

Rescuing Martha from the Dishes: A Challenge of Retrieval and Proclamation by Mary Grey – Part III

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Rescuing Martha – A Hermeneutic of Retrieval

This is the last part of a three part post. Read [Part I here](#) and [Part II here](#).

Discovering another tradition means being open not only to artistic witnesses but to myth, legend, and to feminist theory. But to begin with what is uncontested: both sisters, Mary and Martha, were friends of Jesus who loved them and their brother Lazarus. Martha seems to be the householder. We are told nothing about the parents of the three – perhaps they had been caught up and killed in one of the Zealot uprisings. The Church that sprang up at the site of Bethany was one of the earliest Christian pilgrimage places. The legends that grew up held Lazarus and his 2 sisters in great respect. And this is a sharp contrast with the tradition I began with.

Secondly, to disparage responsibility for housework as a lowly role is an anachronistic viewpoint. It is likely, as in most poor agricultural communities today that domestic work goes alongside income-generating work either inside or outside the house. Many rural women in India and Africa cope with domestic work, child care and a full day's work in the fields. In the life-time of Jesus, women would be involved in cleaning fish and mending nets – though the Gospels do not tell us this. Nor was this the work of the sisters at Bethany who did not live near Lake Galilee. The public/ private split between unseen work in the household and public work belongs to a much later date. Thirdly, it is *diakonia* or service that is at stake here, and this was part of a creative tension in the early communities.



Fra Angelico. Agony in the Garden. c.1450. Museo di San Marco, Cell 34, Florence, Italy.

I suggest that not only was Martha known as a disciple, but a leader, according to the Johannine tradition. I appeal to one artistic and one written witness, one Franciscan and one Dominican. [Fra Angelico's](#) (1387-1455) picture from the Abbey of San Marco in Florence is well-known. It depicts Christ and the male disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, sleeping, when Jesus had begged them to stay awake and pray with him. (Luke 22.39-46). But at the gates of the Garden are Martha and the women, praying. It is possible to distinguish the two sisters: Mary is reading a book, her head bent. Martha is:

Fully alert, casting questioning look at Mary and praying with uplifted hands, adopting the same attitude of the sorely-tried Jesus. However, the action of Martha is now a readiness to watch with Jesus which has grown from her own total involvement, her own spirituality ([Elisabeth Moltmann:38](#))

In another picture, Fra Angelico represents Martha along with St Veronica as the only two women standing beneath the cross. From where does this tradition arise? Does Fra Angelico know of an Apocryphal Gospel?

Let us now look at the second witness, the sermon of Meister Eckhart, the Dominican mystic and teacher, around 1300 ([Eckhart 1994:193-202](#)). In a surprising way for some one now renowned as a mystic, Eckhart turns the contrast between Martha and Mary on its head, considering Martha to be the woman of mature faith:

Three things moved Martha to serve her beloved Christ. The first was her maturity and the ground of her being which she had trained to the greatest extent and which, she believe, qualified her the best to undertake these tasks. The second was wise understanding which knew how to perform those works perfectly that love commands. And the third was the particular honour of her special guest (Eckhart:193).

Eckhart sees Mary as less mature, more concerned with her delight at sitting at the Lord's feet. He understands Christ's naming of Martha twice, to indicate her perfection in both temporal and eternal blessedness. What tradition understood as a reproof, Eckhart saw differently –as an assurance to Martha that Mary would indeed become as both Christ and Martha wished her to be:

Mary was not yet her name as she sat at the feet of the Lord. Mary is the name of one who has a disciplined body which is obedient to instruction (Eckhart:201).

We know that Eckhart was very concerned with and took great responsibility for the guidance of women in many convents. In fact he had oversight of convents in south-west Germany, but had also been a theological teacher in Paris. Although Eckhart primarily lived and worked in Germany, it is possible also that the Dominicans had picked up positive Martha traditions from preaching in the south of France, where in fact, their founder, Dominic himself, had been very active.

But how did Martha get to the South of France. From the early Middle Ages legends had flourished that Mary, Martha and Lazarus had been put on a raft – some say immediately after the Resurrection – and been shipwrecked off the southern coast of France, in Provence, where they all three became involved in missionary work. One account says they were accompanied by Maximinus, a disciple and landed at Marseille ([Duchesne 1907:133](#)). A later version has the family fleeing during Jewish persecutions, and arrived at Aix in Provence. There Lazarus became the first Bishop of Marseille, Martha lived at Tarascon and killed the wicked dragon and they all died. Later, As Susan Haskins relates ([Haskins 1993:121](#)), the relics of Mary Magdalen were taken to Burgundy, (to the basilica at Vézelay) but Martha's remained in Tarascon –they were “discovered” in 1187. Here the story gets entangled in the needs of the basilica at Vézelay to have authentic connections with the apostles in order to establish its own importance. To this day it claims to have the relics of Mary Magdalen. But for my purposes here what is interesting is the clear development of a Martha tradition: she was not submerged in the glamour of her sister, but became known as a distinct spiritual leader, from France through Germany and parts of Italy.

