

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
May 2, 2021
Fifth Sunday after Easter

"Mary of Bethany: Proclaimer of the Messiah"

Fourth of six in a series entitled "Happy Easter (Thanks to Women)!"

John 12:1-8



The top three most popular names for baby girls in 2020 were: (3) Aurora, (2) Charlotte, and (1) Amelia/Emelia. I don't know any baby girl named 'Amelia'.¹



¹ Kait Hanson, "These Are the Most Popular Baby Names of 2020:", *Today*, December 11, 2020. Found at: <https://www.today.com/parents/these-are-most-popular-baby-names-2020-t203730>, accessed April 30, 2021.

Yet, it's popular. 'Mary' was the most common name for women in Palestine during the first century.² In fact, scholars estimate that one out of four Jewish women during Jesus' time were named 'Mary'. Can you imagine if today one out of four women were named 'Mary'? We have enough trouble at Centre Church with two Marions and two Rogers!



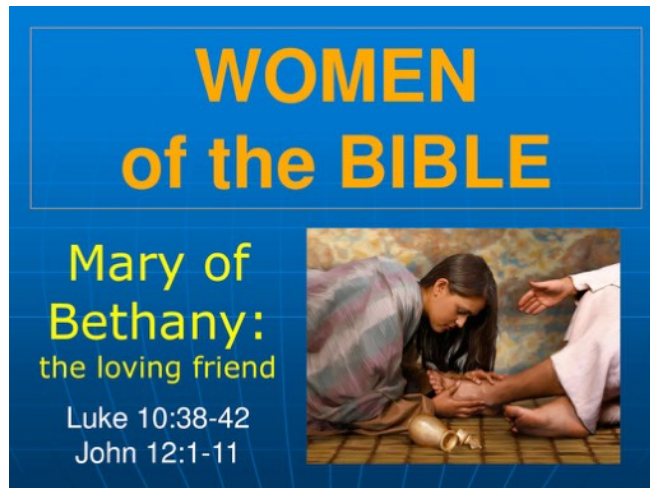
Interestingly, the name Mary is actually derived from 'Miriam', the sister of Moses, about whom we learned earlier in our sermon series.



The Christian scriptures mention the name Mary (in some form) an astounding 54 times, in 49 verses. In 10 cases, two different Marys are mentioned in a single verse! There is Mary (mother of Jesus) and Mary (Magdalene) – they are mentioned the most. Mary (of Bethany), who we will celebrate today, comes

² "New Testament People Named Mary", Wikipedia, found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Testament_people_named_Mary#:~:text=A%20common%20Roman%20Catholic%20tradition,sister%20of%20Martha%20and%20Lazarus., accessed April 30, 2021.

in at third place with 10 mentions. Next is Mary (of a Galilean village), Mary (of Clopas), Mary (Mother of John Mark), and last but not least, Mary of Rome.³



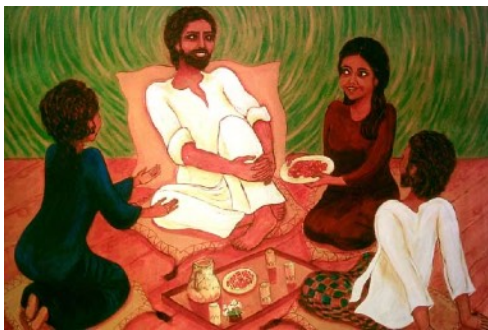
Today, this morning, we focus on Mary of Bethany. Mary of Bethany is key. What strikes me about Mary is that she is a close friend of Jesus. She is not a mother, not a potential companion like Mary Magdalene, and not a disciple (in the formal sense) like many of Jesus' male friends. Instead, she, like her two siblings Lazarus and Martha, strikes me as a very close friend. Yet, the stories imply that Mary seemed to have a more intense friendship with Jesus, more so than with her siblings. There are three incidents in which Mary of Bethany is portrayed very favorably and all three happened during visits Jesus had to her home. The first incident was Jesus' raising of her brother, Lazarus (John 11:1-45). The second was when Jesus praised Mary for listening to him (Luke 10:38-42). And the third

³ "New Testament People Named Mary", *Wikipedia*.

instance was when Mary poured nard on Jesus' feet (John 12:1-8). It is this third instance that I requested Tony to read this morning so that we could focus upon it.



If Jesus had a home during his ministry, it was at Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' home. By that I mean, by all accounts it seemed that Jesus felt most 'at home' with these siblings in their home. I am sure there are places that are not your home where you nonetheless still feel very much at home.



