

Martha, Martha, Martha, Distracted by Many Things!

Christianity did not invent kyriarchy¹ it was born into it. The kyriarchy into which Christianity was born included the idol of the male God. The idol of the male God functions to elevate the male into the realm of the holy. This elevation of men is achieved at the expense of women. As he attempts to proclaim the Gospel, the author of Luke/Acts is presented with a difficult problem. The first witnesses of Christ's resurrection were the very people who by virtue of their gender were deemed, by the kyriarchy to be unreliable witnesses. The idolatry of the male God may indeed be responsible for women's accounts of the resurrection being described as idle tales.

The author of Luke/Acts has been portrayed as both a friend and a foe of women. The author of what makes up the majority of the New Testament has been praised for including so many stories about women and chastised for attempting to subordinate or even preclude the active participation of women in the early church. There are those who point to the stories about women in Luke/Acts as a biblical witness to women's leadership roles and those who point to the same stories and argue that rather than encourage women's leadership, the author was attempting to eliminate women from leadership roles. The Gospel of Luke contains more stories about women than any of the canonical gospels. For this reason alone it is important to examine the way in which the author portrays women. Luke/Acts makes up 25% of the New Testament and Luke/Acts dominates the three-year lectionary. This means that the author of Luke/Acts gets more access to the ears of regular Sunday worshippers than any other proclaimer of the Gospel before or since his time.² For this reason it is important to carefully examine the role of women in Luke/Acts.

¹ Kyriarchy is a term coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza to replace the term patriarchy. Kyriarchy emphasizes "the rule of the emperor/master/lord/father/husband of his subordinates". Fiorenza argues for a "different understanding of patriarchy, one which is not limited to the sex/gender system but which conceptualizes the system in terms of interlocking structures of domination, i.e., elite, male, relations of ruling."

²Even though the amount of unique material about women in Luke-Acts has led to the claim by a few scholars that the author may have indeed been a woman, I have not read any convincing evidence that would lead me to claim anything more than the author may have had access to a woman's source. See Jane Schaberg's article "Luke" in The Women's Bible Commentary. eds.

Before approaching the question of the author's portrayal of women, it is important to establish a point of departure. The traditional approach to the contents of Luke/Acts suggests that both were written by one author, commonly referred to as Luke the physician, a contemporary of the apostle Paul (as referred to in Colossians 4:10-14). Traditionally Luke has been described as a gentile Christian from Antioch. Luke's two extant writings have been viewed as two separate sacred histories. The Gospel of Luke has been described as the history of Jesus Christ and the book of Acts has been called the history of the early church.

Rather than view Luke/Acts as two separate histories, I prefer to follow a narrative approach which views the work of this unknown writer (whom I shall refer to as Luke) as one continuous narrative.

Following the work of Gunter Wasserberg,³ I shall view Luke's writings as a response to his own religious community's concern about the theology of the Apostle Paul. I agree with Wasserberg that Luke/Acts can be viewed as Luke's apology for Paul's mission to the gentiles.

While Luke's primary concern was to encourage his own community to accept Paul's theology and focus upon a universal approach to the proclamation of the Gospel, it is not Luke's only concern. One of the issues that Luke directly addresses is the role of women in the growing Christian communities.

Written towards the end of the first century, nothing conclusive is known about where Luke/Acts was written. However, it can be assumed that Luke/Acts was written within the Roman Empire and addressed to a community that lived under Roman rule.

The Roman Empire was a kyriarchal society. Since the reign of Augustus (27 BCE to 14 CE), various laws were enacted within the Roman Empire to limit the role of women so as to encourage child bearing. Rome required Roman citizens in order to rule their vast Empire. Various eastern

Newsome & Ringe, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

³Class instruction. Luke/Acts a Narrative Reading. Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Fall Term 1997. Gunter Wasserberg, Instructor.

cults like the cult of Dionysus and the cult of Isis provided roles for women that in the Emperor's opinion distracted them from child bearing. We know that:

