

## Look for the Liberator

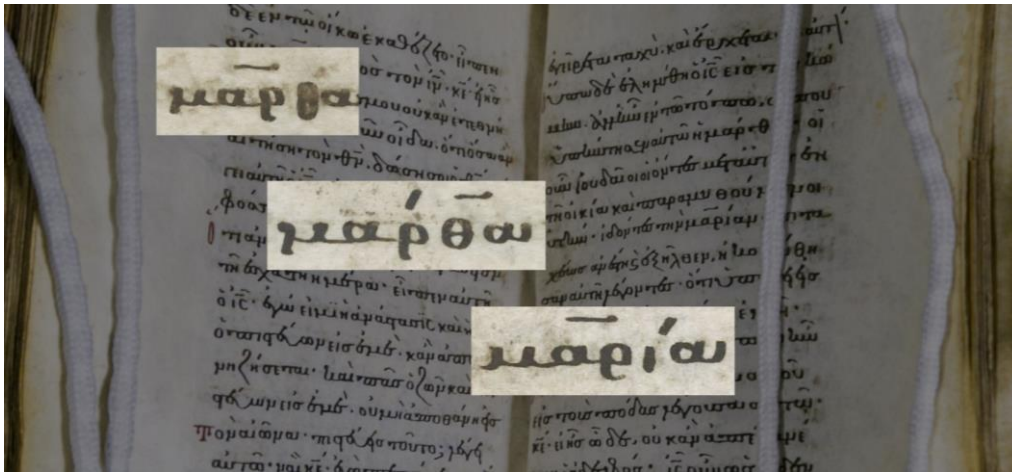
A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, March 26, 2023, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [John 11:1-45](#)

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I got to have a wonderful theological geek-out 10 days ago. That day, I got to attend a webinar starring (is that the right word to use for a webinar?) Elizabeth Schrader.<sup>1</sup> If you been attending worship regularly for the past year, you heard both Pastor Brenda and me talk about Libbie Schrader’s amazing work on the Gospel of John. Her doctoral dissertation, which I think has been submitted now, examines some inconsistencies in the manuscripts of the Gospel that go all the way back to about 200. In particular, she noticed that sometimes words have been crossed out and changed or otherwise edited especially in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel – which is today’s gospel lesson.

Here’s a concrete example. Papyrus 66 – generally thought to be the oldest near-complete manuscript of the Gospel of John and dates from around the year 200 – the word ‘Maria’ (translated ‘Mary’) has sometimes been altered, with the Greek iota symbol – the ‘i’ – scratched out and replaced with a theta – the ‘th’ sound – changing the name from Mary to Martha. In a later verse, a woman’s name was replaced with ‘the sisters.’

