

April 3, Lent 5C (John 12:1-8)

Were Mary and Martha at the Last Supper? It's possible.

by [Stephanie Perdew](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue

Imagine this drama: Mary and Martha host a meal in their home. It is a few days before Passover, and the Teacher, Jesus, is the sisters' special guest. He has just raised their brother from the dead, which has drawn the attention of the authorities. They know his life is in danger. There may not be many more meals together.

The evening begins. Martha serves. Mary comes to the table with a pound of expensive nard. She anoints her Teacher's feet, washing them as a guest's but with burial balm as if for a dead or dying man.

One of the guests is especially edgy. It turns out that the devil has entered Judas's heart. He criticizes Mary's use of the nard and feigns interest in the poor, knowing all the while he is going to betray his Teacher to the authorities.

Jesus accepts Mary's anointing. He interprets it as an acknowledgment of the danger to his life. It prefigures his burial. There is not much time left together now.

Then Jesus puts himself in the role of the host to the guests. He washes their feet. He predicts his betrayal. He preaches to them one last time. Martha shuffles between the table and the kitchen, cleaning up. She sees Mary smiling and hears her laughter as they listen to their Teacher that night.

This exercise in imagination combines several biblical scenes. In one, a woman anoints Jesus. Three Gospels set this in the village of Bethany in Judea, while Luke sets it in Galilee; in three Gospels the woman goes unnamed, while in John she is Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. In another, Martha and Mary host a meal, and Martha serves while Mary sits at Jesus' feet. In a third scene, Jesus joins his disciples for a meal, at which he breaks bread and blesses them one last time or, in John, washes their feet and gives them counsel one last time.

The Gospel reading for this week contains variations on these scenes and themes. It locates the meal in Bethany, in the home of Mary and Martha. It locates the scene in proximity to the Passion narrative, and so we find Jesus interpreting Mary's anointing as a preparation for his burial. Mary is criticized by Judas, and we expect her to be criticized—her sister has criticized her too, in another meal scene. In both stories, Jesus praises Mary as an exemplar of faithfulness.

If we venture beyond the New Testament for further viewing, Martha and Mary appear in another scene, this time in the Apostolic Church Order. This third-century document unfolds as a conversation among a curious cast of apostles. Andrew, Peter, and John are discussing women. Andrew asks for clarification about what women can and can't do. Peter reminds him that they've discussed the widows who should pray and listen for prophetic revelations. Peter speaks more precisely of what he calls the offering of body and blood. John says that when the Teacher requested the bread and cup and blessed them, he did not permit the women to stand together with them.

Martha chimes in. She says that Jesus saw Mary smiling. Mary says she didn't laugh. She was remembering his teaching.

In a dusty corner of New Testament scholarship early in the 20th century, the idea surfaced that the Apostolic Church Order assumes a different arrangement of these scenes and variations than we now know. It reads the meal scene in Mary and Martha's home in continuity with the rest of John's final meal narrative. It knows that meal as Jesus' final supper. Martha and Mary were there.

If you're willing to blow the dust off this idea and rearrange scenes from John 11-13, you'll find that this reading is plausible. There are strange interruptions you didn't notice before, bits of repeated information that you already know. It dawns on you that the stories have already been rearranged.

You know the characters in these stories, and you expect them to play certain roles. You expect Martha to serve and Mary to sit. You expect Judas to betray. You expect Jesus to be generous in his praise of Mary. Jesus has foresight into his coming betrayal and burial. Mary is always found in proximity to Jesus: sitting, listening, anointing, maybe laughing.

Reading the John 12 and 13 meal scenes in continuity is a good and satisfying read. But we've been taught to read them separately. Rearranging biblical stories might

border on blasphemous for some of us. But when we exercise our scriptural imagination, we realize that these stories were already arranged and rearranged, the characters cast and recast as our ancestors told and retold them according to their purposes. One of those purposes may have been to tease Mary and Martha apart from the final meal scene—to remove them from proximity to the men, from what was later called the Eucharist, and from the group known as the apostles.

But what if we weave the stories together and play with these variations on a theme? What if we weave these women into John's story of the final meal? Did Mary sit with Jesus? Did she anoint him there in preparation for his burial? Did she smile as she listened to him one final time?

Mary was not afraid to improvise that night, with her ritual of foot washing combined with burial blessing. And we don't need to be afraid to improvise with these scenes and themes. We can view them with new eyes, hear them with fresh ears, listen for the variations, and be blessed.