"in his social reforms Augustus promoted the cults advocating chastity, childbirth, and strong familial bonds. Coupling this with Augustus' effort to legally force widows and divorcees to remarry, and the fine (uxorium) he placed on both males and females for remaining single past acceptable ages, we can see how much Augustus desired to eliminate public and private situations where women were independent of men."⁴

Subsequent emperors determined to encourage child bearing imposed legal fines upon women who failed to produce a minimum of three children who managed to survive to the age of twelve. Widows risked losing a portion of their inheritances if they remained unmarried for more than a year. Christianity became just another cult which the Roman authorities judged to be interfering with women's responsibilities to bear Roman citizens.⁵

Luke's audience would have been all too familiar with Roman attempts to restrict women to roles which served the needs of patriarchy. This alone would have been reason enough for Luke to attempt to narrow the role of women in his own writings. However, Luke had another problem. One which the author clearly identifies in his account of the resurrection in Luke 24.

Christian accounts of the resurrection clearly identified women as the first to arrive at the empty tomb. The Gospel of Mark identifies Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome as the first to discover the empty tomb. The Gospel of Matthew identifies Mary Magdalene, "and the other Mary" as the first witnesses to the resurrection. Luke identifies "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women" as the first witnesses to the resurrection. Luke goes on to identify these women as the first proclaimers of the resurrection. "Returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest"(Luke 24:9). Then Luke clearly identifies the

⁴Ben Witherington III. Women in the Earliest Churches. (Cambridge NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988.) page 20.

⁵For a detailed description of Roman opinions see Margaret Y. MacDonald's Early Christian women and pagan opinion: The power of the hysterical woman. (Cambridge NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

problem of having these women be the first witnesses and the first proclaimers of the resurrection. The women's words "seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them". The defining moment of the Christian story has as its first witnesses women whose tale is judged to be "leros", nonsense, an idle tale.

Not only are the witnesses to the resurrection women, their leader is a particular sort of woman. Mary Magdalene is a woman from whom seven demons have been driven out (Lk.8:2). A woman who is connected to Jesus in a very special way. A woman, who would not measure up to the standards or conventions prescribed for women in Luke's culture.

In the narrative of Luke/Acts, Luke undertakes a narrowing of the role of women in Christianity and attempts to redeem the type of women who carry out leadership roles. Mary Magdalene disappears after Pentecost and those few women who remain are portrayed by Luke as prayerful, quiet, grateful women who are supportive of male leadership and forego any prophetic ministry.⁶ Luke specifically limits the role of apostle to those men who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life death and resurrection.⁷ That he felt the need to do so, may indicate that women were functioning as apostles. A careful examination of the story of Martha and Mary which appears in chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel will indicate the acceptable roles which Luke attempts to prescribe for women.

At various times I have been accused of being a "Martha". Over the years I have come to hate this label which has been used to minimize women's ministry or to suggest that women are neglecting their ministry. I came to believe all of the negative things which the church and our culture have taught about the woman, Martha of Bethany. I did not want to be labelled a "Martha".

⁶A careful examination of the narrative of Luke-Acts will show the gradual disappearance of women whose behaviour, according to the sexual mores of the time, would have been questionable. These questionable women (sinners, women from the city, widows, equal "porne" or prostitutes) are replaced by silent matrons/patrons. For a detailed description of the "types" of women in the Roman Empire of the first century see: Kathleen E Corley's "Were the Women Around Jesus Really Prostitutes? Women in the Context of Greco-Roman Meals" in SBL Seminar Papers 1989. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 487-521.

⁷Compared to Mark 10:28-30, Luke 18:28-30 imposes important restrictions that effectively confines the role of discipleship to men.

I love learning too much to stay in the kitchen. I would much rather be found at the feet of the teacher than be caught fussing. Call me Mary, but please don't call me Martha.

