

Who Do You Say That I Am?

In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We've been with Jesus in Matthew's gospel for quite a while now. We've listened to his Sermon on the Mount in which he outlines this challenging seemingly upside/down worldview of this Kingdom he talks about: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you... We've seen him heal all sorts of sick people, calm a storm, talk in confusing parables about things like mustard seeds, yeast, a treasure hidden in a field. We've seen him feed thousands of hungry people with just a few fish and pieces of bread. Are we beginning to understand this man? Who is he really? And now imagine this scene from today's gospel: He asks "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Some answer John the Baptist, others Elijah, or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. But then Jesus looks at you and says: "But who do you say that I am?" Note he is not asking about your belief system or some religious dogma. He is asking you what is your experience of him? Peter seems to get it, although as we will see not completely, but at least a glimpse. He responds: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." That statement is called the Christological Confession, also known as Peter's Confession. Many theologians and scholars say that it is one of the most important statements in all of scripture.

Diana Butler Bass is one of the world's best known commentators on Christianity. She is a historian of Christianity, a highly sought-after speaker, author of numerous books, and has a special interest in Mary Magdalene, and in what Bass sees as the important even foundational role of women in the life and ministry of Jesus—a role that she says has been obscured, ignored, and hidden from us for almost 2000 years. She too has said that this confession, the Christological confession, is one of the most important statements in the entirety of the New Testament. As you will see she also says that it was not only Peter

who said it. Bass gave the closing sermon at the Wild Goose Festival in July of 2022, just a few days before the Feast Day of Mary Magdalene. The sermon title was “Mary the Tower, What would Christianity be like if Mary Magdalene hadn’t been hidden from view?” The sermon “went viral.” It has been shared more than 200,000 times by listeners around the globe. I want to tell you the story that Bass told about Mary Magdalene in that sermon.

Elizabeth Schrader Polczer, Libbie for short, is a good friend of Diana Bass. She made a fascinating discovery while working on her master’s degree in New Testament studies at General Theological Seminary in New York. She studied the Papyrus 66 manuscript, dating to around 200 CE, the oldest and most complete text we have of the Gospel of John. It is in chapter 11 of John’s gospel that we find the other Christological Confession, spoken not by Peter but by the sister of Lazarus, who our Bibles now call Martha, when she says “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” What Libbie the seminarian discovered, to her shock, was that the original text of John in Papyrus 66 makes no mention of a Martha, but only of a Mary. The sentence is confusing, but there is no Martha. Libbie went through all of chapters 11 and 12 in John and discovered that at every place we read Martha in English, it originally said “Mary.” In addition, every singular word “sister” had been changed to the plural “sisters.” Someone—some editor or scribe—appears to have altered the oldest text of the Gospel of John and changed it so that what originally said only Mary became Mary and Martha. In her in depth analysis, Libbie had shown that someone had fiddled around with—had altered—the original text in the Papyrus 66 manuscript. The thesis that Libbie wrote about this was picked up and published in the Harvard Theological Review, which was widely read, including by members of the Translation Committee of the Greek New Testament, a group of men in Germany. They are the guardians of the New Testament. Their job is to insure that all of our Bible translations are as close to the original manuscripts as they can be. They invited Libbie to come to Germany

to present her research, and after several days, apparently impressed by her findings, ended up saying, “Well, we might need to change something here.” What?! Change something that important in the New Testament? The debate within the highest circles of New Testament studies became what to do about this new finding. Would they add a long footnote in the Bible about this discovery? Would they actually change scripture and remove Martha from John’s Gospel? That would be one of the most radical things ever done in New Testament criticism. I will add here that as of now no such changes have been made. Her hypothesis has not become the consensus view of New Testament textual criticism. But the debate continues. Now, for those of you who love Martha, the sister of Mary in another story not in John but in Luke’s gospel—you will remember Martha the busy doer and Mary the contemplative listener in that story—do not fear. That Martha and Mary will stay. They are from a different family from that of Lazarus in John.

So as a review, back to Libbie’s and Bass’ opinion about what Libbie discovered: in the original text there was only one sister of Lazarus and it was Mary. There was no Martha. Someone had altered the text and split the character Mary into two—a Mary and a Martha. And further, Bass and others, based upon their textual criticism, have concluded that this Mary is none other than Mary Magdalene, the same Mary who near the end of John’s gospel is the first to see the resurrected Jesus outside the tomb early on that first day of the week, that first Easter. If all of this is true, as Bass and others feel certain it is, then it was Mary Magdalene who had offered the Christological Confession to Jesus back in Bethany that day, the first person in John’s gospel to recognize and understand Jesus for who he really is.

