



Artwork by Josef Klopacka, Ruzomberok, Slovakia. Used by permission. (https://www.dreamstime.com/jozefart_info)

- At the Center of The Song -

Have you ever been at a summer family gathering, perhaps sitting at a picnic table, enjoying things cooked on the grill: Hot dogs, burgers, corn on the cob, potato salad... when suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a water balloon sails through the air and bursts right there in the middle of the table?

I bet you can imagine the scene in your mind, screams, giggles, the laughter of children, wet paper plates and napkins, drinks knocked over, people scurrying out of the way, their shorts and t-shirts wet, and everything all askew. What happened!?

The Gospel from Luke appointed for today, that seemingly harmless six sentences about Mary and Martha – a story many of us have heard since childhood – depending on how long we have been around, we’ve sat through countless sermons on the text, our minds wandering to take in the mountains out the window, the events on our to-do-list for the weekend, the front left brake that need to be fixed on the bicycle...

When “wham!”, the balloon bursts on the table!

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What am I talking about, you might be asking?

We are so far removed from the times and culture of the Gospels, and seemingly so familiar with the text, that we are largely oblivious and shielded the impact of the stories of Jesus.

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So let me try to start again, at the beginning.

Today is the first Sunday of the Season of Mary's. What? You've never heard of the famed Season of Mary's, despite the fact that I just made that up?

Here at St. Mary's, of all places, we should be in full-on celebration mode. In the next thirty days, from now until August 15th, the Feast of St. Mary's, the mother of Jesus, the calendar of the saints in The Episcopal Church, what we sometimes call "Holy Men and Holy Women," has the following in store for us:

July 22nd, next Friday, is the Feast Day of Mary Magdalene. Without conventional attachments to men, and at times disbelieved and erased by the male disciples, she was herself a disciple, long before we ever heard the word "Christian" and long before there even was a "church." Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning. In the language of the Church, she was thus the "evangelist to the evangelists".

But her status was not without compare among women in Jesus' circle of followers, in taking on roles in the early Jesus movement that were almost exclusively held by men in the culture of the ancient near East, the times and culture of Jesus.

On the 29th of July, the Friday after next Friday, we celebrate the Feast Days of Mary and Martha of Bethany, and it is a piece of their story and witness that we read today in the Gospel.

I've recently picked up a copy of the Social Science Commentary of the Synoptic Gospels¹, by Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, two of the premier experts in researching and reconstructing the social world of the ancient near east.

The cultural and social world of Jesus' times and place divided the world into a public and a private sphere to a degree unlike any modern western culture. The transition points between these two spheres in an honor-and-shame culture were closely guarded by men. Only within the private sphere were women to have any role, and even the extended family home had clear points of demarcation.

¹available at: https://www.powells.com/book/-9780800634919/1-6?gclid=EAlaIQobChMlu5DMj63--AIVpQ-tBh2pkAQXEAQYASABEgK1-PD_BwE

Luke's Gospel passage, which lands in our lap this morning, begins with the assertion "As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home."

There's nothing here that upends our table. But for those early listeners of Luke's Gospel, it would have been a shock. So much so, in fact, that certain Greek manuscripts of this passage omit the phrase "Martha welcomed him into her home." Scholars such as Malina speculate that it was too much for ancient scribes, who meticulously hand copied each and every copy of the Holy Scriptures. Perhaps, they might have believed, ascribing the home to Martha was an obvious error.

The location in question would have properly been the household of Lazarus. It was he, who would greeted and welcomed any male visitors such as Jesus and the disciples into his home, and would have greeted them in the transition points of the courtyard and doorway.

The balloon is launched.

Hospitality was at the core of Jesus's culture in a way that is hard to fully appreciate today. Large sections of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we sometimes call The Old Testament, expounded on the core belief of hospitality. Hospitality was the "process by which a stranger is taken under the protection of a host for a given time, and to leave that protection as a friend or enemy,"² and it was governed by strict rules of conduct.

Martha's care in the kitchen, preparing the many tasks of hospitality, was a sacred duty in her time and place. The honor of the household rested upon the smooth operation and good solid management of the particularities and prescribed patterns of hospitality. It is unfortunate that so many contemporary sermons on this passage relegate Martha's many concerns to second place compared to those of her sister Mary.