When I was exploring the various women in the Gospels, in an attempt to pick one to write about, I was drawn to Mary of Bethany. The woman who knew where she belonged. The woman who sat at the teacher's feet. The woman who stayed out of the kitchen. I saw Mary as a woman who had made the best choice. Women need to come out of the kitchen and learn. However, when I really got down to writing this paper, I began to realize that I did not know Martha at all. The more that I read, the more I realized that my assumptions about the sisters of Bethany did not flow from the Gospel accounts, but were based largely on our culture's attempts to limit the role of women in the church and in society. I had been guilty of labelling Martha in the same way as others had labelled me. I had accused her of neglecting her ministry and I had minimized her ministry. I had judged Martha on the basis of the account in Luke 10, which describes Martha's complaint to Jesus about her sister Mary's choice. I had missed the account in John chapter 11, of Martha's declaration of faith. How could I have made such a mistake? I decided that I wanted to try to get to know Martha. But in order to get to know her I had to effectively deal with the story in Luke, which seems to paint Martha in a disagreeable light.

I began by looking back into history at the various comments which have been made about Martha, and a pattern emerged which goes a long way to explaining how Martha is often misjudged. Over the centuries Mary and Martha have been used in various ways as models which conformed to the culture's view of the appropriate place for women in the church and in society.

In the third century of the Common Era, Origen, applied an allegorical or mystical interpretation to the text found in Luke 10:38-42. Origen taught that, we are not at home in this world, we have a destiny which cannot be fully achieved here. Origen believed that we are on a journey and our life here in this world is designed so that we can pass from virtue to virtue on our way to some higher level. Origen interpreted the Luke 10:38-42 text as an allegory of the distinction between the active and the contemplative life. Martha, troubled about providing hospitality,

represents the way of action; while Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus and waiting upon his heavenly word, is the epitome of contemplation. Origen sees the active life as subordinate to the contemplative life. He does not treat them as exclusive options, but two stages on the single Christian path. However, it is clear that Origen sees contemplation as a higher virtue.⁸

In the fifth century, John Chrysostom rejected the allegorical interpretation of this text. Chrysostom interpreted Jesus' remarks to Martha not as a reproof of work or an approval of leisure. For Chrysostom, everything hinges on the significance of the moment. Christ does not praise Mary for her "contemplative life", but for her knowledge of "the time". Accordingly, Jesus does not reproach Martha for her active hospitality; rather it is her concern for peripheral matters that is out of whack. When Jesus comes to your house declaring the kingdom is coming, then you should drop everything and pay attention.⁹

Augustine (354-430), praised both Mary and Martha and argued that they complemented one another. Without Martha's busy activity Mary could not enjoy sitting at Jesus' feet. If anything Augustine praises Martha more because she gets things done. Augustine himself left his contemplative retreat from the world in favour of ministering in the world.¹⁰

In the eleventh century, the Cistercians saw the ideal life as one of contemplative prayer which then spanned the active life. Bernard of Clairvaux preached on this text and suggested that the village of Bethany represented the world and that the sisters' house represented the Virgin Mary's womb. Clairvaux insisted that both sisters dwell in the Blessed Virgin. While Martha ministers to the earthly Jesus, Mary had the privilege of receiving the heavenly Christ. Although Clairvaux viewed the contemplative life of Mary as the "best part", he recognizes that Martha's business is also a necessary part of life.¹¹

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), when designing a "Rule for Hermitages", used the story of

⁸Blake R. Heffner. "Meister Eckhart and a Millennium with Mary and Martha" in Lutheran Quarterly, Vol.5, Sum. 1991, 172-3.

⁹Ibid. 173.

¹⁰Ibid. 173-4.

¹¹Ibid. 175.

Martha and Mary as his blueprint.

"Every hermitage should be limited to three or four brothers. Two of them are to serve as mothers and follow the life of Martha, while two sons should follow the life of Mary. The mothers are to provide the climate wherein contemplation may flourish, protecting their sons from everyone, so that no one can talk with them. The sons, in turn, should sometimes assume the role of the mothers as from time to time it may seem good to them to exchange roles."¹²

Francis' views point to a balance between the contemplative and active life. This view was shared by the Beguines, a women's religious order founded in the Netherlands in the 12th century. It is interesting to note that both the Franciscan and Beguines facilitated women in ministry, who shared in both the contemplative and active lifestyles.