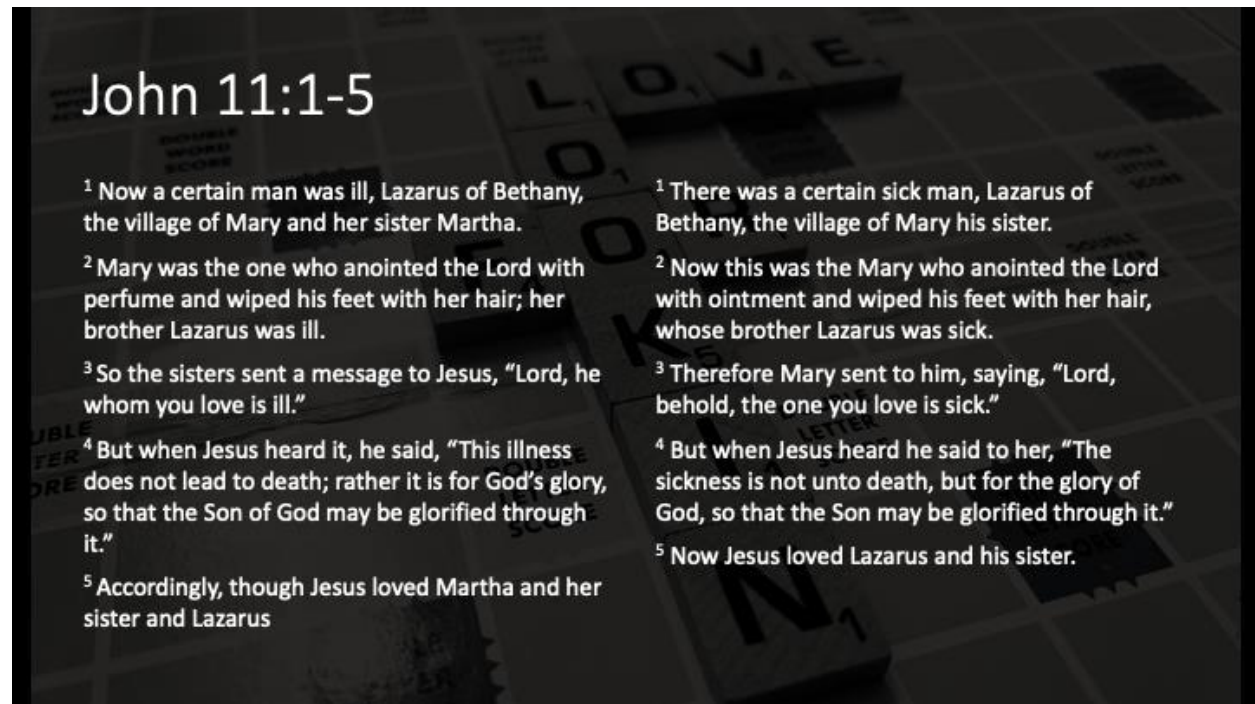


Seeing this a few years ago, Schrader started doing a lot more digging. At this point, she’s scoured hundreds of manuscripts of the Gospel of John and the writings of early church leaders, and she is convinced that Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus we heard about in today’s lesson, is an addition to the Gospel.

As an example, Schrader shared how she reconstructs John 11:1-5 by using three ancient manuscripts: Codex Alexandrinus (5th century Greek, held in the British Library) as it read before it was “corrected” for John 11:1-2; Papyrus 66 (early 3rd century Greek, held in Geneva) as it read before it was “corrected” for John 11:3-4; and Codex Colbertinus (6th century Latin manuscript, held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France) for John 11:5,

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Schrader interview with Diana Butler Bass on 16 March 2023. Recorded and archived at <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/libbie-schrader-preaching-john-11>.

which is uncorrected. Here's the New Revised Standard Version on the left and the Schrader reconstruction on the right.



Take out Martha from the way the story is currently translated, and the story in John 11 more starkly parallels John 20 where John writes about the resurrection of Jesus. In both stories, a stone is rolled away and the one who was buried in the tomb comes back into life. Take out Martha and Mary is the one weeping outside Lazarus' tomb in John 11, just like Mary Magdalene is outside a tomb, crying, in John 20.

Tertullian (considered to be one of the early church fathers who lived about the same time as Papyrus 66 was written) says it's Mary who gave the Christological confession (not Martha) in John 11: "I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." In other words, Tertullian contradicts the two-sister version we have now, which suggests the manuscript(s) of John he read had only one woman there: Mary. (This, Schrader says, is true of the writing of other church fathers, too.)

And if you look at early church artwork, you get the impression that Lazarus had only one sister. For instance, when the story of the resuscitation of Lazarus is depicted on 4th cent sarcophagi, we see Jesus, Lazarus, and one woman (not two). When there is a fourth person there, it's a dude.

All this supports Schrader's contention that in John 11, at least originally, there were only two people in the Bethany household: Lazarus and Mary. Yes, there's a story in Luke's gospel about two sisters Martha and Mary. You might recall that in Luke's story, Martha complains about how her sister Mary won't help her with getting dinner ready. They are a different household, living in a different community (not near Jerusalem).

If you are a theological geek like I am, at this point you may be asking, *why* did this happen? The reason may have been as simple as wanting to harmonize the two gospels, so

some scribe split Mary into two women, Mary and Martha to make John's gospel sound like Luke's. It could also be to reduce the importance of Mary. This might have been an agenda, especially if Mary the brother of Lazarus was understood to be Mary Magdalene, which could very well be John's intent (though I won't take you down that theological rabbit hole – at least not today).

If you're not a theological geek like I am, you may be asking, *so what?*

Information like this can cause some to start questioning their relationship with the Bible. If the translations we have now are based on manuscripts that are riddled with "corrections" (please note the sarcastic air quotes), how are we to trust them? Meanwhile, people who long ago made peace with the Bible containing inconsistencies and who long ago accepted that we don't have originals of any of the books and letters that are considered scripture may be wondering what difference any of this makes to our understanding of today's lesson for us today.