If I pretend Jesus lived in the twenty-first century, Mary's home was a place he could find the bathroom with ease in the pitch dark. Mary's home was a place where Jesus could open-up the refrigerator and grab whatever looked good. Mary's home was a place where Jesus could choose to recline in his most

comfortable spot. Jesus knew where the remote control was. Jesus could nap while everyone else went about their business. Mary's place was a place where late night discussions happened over many glasses of wine. Mary's home was Jesus' home, for all intents and purposes. Jesus and Mary were real and genuine friends. Neither performed for the other. They saw each other at their best and worst. There were no pretenses nor facades presented to one another. I am sure Mary's place was where Jesus could let his hair down, if he ever had it up. And I surmise that Jesus and Mary both loved one another and enjoyed each other's company.

Yet, transcending this friendship was Mary's deep understanding that Jesus was fundamentally different from other people. And her understanding was expressed by a 'typological reenactment' wherein Mary felt compelled to conduct something akin to an anointing ceremony used for Israelite rulers.⁴



Mary is seen at a dinner party given in Jesus' honor to designate him as the messianic king. She declares him, in the fashion of ancient Israel, God's 'Anointed

⁴ "Mary & Martha of Bethany: Miracle-Seeking Sisters", *The Women of the Bible* in *Life Magazine*, editorial director, Kostya Kennedy (New York: Meredith Corporation, 2021), 82.

One'. Linguistically, the title 'Messiah' means 'anointed' in Hebrew and that is translated in Greek as 'Christ'.⁵ Both titles, 'Messiah' and 'Christ' therefore mean 'anointed'.



“In the Hebrew Bible, the high priest and the king are both sometimes called ‘the anointed’ (Leviticus 4:3-5, 4:16; 6:20; Psalm 132:10). Both Saul and David were anointed as king by the prophet Samuel: ‘Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward’ (I Samuel 16:13). Anointing a king was equivalent to crowning him in terms of authority. In fact, a crown was not required (I Samuel 16:13; II Samuel 2:4)”.⁶

So, part of Mary of Bethany’s legacy was that she proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

⁵ “Anoint”, in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31.

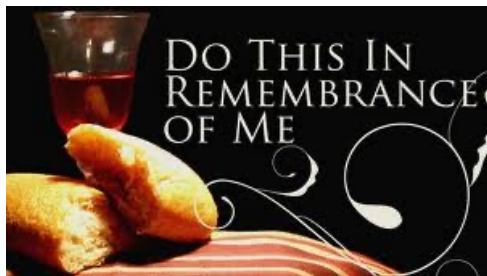
⁶ Anointing, Hebrew Bible, *New World Encyclopedia*, founds at: <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Anointing>, accessed 5/1/2021.



In addition to being a proclaimer of Jesus as the Messiah, Mary of Bethany was a prophet. In our scripture, Jesus interpreted her gesture with the perfume as a preparation of his body for burial. Jesus said, “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial” (John 12:7). We must remember that this event happened just six days before the Passover when Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts of ‘Hosanna!’ as a king would, but on a donkey rather than a warhorse. The Passover was the holiday during which the chain-reaction of events were sparked that led to Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus interpreted the nard on his feet as a prophesy of what was to come. And it is after this event and after his entry into Jerusalem that Jesus predicts his death to the disciples (John 12:20-36). So, like Miriam, the first prophet, Mary of Bethany is also very much a prophet for she foresaw what was to come.



Just a few weeks ago, I rushed to Keene to see Frances Burrows as she laid gravely ill. I did not know her. But I knew of her and her husband's contribution to this town and her steadfast devotion to this church. I asked her daughters if I might return the next day to anoint Fran's body with oil. No, I did not proclaim her to be the Messiah. By anointing Fran, I honored her. I respected her. I declared her loved by God. I proclaimed to all in the room that she was sacred, as was her life, as was her transformation. Fran was sacred. In this way, God recognized Fran as God's chosen one (just like Jesus who opened the door for us all). And thus, we gathered at these tables are all God's chosen ones.



This is in fact what we celebrate this morning at our tables. With the bread and the wine, we engage in a typological reenactment. At the table, Jesus chooses us to be his disciples. At the table, God chooses us to be servants of the church, the Body of Christ. At the table God chooses us to be redeemed. We are chosen today.



Let us give God thanks for Mary of Bethany, for she led the way. Mary of Bethany:
“Proclaimer of the Messiah”. Respect her.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And
the people of God responded, “Amen!”