Over the years the traditional Roman Catholic view has presented Mary's contemplative life turned to action after the resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The church offered women the choice between the two lifestyles exemplified by Mary and Martha. From the perspective of the church, there were those women who served God and those women who served men. Accordingly, active women were those who do the house work, rear the children or take care of the sick and concern themselves with mundane business, contemplative women are seen as those who do not allow worldly things to interfere with their quiet study, prayer, contemplation, and service to the Lord. According to this traditional view, women are either laywomen or nuns, secular or religious, serving their husbands or serving the Lord, nuns or wives.

The Reformation did not do very much for the interpretation of our text. Martin Luther wrote:

"Martha, your work must be punished and counted as nought...I will have no work but the work of Mary; that is the faith that you have in the Word."¹³

¹²As quoted in Heffner page 176.

¹³As quoted in: The Women Around Jesus by Elisabeth Moltman-Wendel. (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 17.

John Calvin's contribution consists of the "Three Faults of Martha":

"Martha carried her activity beyond proper bounds; for Christ would rather have chosen to be entertained in a frugal manner, and at moderate expense, than that the holy woman should have submitted to so much toil.

Martha by distracting her attention, and undertaking more labour than was necessary, deprived herself of the advantage of Christ's visit.

Martha was so delighted with her own bustling operations, as to despise her sister's pious eagerness to receive instruction. This example warns us that, in doing what is right we must take care not to think more highly of ourselves than of others.

Martha yet lacks that composed calmness of soul which can alone make her receptive for intimate and abiding communion with Jesus"

Protestants may have done away with the role of nuns but in effect they have replaced them with pastors' wives. Protestants have set women up by suggesting that they should embody both Mary and Martha's qualities. Women are asked to be skilled domestics, but they should not over do, they should take some time to listen, to pray and to learn. Women are encouraged to be hostesses, but preferably religious hostesses.

When I turned to the various modern commentaries I found that this notion of Mary choosing the "better part" was emphasized. Martha is treated all too negatively. Her worldly concerns got in the way of what she should have been doing; listening at Jesus' feet. If I were to preach a sermon based on the traditional commentaries I would undoubtedly end up encouraging women to come out of the kitchen and learn. While it is important to liberate women from their traditional domestic roles, this approach only serves to minimize or negate the service of many women. Martha is used not to uphold women but to attack them. Those women who minister in ways which are seen as domestic, are then valued less than those who pursue a more "heady" approach to ministry.

With the advent of the women's liberation movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women have used this text in their efforts to empower women. Liberationists often point

to the fact that Jesus held these two women in high esteem and point to the example of Mary, who sat at Jesus feet to suggest that Jesus endorsed treating women as equals.

Rachael Conrad Wahlberg, a feminist theologian points to Martha as the traditional role women have played and suggests that Jesus is saying that Mary represents an option for women; an option that includes the intellectual life. Wahlberg's interpretation of the text calls for a holistic approach to how we see women. She points out that Jesus, Mary and Martha treated each other as persons rather than assigning each other to limited functions and stereotypes.¹⁴ Even though this approach encourages us to view the roles of Martha and Mary as valuable, it is clear which woman Wahlberg sees as the most valuable to the liberation movement. It is largely this view which made me reject the image of myself as a "Martha". As a woman struggling to find a place for my ministry, I did not want to be thought of as a "Martha". I did not want anyone to get the impression that my ministry was domestic.

I have discovered that this view of Martha as the domestic, is hopelessly inadequate. As long as we limit our view of Martha to the Lukan text, we will continue to present an inadequate view of who Martha was and she will fail as a role-model for women and men alike.

As a feminist I have often looked to the Gospel of Luke to provide images of women, which might be used to empower women in general. Feminists, rejoicing at finding stories about women, zero in on the Gospel of Luke, in their attempts to include images of women in our faith story. Luke's story of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha's home is no exception. We see Jesus interacting with women and we attempt to extrapolate the power of the interaction from the story into our vision of ministry. We point to Mary and suggest that women belong in the world of academics. But is that the story which Luke is actually telling?