The context is one of growing orders of active women – following key changes in inheritance laws prohibiting daughters from gaining land-holdings – and the rise of the Béguine movement of women living together in a more independent way. New brotherhoods, like the Franciscans, and others caring for plague victims, made Martha their patron. Martha's independent, active spirit appealed to them, more than that of Mary. Once the latter took over the Magdalen traditions, her identity as a sexual sinner, concerned with her appearance, (though we know this to be false), gave double messages, while the Martha tradition is more straightforward.

Elisabeth Moltmann cites the Nuremberg Church with its Mary altar, with the picture of Martha with the dragon. Others are found south of the Main, in S. Switzerland, France and Italy, where they appear in places to which the Cathars fled during the Inquisition. To date, as she rightly says, there is no satisfactory iconographical explanation of the theme's significance. I found many versions of the legend, explaining that because of the conquest of the monster, the Tarasque, (a man-eating dragon, half-animal, half-fish), that terrorised the village of Nerluc, near the mouth of the Rhone, it was renamed Tarascon. Already in the 10th century there was a church dedicated to Martha. According to Elisabeth Moltmann (Moltmann:29-48), the triumph of Martha was not to kill but to tame the dragon, using holy water, not a sword and tying him up with her girdle – the townspeople killed it later- thus offering us a non-patriarchal, non-violent way to deal with evil:

The Martha legend represents a new development. Now a woman represents the victory over the unconscious, death, the threat, and she conquered the dragon in a new way. ...Martha marks the beginning of a new way of dealing with evil: not its annihilation, but its redemption, ‘the transformation of the underside,’ as Erich Neumann puts it (Moltmann:48).

Although the depiction of Martha and the dragon continued to the end of the 18th century, and there are even churches dedicated to both Martha and George, George won out as a key symbol of overcoming evil by military force. After the Reformation, the Lukan depiction of Martha the housewife triumphed over Martha the spiritual leader.

A Hermeneutic of Proclamation



Christ in the House of Martha and Mary
~1618, Diego Velázquez

This alternative Martha tradition I have described testifies to another reading of the Lukan tradition. Now I return to this, to show that even given the conservative reading, there is still a way to retain a subversive reading of the text. I do this by looking at Diego Velasquez's picture (1599-1666). Velasquez was very influenced by Caravaggio, and is at home with the taverns of Seville, the homely scenes within them and the struggles of a large underclass of servants. This picture, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* is based on the Lukan text, but uses a particular technique of double composition, a present scene where the young cook is being reprimanded by an older woman, and a glimpse through the hatch of Christ with Martha and Mary. For me it evokes the problematic of this text and its meaning today. The scene with the young cook, close to tears, is clearly in the present: is she meant to be influenced by the scriptural story that is depicted through the hatch?

John Drury suggests that the link between the two is the uplifted hand of the woman, who is an intermediary between the two scenes through this gesture (Drury 1999: 156-168). The young woman, pounding her mortar is looking distressed at the implications of Jesus' message:

For her Jesus' word can only mean that she is either facing a life-time in a convent or, if she is too poor to afford the dowry which that would demand, or disinclined to take the veil, a lifetime of Martha's hard work in the depressing knowledge that it is not Mary's "good part" (Drury:158).



Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus, Artist: Diego Velázquez de Silva c.1617-18 Copyright: National Gallery of Ireland

Velasquez is clearly sympathetic and sensitive to her feelings. His reaction to the scriptures shows an independence that moved him beyond the orthodox interpretation. Drury suggests a comparison with Velasquez's *Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus*, (c.1618 – in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin). Here too the scriptural action is portrayed through the hatch. The present scene is played out through the young serving girl in the foreground. Hearing and listening are crucial. But if we look at the face of this black servant, (is she a slave?) we will see a more contented expression. Has she heard Christ's blessing over the bread, the means of revelation, and known this to be a result of her own work of serving, however

humble? There is a serenity here that is missing from the Martha picture – and the two pictures are roughly contemporary.

I take from this picture, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, not only the painter's absorption in the material world – look at the profuse detail with the fish,- not only his sympathy for the contemporary Martha, but his invitation to us to discern how a text can be liberating or not.

A feminist ethics of liberation today questions the rhetoric of service, sacrifice and self-giving, from a framework where just wages for both sexes and egalitarian partnerships are the goal. This ethical base rejects a self-effacing service that prohibits women in many cultures from meaningful work, and even propels women into prostitution and being trafficked. Secondly, an ethics of liberation cuts through a dualist split between physical and mental work, opposing a system that downgrades one in favour of the other. What is called for is a revaluing of domestic work, carers of both young and elderly, and a wage structure that gives dignity to cleaners in both public and private contexts.

Finally, if the Lukan text is primarily about *διάκονία*, and if the text was controversial in the early church as it struggled to work out its mission, it is no less vital today in our churches, many of which still confine women to serving and listening, and prevent their participation in the ministry of proclamation.

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