And Mary... Wow! I can't state enough how (wholly) improper [that W-h-o-l-l-y, but I will not argue with you *at all* if you hear that as H-O-L-Y improper.] I can't state enough how (wholly/holy) improper it would have been for Mary to take a place at the feet of Jesus, with the male disciples. He's a rabbi, for heaven's sake!

But the author of Luke's Gospel just lays it out there at it is: "She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying."

The water balloon sails through the air.

And Jesus, seemingly taking no note of any of these "cultural transgressions," says an interesting thing: "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."

² Malina, B. and Rohrbaugh, R. Social Science Commentary of the Synoptic Gospels, Kindle edition location 1355 of 7128.

This is admittedly hard to clearly hear in its English translation, but it is clearer in the Greek. Jesus's comments are not about the primacy of men's culturally-assigned tasks over women's – nor is the distinction between household tasks and study. There was a perennial and central discussion that runs through Greek philosophy, (Biblical scholars believe the writer of Luke's Gospel was from one of the Greek cities)³. It is the distinction between "the one and the many".⁴ "Philosophy in the Western world begins with this question; the earliest Greek philosophers mainly concerned themselves with this question."⁵ " In its (perhaps oversimplified form) it is the question: what is the One Thing that lies at the center of all that is, and that holds all things together?

I believe in answering Mary the way that he did, Jesus is weighing in on that important question. For the culture of the ancient near east, the question might have been answered, "hospitality." We could say more about that, of course, but note that the first reading today (Genesis 18:1-10a) is about hospitality to strangers. You might remember, the ancient story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah,⁶ (which the homophobic tradition has done terrible violence with) is about arrogance and the failure to provide hospitality to strangers, not sexuality.⁷ For the devout Jew, it might have been answered "torah," the teachings of G-d that provide a totality of meaning, structure, and purpose for everyday life.

But for Jesus, whatever Mary of Bethany is doing here: sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching, being in his presence...) is the one that defines the many. The central point of all that we strive to do through time and cultures, whether it is "hospitality", or "torah."

The balloon hits and explodes!

The New Testament book of Colossians⁸, likely written within thirty years of Jesus's death and resurrection,⁹ says this about the One and the Many:

"Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or

³ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luke_the_Evangelist

⁴ See: <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0198235496.001.0001/acprof-9780198235491-chapter-8>;

⁵ Richard Hooker, under the entry "The One and the Many," in in the World Cultures General Glossary of World Civilizations, see:

https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20281b/Philosophy%20of%20Magic/Dante.%20etc/Pphilosophers/Idea/www.wsu.edu_8080/~dee/GLOSSARY/ONEMANY.HTM

⁶ Genesis 19:1-25.

⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodom_and_Gomorrah; See also " Sodom and Gomorrah: How the "classical" interpretation gets it wrong," at: <https://www.westarinstitute.org/blog/sodom-and-gomorrah-how-the-classical-interpretation-gets-it-wrong>. For the Bible's interpretation of itself, see: Gen. 19:1-25; Isaiah 1:10-17; Ezekial 16:49.

⁸ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistle_to_the_Colossians

⁹ May, Herbert G. and Bruce M. Metzger. The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha. 1977.

powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. *He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” (emphasis added).

This is what some scholars call the image of the “cosmic Christ”¹⁰, a phrase that some of you know through Catherine Amy Kropp or the writings of Richard Rohr and Jurgen Moltmann.

The Risen Christ, in whom we live and move and in whose holy spirit we seek to dwell, is the One that holds it all together, in whom all is harmonized, transfigured, transformed, healed and brought to wholeness.

Modern Christian discipleship is to *pay attention to that*, lest our many acts of Christian life and living (Think about these things you are doing to live out your faith: in God and in the image of God in each and every person...):

- telling the Good News
- political activism, witness, and protest
- health care and human service,
- hospitality to the outcast,
- marginalized, and forgotten,
- stewardship, generosity, and gratitude
- education and the raising of children
- voting,
- etc. etc.....)



lest our many acts of discipleship become burdens we must carry, rules we must follow, and endless, often oppressive (and *impressive*) “to-do-lists.

Live the Risen Christ in all these things and through all these things.

For in Christ all is held together and so shall the power of God’s Holy Spirit be in you and with you and work through you.

There it is. Christ at the center of the song, the universal sound.

The water is now everywhere and what we thought was a simple picnic...

has become a new kind of baptism. Amen.