In the Women's Bible Commentary, Jane Schaberg suggests that the Gospel of Luke is:

"an extremely dangerous text . Because it contains a great deal of material about

¹⁴Rachael Conrad Wahlberg. Jesus According To A Woman. (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 73-84.

women that is found nowhere else in the Gospels, many readers insist that the author is enhancing or promoting the status of women. Luke is said to be a special 'friend' of women, portraying them in an 'extremely progressive' and 'almost modern' fashion, giving them 'a new identity and a new social status'.¹⁵

Schaberg suggests that rather than enhancing or promoting the status of women, Luke's Gospel "portrays them as models of subordinate service, excluded from the power centre of the movement and from significant responsibilities".¹⁶

If I look at this story without trying to see what I want to see, ie: an enhanced view of women; I see a much different story. I see a story which pits sister against sister. A story which suggests that the "better part" for women is learning in quiet contemplation. In Luke's story Mary may sit in an exalted position at the Teacher's feet, but she is silent. Mary has no voice. The voices we hear in Luke's story are Martha's complaining voice and Jesus' admonishing a woman. Mary remains silent. Schaberg suggests that:

"One of the strategies of this Gospel is to provide female readers with female characters as role models: prayerful, quiet, grateful women, supportive of male leadership, forgoing the prophetic ministry".¹⁷

It is now no longer possible for me to accept Mary as a role model. This put me in an even more difficult position than before. Not only do I reject the "domestic" model which has been extrapolated from the figure of Martha, but I no longer see Mary as an adequate role model. To view Mary as a model, only perpetuates the problem for women seeking a voice in the church. Mary as role model, can and has been used to suggest that women are entitled to quietly study, but not to act. Clearly, I must look for a new method of interpretation if I am going to reconcile this text to my reality.

The most helpful and illuminating interpretation of this text which I have found is developed

¹⁵Jane Schaberg. "Luke" in The Women's Bible Commentary. ed. Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 275.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. In But She Said, Fiorenza applies her own feminist hermeneutic to Luke's account of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha. Fiorenza applies her "four reading strategies" to Luke 10: 38-42 and her results have helped me to better understand and appreciate Martha.

Fiorenza's "four reading strategies" include a hermeneutics of suspicion, of remembrance, of evaluation and proclamation, and of imagination. Fiorenza describes a hermeneutics of suspicion as a reading which seeks to explore the liberating or oppressive values and visions inscribed in the text by identifying the androcentric-kyriarchal character and dynamics of the text and its interpretations. Fiorenza's hermeneutics of remembrance seeks to move against the grain of the androcentric text to the life and struggles of women in the early churches. It seeks to reconstruct early Christian history as the history of men and women. Her hermeneutics of evaluation and proclamation explores the text's implications for contemporary feminist readings, for preaching, counselling, and individual Bible study. This requires a critical assessment of the text and a critical assessment of the reading situation or context. A hermeneutics of imagination is described by Fiorenza as an attempt to articulate alternative liberating interpretations that do not build on the androcentric dualisms and kyriarchal functions of the text. It allows women to enter the biblical text with the help of historical imagination, narrative amplifications, artistic recreations and liturgical celebrations.¹⁸

In applying her hermeneutics of suspicion to our text, Fiorenza reminds us that we cannot assume that the Martha and Mary story is a liberating text for women just because its central characters are women. Fiorenza asks us to look at how and why the author of the text constructs the story of these two women as he does.

Fiorenza suggests that most interpretations of this text, including feminist ones, enforce the dualistic antagonism either between the two women or between the timeless principles or lifestyles

¹⁸ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. But She Said, Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 57-76.

which they symbolize. She insists that this dualism is not just a projection of traditional contemporary interpretations but is generated by the text itself.¹⁹

Despite feminist interpretations to the contrary, Fiorenza insists that the text clearly shows Jesus reproaching Martha. Martha approaches Jesus as though he has the authority to sort out the situation. Jesus sides not with Martha, but with Mary. Mary the silent woman receives Jesus approval, while Martha the one who argues on her own behalf is silenced. According to Fiorenza, those feminists who praise Mary's extraordinary role as a disciple generally overlook the fact that Mary's discipleship only includes listening but not proclamation. For Fiorenza the text does not hold up women but uses women, pitting them against one another in order to make a point. She suggests that it is a point that Luke wanted to make and not a point that Jesus wanted to make.

