**Unbind Mary**

March 26, 2023 Lent V

John 11: 1-45 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This past week the City of Regina [launched](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/experience-regina-brand-relaunch-1.6784321) a new tourism campaign, **Experience Regina**, that was an epic fail. The city misjudged making fun of itself and using phrases like “the city that rhymes with fun” and “Show us your Regina”, which are inherently sexist and offensive to women. The leaders of this City once again show they don’t understand the issue of sexism. The last few days the NHL has been [making news](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nhl-hockey-pride-lgbtq-1.6790930) as individual hockey players refused to wear pride jerseys showing acceptance of LGBTQ players, and now whole teams are finding excuses to back out of showing their support for the league’s attempt to show inclusiveness. Obviously, they had not done the work involved and necessary to bring teams and members on board with a commitment of being inclusive. Another news item this week was about an indigenous elder [seeking an apology](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/cree-elder-apology-conservation-raid-1.6791233) from the provincial government for conservation officers raiding his home and confiscating moose meat given to him by community members for a ceremonial gathering and feast. Each of these stories are examples of ways that systems of oppression are binding or restricting us, especially those who are marginalized. Sexism, homophobia and racism bind us, can lead to death, and are things that we need to be released from.

In our scripture reading today, at the end of the story, Jesus tells the people gathered, as Lazarus is raised from the dead, to “unbind him and let him go”. Jesus had received a message from his beloved friends Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus was ill in hopes he would come right away. However, Jesus decides to stay where he is for two more days, so it is four days before he gets there. Once there, Lazarus has died and Mary and Martha are upset with Jesus, that he did not come right away, and believing that he could have saved Lazarus. Martha, in the conversation with Jesus, confesses, that she knows he is the Messiah. The only other person to make such a confession in the gospels is Peter. Once Jesus sees where Lazarus is lain, he weeps, showing his love for his friend and then performs a miracle in raising him from the dead. He tells those near Lazarus, to unbind him and let him go. Whatever had killed Lazarus, was no longer binding him, and he was free.

There is much in this story that could be explored, however today, I am going to go in quite a different direction than one might usually. This past year, Diana Butler Bass, theologian and historian brought to [our attention](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/mary-the-tower) some recent [scholarly work](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/elizabeth-schrader-on-preaching-john?utm_source=podcast-email%2Csubstack&publication_id=47400&post_id=109446924&utm_medium=email#details) from Elizabeth Schrader, a PhD student at Duke University working on a doctorate in New Testament Studies. Elizabeth’s final doctorate paper was on Mary Magdalene and John 11. In her work she was examining the oldest copy of the text we have of John 11, and noticed that the original text read "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, at the village of Mary and his sister, Mary." Looking closer she notices that the text had been changed so that the second Mary, or Maria in the Greek, now reads Martha. The original text is confusing and not a very good sentence, and someone changed it to read ‘Mary and her sister, Martha’. In looking at the whole text, it had been changed adding Martha. Every pronoun is changed, every singular sister is pluralized. Now it is important to note as this is very new scholarly work, it is still considered theoretical. So, we have come to know this story of Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha.

You may recall another story of Mary and Martha. That one is in Luke 10. You know, the one where Martha is running around getting the meal ready for Jesus who is their guest and her sister Mary is sitting at his feet listening? We think they are the same people, the same Mary and Martha as we have heard in the story of Lazarus we heard today. However, looking at the context of the story in Luke, while it doesn’t say where they are, the information leading up to this story indicates they are nowhere near Bethany but in another location in Galilee or Samaria. Thus, they are likely two totally different families. When we were discussing the passage of Lazarus this week in the opening of our Faith Formation meeting, there was a question raised, making the link to Martha in Luke: “Wasn’t Mary the one listening to Jesus in the other story of Mary and Martha? Why didn’t she go out to meet him when he arrived?” Knowing they are probably two different families helps address this question.

Elizabeth Shrader has reconstructed the passage given her research, so this is the proposed corrected passage, the first three verses:

1 There was a certain sick man, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary his sister.

2 Now this was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.

3 Therefore Mary sent to him, saying, “Lord, behold, the one you love is sick.”

One might ask, why does this change matter? Why would this happen? In the story as we have it, in her conversation with Jesus, Martha confesses Jesus as the Messiah. Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus is likely the same Mary who goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body after his death, and witnesses his resurrection. This is Mary Magdalene. So if there is no Martha, then it is Mary Magdalene who confesses Jesus as Messiah. Shrader identifies that Magdala is not a place in these references, but a title that means Tower. Mary Magdala, Mary the Tower. As one who confesses Jesus as Messiah, and was then the first to witness his resurrection, in the gospel of John, and then Jesus commissions Mary to go and tell the others, she became known as the Tower, a woman of great credibility and authority. It may be that some of the leaders, (the men) of the early church didn’t want this as it could threaten the authority of Peter as the rock and foundation of the church. The only other person in the gospels to confess Jesus as Messiah.

Shrader muses that maybe Martha needed to be in this gospel story in order to get John accepted into the canon, the present accepted books of the Bible. John is an important gospel, essential to our understanding of Jesus, offering a unique and important message to supplement the other gospels. Maybe, she proposes, this is another way of understanding glorifying God in this story. Maybe Mary, and the text needed to be diminished so she could be resurrected and elevated later in our time, when we would be more open to hearing and accepting it, through this discovery. Maybe, as is a message in this Lazarus story, the text is being unbound and freed through this scholarly work about Mary. As we work to liberate women from sexism, to unbind them and let them go, maybe Mary needs to be liberated from the sexism that identified her a prostitute, that reduced her role from the text, from this story

In this passage, Jesus glorifies God through the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection, and it is likely foreshadowing for us, Jesus death and resurrection. Jesus tells those closest to Lazarus to unbind him and let him go. We too can hear this message to unbind those who are oppressed by the systems that can be death dealing, sexism, racism, homophobia, and economic exploitation. May we be open to what it means to unbind Mary and elevate her to the tower she is by her name. May we do the work needed to glorify God and unbind those who are bound by the systems that diminish us all.