¹⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmic_Christ . See also the work of scholars and theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Richard Rohr: *Moltmann, Jürgen (1993). [The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions](#). Fortress Press. pp. 274–280. ISBN 9781451412079 and Richard Rohr: *Rohr, Richard (2021). [The universal Christ : how a forgotten reality can change everything we see, hope for, and believe](#). New York. ISBN 978-0-593-23832-5. OCLC 1155071369.**

Scriptures appointed for Sunday, July 17, 2022



The Collect

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our inability we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Genesis 18:1-10a

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on-- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

The Psalm - Psalm 15

- 1 LORD, who may dwell in your tabernacle? *
who may abide upon your holy hill?
- 2 Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, *
who speaks the truth from his heart.
- 3 There is no guile upon his tongue;
he does no evil to his friend; *
he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.
- 4 In his sight the wicked is rejected, *
but he honors those who fear the LORD.

- 5 He has sworn to do no wrong *
and does not take back his word.
- 6 He does not give his money in hope of gain, *
nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
- 7 Whoever does these things *
shall never be overthrown.

The Epistle - Colossians 1:15-28

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him-- provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

The Gospel - Luke¹¹ 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus 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 then to

¹¹ For a brief overview of the background for Luke's Gospel, see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gospel-According-to-Luke>

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."

This sermon was crafted in part from the following

Resources for further study and reflection:

A Provocation: <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2016/06/30/a-provocation-ninth-sunday-after-pentecost-luke-1038-42/>

Mary and Martha: No Small Struggle: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20040719JJ.shtml>

A Commentary on Luke 10:38-42: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-luke-1038-42-5>

Martha's Anxiety: Struggling Alone Against Many Things: <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/07/marthas-anxiety-struggling-alone.html>

Sarah Dylan Brewer on Colossians 1 and Luke 10:38-42: <https://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/philippians/>

Podcasts and Videos:

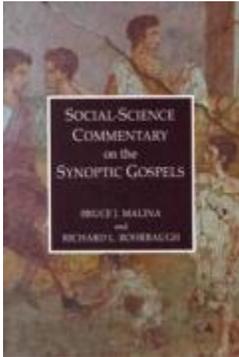
The Cosmic Christ, with Richard Rohr: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f7w2YxxhwA>

At Home with the Lectionary, with Fr. Aaron Burt and Marissa Burt: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/at-home-with-the-lectionary/id1599653570>

Kisha and Christina: *The Mary and Martha Podcast:* <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/mary-martha-podcast/id1455420462>

Fr. Thomas Keating on *The Cosmic Christ:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43INlyzYgLA>

Recommended:



Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels
by [Bruce J. Malina](#)

Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John
by [Bruce J. Malina](#) and [Richard L. Rohrbaugh](#)



Music Playlist:

Hills of Morning

Song by Bruce Cockburn

Underneath the mask of the sulfur sky
 A bunch of us were busy waiting
 Watching the people looking ill-at-ease
 Watching the fraying rope get closer to breaking
 Women and men moved back and forth
 In between effect and cause
 And just beyond the range of normal sight
 This glittering joker was dancing in the dragon's jaws



Let me be a little of your breath
 Moving over the face of the deep
 I want to be a particle of your light
 Flowing over the hills of morning

The only sign you gave of who you were
 When you first came walking down the road
 Was the way the dust motes danced around
 Your feet in a cloud of gold

But everything you see's not the way it seems
 Tears can sing and joy shed tears
 You can take the wisdom of this world
 And give it to the ones who think it all ends here

Let me be a little of your breath. 
 Moving over the face of the deep
 I want to be a particle of your light
 Flowing over the hills of morning

Songwriters: Bruce Cockburn / Hills of Morning lyrics © Carlin America Inc



Mystery

Music and Lyrics by Bruce Cockburn

You can't tell me there is no mystery
 Mystery
 Mystery
 You can't tell me there is no mystery
 It's everywhere I turn

Moon over junk yard where the snow lies bright
 Snow lies bright
 Snow lies bright
 Moon over junk yard where the snow lies bright
 Can set my heart to burn

Stood before the shaman, I saw star-strewn space
 Star-strewn space
 Star-strewn space

Stood before the shaman, I saw star strewn space
 Behind the eye holes in his face

Infinity always gives me vertigo
 Vertigo
 Vertigo
 Infinity always gives me vertigo
 And fills me up with grace

I was built on a Friday and you can't fix me

You can't fix me...