Using her hermeneutics of remembrance, Fiorenza attempts to go beyond the text to examine the role of women in the early church. She uses the linguistic clues of the text to view this text not as a story in the life of Jesus but as a text addressed to a particular problem that the author of Luke/Acts sees in the early church. The author is concerned with the role of women in the early church and uses this story to limit that role.

Fiorenza develops her case arguing from the Greek. Martha is preoccupied with too much serving. The Greek word translated as serving is: *diakonein*. According to Fiorenza, in the Hellenized culture of the author of Luke, *diakonein* had already become a technical term for ecclesial leadership. In this text *diakonein or diakonia* does not refer to domestic service but to eucharistic table service and the proclamation of the Word in the house church's of the first and second centuries.²⁰ Luke stresses that the *diakonia* of Martha is not the "best part" and should be subordinated to listening to the Word. However, the *diakonia* of the Word chosen by Mary does not include proclamation. Fiorenza suggests that Luke is attempting to limit the role of women in the early church. He constructs his text in a way which pits the sisters against each other and appeals

¹⁹Ibid. 60.

²⁰Ibid. 61-2.

to a Word of the Lord in order to restrict women's ministry and authority. Luke seeks to silence women leaders of the house-churches who, like Martha might have protested, and he extols Mary's silent and subordinate behaviour.

I must admit that after reading Fiorenza's interpretation of remembrance I went rushing back to the text to find the kitchen. For all these years I had assumed that Martha was busy preparing a meal for Jesus and his followers and was simply too busy to sit down and enjoy it. Because I have all too often found myself in the position of not being able to enjoy my guests, I too felt chastised by Jesus. The traditional interpretations of this text have succeeded in making me and many other women like me feel bad about my own actions. But there is no kitchen in the text, and there is no admonition against domestic service. However, there may be an attempt by the author to restrict the role of women in the church. Martha may have been engaged in a leadership role in the church, she may have been engaged in serving the eucharist. Now I am beginning to warm up to this woman.

In applying her hermeneutics of evaluation and proclamation to this text, Fiorenza insists that a feminist interpretation of this text which defends the story as positive for women only perpetuates the androcentric dualism and kyriarchal prejudices which are inherent in the original text. She argues that we must not point to this text as having divine authority and proclaim it as the Word of God. Instead it must be proclaimed as the word of Luke! This does not mean that we cannot use this text in preaching and teaching. If we portray these women as independent apostolic leaders in the early church then we can point to the text as an instrument of their oppression. The text can be used to show how the church became more and more kyriarchal.

Fiorenza suggests that women must adopt a hermeneutics of imagination and seek ways to re-tell this story. She cautions against retelling the story in ways which buy into our culture's traditional assessment of women's roles. We should not portray Martha as a house-wife in the kitchen. Sermons such as Juanne N, Clarke's "Martha of Bethany",²¹ buy into our culture's view of

²¹Juanne N. Clarke. "Martha of Bethany" in The Forgotten Followers. Carol J. Schlueter

Martha as house-wife and fail to portray Martha as an Apostle. We need to tell the story in ways which reflect the struggle of women in Luke's time.

I must admit that there are some things about Fiorenza's interpretation which make me nervous. I am indeed reluctant to give up my own appreciation of the fact that Luke at least includes stories about women. But I am less willing to accept Luke's stories at face value. I am also excited about the possibilities that this interpretation provides. I am attracted to the image of Martha as a leader in the Church. But I am still left with Luke's portrayal of Jesus' admonishing of Martha and his praise of Mary.

