both Martha and Peter. "Both understood who Jesus was," and both Martha and Peter declared the truth, which had been revealed to them by the Holy Spirit (Cunningham and Hamilton, 121). If we accept the foundational confession of the church from a married man, we must also accept that same confession of faith from a single woman. And if that confession of faith is part of Peter's qualification for spiritual leadership, shouldn't the same be true of Martha?

Both of these women were single. Mary who learned at Jesus' feet like the rest of his disciples. Martha who made the same proclamation of faith upon which the church is built that Peter did. Most of the other women portrayed in positive ways in the Gospels were also single. The Samaritan woman who brought her village to Jesus (see **The Samaritan Woman**). Mary Magdalene who was the first to see the risen Christ and proclaim the gospel of his resurrection. Even the women who stood at the cross and then went to the tomb are identified by their sons, not their husbands (see **Apostle to the Apostles**). This indicates that they were probably widows. If these women are connected to men, it is as a sister or mother, not a wife. The man their lives revolved around was Jesus. He was the one who raised them to the equal standing that was their right through creation. He

restored them to their rightful place as daughters of Abraham and daughters of God. He healed them, taught them and spent time with them. He entrusted to them the greatest news humanity has ever heard: "He is risen!" All of them were single, but that did not matter to Jesus. He did not require them to have husbands before he allowed them to minister. He only required that they follow and obey--and they did.

Notes

1. Matt 16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Mark 8:29b Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." Luke 9:20 Peter answered, "The Messiah of God." <return>

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Top of page

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