For both of these groups, let me offer this insight, inspired by Libbie Schrader.<sup>2</sup> In John 11:4, Jesus says, "The illness is not unto death, but it is for the glory of God in order to glorify the Son through it." Though Jesus is talking about Lazarus, perhaps we can hear these words as speaking about the text itself. This illness (of the text) is not unto death. At the beginning of his gospel, John wrote, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it." Maybe Mary needed to be diminished in order for the text to be included in the canon. Maybe followers of Jesus weren't ready to accept the way John wrote about Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene (and especially if they are the same person), and so this wounding of the scripture made it easier to accept.

I've done that sort of thing. In fact, I did it today. If you were reading along in a New Revised Standard Version as Riki read the scripture lesson, you noticed that I made some changes. John makes references to "the Jews" several times in this chapter, and I simply changed them. I didn't want to be distracted into defending John from antisemitic interpretations today, so I simply replaced the troublesome language. That may have been unfair to do, but I did it so we could focus on what it important to me today.

If scripture is living (and I believe it is), maybe we can see the wounding of John's gospel and its portrayal of Mary (as well as my redactions) as the gospel lowering itself to where we humans were and are. Maybe, in a way, the scripture is laying its life down for its friends – for you and for me and for our Christian ancestors. It would be a very Johannine thing to do. In John 15:13, Jesus says there's no greater way to love than that. Perhaps the Spirit of Truth could not be received through a strong Mary in the fourth and fifth centuries. And perhaps the Spirit of Truth has problems being heard today because of antisemitism.

We still needed and need the gospel of John. We still needed and need the witness that Jesus is the Word made flesh. If the scripture needed to be wounded for our sake, how Christian is that?

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

And if now we can see what happened, then the scripture can be liberated and resurrected. This illness is not unto death; it is an opportunity to show the glory of God.

I love how Nadia Bolz-Weber explained Christianity in one of her books: “The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It’s about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and [to] pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the ways God reached into a grave I had dug for myself came years ago, and it came through today’s scripture. I had heard Jesus’ call to Lazarus to “come out” of the tomb as a call to me to come out of the closet years before. It’s hard for a gay man hear a call to “come out” any other way – even if the words are on the lips of Glinda the Good Witch and she’s speaking them to munchkins. It wasn’t until I heard the second part of the call that the full liberation happened.

If you read it carefully, you’ll notice that Jesus’ command has two parts. First, he calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Then he calls the people to unbind him. Lazarus had work to do, certainly. The community had work to do, too – the liberative work of unbinding.

That’s one of the reasons being an Open and Affirming church is so important. Embracing that identity as a congregation says to LGBTQ+ people that we have done and continue to do the liberative work of unbinding. For us, here in Fremont, the social costs of doing this liberative work has not been that high – at least not so far and at least not given how much of that liberative work we’ve done. This is not always the case.

Over the past month, our sibling United Church of Christ congregation in Loomis, California, has been facing increasing social costs. One of the ministries of this congregation is called “The Landing Spot.” The Landing Spot is a non-religious support group for LGBTQ+ youth and their parents. They are currently being targeted by far-right groups, some (and perhaps all) of which have ties to the White Christian Nationalist movement. The severity of the threats and harassment are increasing and the church sees them as part of “a coordinated attack on the LGBTQ community, [that of late is] specifically targeting transgender folks.”<sup>4</sup>

Their Church Council said in a public statement, “There is a wave of anti-LGBTQ violence and legislative attacks across the country and we are not immune.”<sup>5</sup> The Council also said, “As an immediate response to an influx of hateful and threatening messages, we will temporarily suspend in-person Loomis Basin UCC events on church property until church leadership can establish a plan to maintain the safety and security of our congregants. We believe this is the best way to protect our pastor and our congregants during this time of elevated attention for our local church.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I’m quite sure this is in her book *Pastrix: the Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), though I’m not able to find it in there today.

<sup>4</sup> Statement from the Church Council on the website of Loomis Basin Congregational United Church of Christ, <https://www.loomisucc.org/> (accessed 25 March 2023).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

I hope you will join me in praying for the Loomis Basin United Church of Christ, today and daily. With the help of a colleague, I have also drafted a simple letter of support to the Loomis Basin UCC that I invite you to sign during coffee hour.

I do not believe that, in the end, hateful, hate-filled people will have the final word. God is about reaching into the graves we dig for ourselves and that other dig for us, so that God can pull us out. And it happens all the time. Just look for the liberator and you'll see God's resurrection power at work. And if you want to be a co-conspirator in God's resurrection, keep doing the liberative work of unbinding.

Amen.