I do not believe that we can get an accurate picture of the role of Martha in the Life of Jesus or in the early church from the text of Luke 10. In order to broaden our picture of Martha we have to turn to the fourth Gospel. In the eleventh chapter of John we find the Martha which has been effectively silenced by the church; Martha the Apostle.

Buried in the story of the raising of Lazarus, we find an encounter between Martha and Jesus which is all too often over-looked:

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." John 11:20-28

Jesus tells Martha, a woman, that he is "the resurrection and the life". Jesus entrusts Martha with this news. Martha responds, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world". Martha knows precisely who Jesus is. Martha's statement of faith is similar to the Apostle Peter's statement of faith. In Matthew 16:15-19, Simon Peter declares to Jesus "you are the

Messiah, the Son of the living God." In response to Peter's declaration of faith Jesus declares:

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

We know that Peter went on to deny Jesus, not once but three times. There is no record of Martha having denied Jesus. Martha may very well have been one of the "many women...looking on from a distance" while Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:40 par, Matthew 27:55; Luke 23:27). Martha may have been with the "other women" who went to the tomb and finding it empty brought back the "idle tale" to the apostles (Luke 24: 8-11). Peter's role in the early church is well known. Little is known of Martha's role in the early church.

In Matthew's account of Peter's statement of faith, Peter's statement comes after Jesus has miraculously fed the five-thousand. Peter confesses after Jesus performs a miracle. But Martha's confession of faith comes before Jesus miraculously raises Lazarus from the dead.

In In Memory of Her, Fiorenza insists that the writer of the Gospel of John has placed the dialogue and confession of Martha, rather than the raising of Lazarus at the centre of Chapter 11. Fiorenza suggests that Martha's confession parallels that of Peter in John 6,

"but is a christological confession in the fuller Johannine messianic sense: Jesus is the revealer who has come down from heaven. As such it has the full sense of the Petrine confession at Caesarea Philippi in the synoptics, especially in Matthew 16:15-19. Thus Martha represents the full apostolic faith of the Johannine community, just as Peter did for the Matthean community."²²

In all my years in the church I have never heard a sermon that dealt with Martha's statement of faith. Recently I decided to preach about Martha. In order to do so I had to expand the

²²Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 329.

Lectionary pericope so as to include Martha's faith statement in the story of the raising of Lazarus. The Women's Bible Commentary insists that although the raising of Lazarus is the climax of this story, it is not the centre. "Jesus' raising of Lazarus actually occupies a very small part of this story. Of the forty-four verses that constitute this story, only seven of them take place at Lazarus' tomb."²³ The majority story consists of Jesus' conversations with Mary and Martha. Even so the Revised Common Lectionary excludes Martha's conversation with Jesus from the pericope, John 11:32-44, and focuses upon Jesus and Lazarus.

In John 11:5, the Gospel writer tells us that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus". Martha had a very special relationship with Jesus. She was a disciple of Jesus. John casts Martha, the beloved disciple of Jesus, as the spokeswoman for the Messianic faith of his community.²⁴ Martha followed Jesus and articulated her faith in a way which parallels Peter's confession. She was a witness to Jesus' raising of the dead, she may have been present at the crucifixion and the resurrection. Why then do we not herald Martha as an Apostle? Surely Martha stands along-side Peter in her own right.

Based upon the Gospel accounts of Martha's relationship, there can be no doubt that Martha would have played an important role in the early church. The traditional Christian image of Martha as the house-wife who makes the wrong choice is inconsistent with the broader picture of Martha that we get in John's Gospel. Luke's story encourages women to model themselves after Mary. For centuries it has succeeded in making women uncomfortable with Martha. John's story helps us to see Martha as a strong, active and out-spoken woman whom Jesus loved.

Luke's Martha has been in the fore-front for far too long. It is time to reclaim Martha from the clutches of traditional interpretations and restore her to her rightful place as an Apostle of Christ. To do so we must proclaim the Gospel against Luke's backdrop which struggles to push women into the margins of the Christian community.

²³Gail R. O'Day. "John" in The Women's Bible Commentary. 297.

²⁴Fiorenza. But She Said. 67.