You can't fix me
 I was built on a Friday and you can't fix me
 Even so I've done okay

So grab that last bottle full of gasoline
 Gasoline
 Gasoline
 Grab that last bottle full of gasoline
 Light a toast to yesterday

And don't tell me there is no mystery
 Mystery
 Mystery
 And don't tell me there is no mystery
 It overflows my cup

This feast of beauty can intoxicate
 Intoxicate
 Intoxicate
 This feast of beauty can intoxicate
 Just like the finest wine

So all you stumblers who believe love rules
 Believe love rules
 Believe love rules
 Come all you stumblers who believe love rules
 Stand up and let it shine
 Stand up and let it shine

This song, Mystery, was first played in front of humans on [26 May 2004, at Blackheath Halls](#) in South London.

Lord of the Starfields

Song by Bruce Cockburn

Lord of the star fields
Ancient of days
Universe Maker
Here's a song in your praise

Wings of the storm cloud
Beginning and end
You make my heart leap
Like a banner in the wind

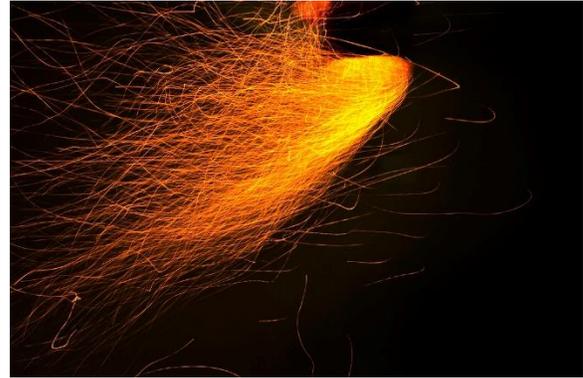
Oh, love that fires the sun
Keep me burning
Lord of the star fields
Sower of life
Heaven and earth are
Full of your light

Voice of the nova
Smile of the dew
All of our yearning
Only comes home to you

Oh, love that fires the sun
Keep me burning

Songwriters: Bruce Cockburn

Lord of the Starfields lyrics © Carlin America Inc



Creation Dream

Bruce Cockburn

Centered on silence
Counting on nothing
I saw you standing on the sea
And everything was
Dark except for
Sparks the wind struck from your hair
Sparks that turned to
Wings around you
Angel voices mixed with seabird cries
Fields of motion
Surging outward
Questions that contain their own replies

You were dancing
I saw you dancing
Throwing your arms toward the sky
Fingers opening
Like flares
Stars were shooting everywhere
Lines of power
Bursting outward
Along the channels of your song
Mercury waves flashed
Under your feet
Shots of silver in the shell-pink dawn

Universal Sound

Tyler Childers

Up in Pocahontas, near the Cranberry Glades¹²
 Ain't got bars, nor the charge to call her anyways
 My mind's a mile a minute, and my thoughts they
 bark like hounds

I focus on my breathing and the universal sound

I think about my darling girl sleeping all alone
 I pray the stars will shoot her all the wishes she can
 hold

On the day that I return, I aim to lay her down
 But right now, I am focused on the universal sound

I think about tobacco juice and Mason jars of 'shine
 I think about the vices I've let take me over time
 I recall when I was a baby, I didn't need nothing
 around

But a little bitty rattler and the universal sound

I'd close my eyes
 It was all so clear
 It was all right then
 It was all right here

I focus on my breathing and the universal sound
 I let it take me over from the toenails to the crown
 Of the body that I'm in 'til they put me in the ground
 And I return to the chorus of the universal sound

I've been up on the mountain,
 and I've seen His wondrous grace
 I've sat there on a bar stool,
 and I've looked Him in the face
 He seemed a little haggard,
 but it did not slow Him down
 He was humming to the neon of the universal sound

Songwriters: Timothy Tyler Childers



Cranberry Glades Botanical Area in Pocahontas County, WV.
 Photo by: Forest Wander via Creative Commons.

*I've been up on the mountain,
 and I've seen His wondrous grace
 I've sat there on a bar stool,
 and I've looked Him in the face
 He seemed a little haggard,
 but it did not slow Him down
 He was humming to the neon
 of the universal sound...*

The Universal Sound / Tyler Childers

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cranberry_Glades