If this is true, we have to ask why would someone intentionally alter the text of scripture that way? Why would someone split Mary into two women, a Mary and a Martha? Of course we don’t know for sure. Maybe there was some explainable benign motive. Or maybe there was something else. Remember that

there are two Christological Confessions in the gospels. In all three synoptic gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—it is Peter who makes this confession, and Jesus tells him “You are Peter, upon this rock I will build my church.” The other confession is in John, spoken by this minor character Martha about whom we hear nothing again. But if that was really Mary—Mary Magdalene no less—then the Gospel of John gives what is considered by many to be the most important statement in the entirety of the New Testament, not to a man, but to a woman, and to a really important woman who will show up later as the first witness to the resurrection. And one other thing: the town, the place Magdala, supposedly where Mary was from, was not known as Magdala in the first century. The word *Magdala* in Aramaic means *tower*. When we call her Mary Magdalene, it is not Mary from Magdala. It is a title, meaning Mary the Tower!

So what is going on here? Two confessions: one by Peter the Rock and the other by Mary the Tower. Could it be that there was an argument in the early church about who Jesus chose to lead his church? Was it both Peter and Mary? Could it be that some editor chose to make it Peter and bury the second confession with an obscure woman named Martha? Was it really Mary the Tower, the tower of faith, the faith of that woman who would become the first person to announce the resurrection to the disciples? We don’t know for sure. But if so this Mary and her role in Jesus’ life has been obscured from us, hidden, throughout all these centuries. And here is the question Diana Butler Bass poses: What if it was Mary who pronounced that confession? What kind of Christianity would we have if the faith hadn’t only been based upon, “Peter, you are the Rock and upon this Rock I will build my church”? What if the early church had recognized Mary Magdalene as one of its major leaders? Think of the implications, things like apostolic succession going all the way back to Peter, considered by the Roman Catholic Church to be the first pope. But what if we’d always known, “Mary you are the Tower, and by this Tower we shall all stand.” Imagine, Bass says, imagine the possibility that is opening before us,

never visible since that text she says was first changed nearly two thousand years ago. What does that church look like? What does a Christianity of Mary the Tower look like? What if the patriarchy of our church had never become so dominant? And what in the world might that towering faith have to say to this moment of crisis in which we live? Bass goes on: “I don’t know the answers to these questions. But what I do know is that all of this matters.” But just IMAGINE! When asked how she hopes Libbie Polczer’s discovery might shape Christianity in the years to come, Bass responded: “I am committed to the idea that the Christian future is both a future that is more colorful—it is going to include people of every type from every corner of the globe—and also (more) female. If Christianity survives as a global religion, it’s going to have to be a rainbow and it’s going to have to be male and female. That’s going to bring up a lot of really interesting questions that our trans friends are actually bringing up about the dualism of gender. And boy, I can’t wait. It’s going to be an amazing argument going forward, and I think that we’re in for some exciting moments of change.”

Having written this, I’ve wondered why I decided to make it my sermon today. I certainly don’t want any of you to think that you cannot trust scripture. That’s not it. The Bible is full of truths. And I realize that maybe I’ve gotten into some weeds with this story, but once I heard it and read it I knew I had to share it with you all. I also think that it provides us with another take-home message. God the creator, creation itself, and all the tradition and literature including scripture that we have to help us explore this mystery—the mystery of God, of the Christ—is like creation itself an ever-expanding, ever-changing reality. It is a process which is still evolving. Our faith is a transformative faith, meaning we too are changed as we travel this path of life. We are seeking Truth, which is often hard to find. And yet, we must persevere. This story of Diana Butler Bass and of the work that her friend Libbie Polczer did in her examination of the New Testament is an example of this perseverance in finding truth. We must

remember that our scriptures were written by men, and that our church tradition was established by men. They are no more than man's best effort to explain God and humanity's relationship to God and to all of creation. They are not infallible. I think we are called to keep searching for Truth, even and perhaps especially when that search collides with, and what it discovers contradicts, what we have been told by our tradition—our dogma—to be otherwise. And it is exciting! Who knows what we will find in our search for truth? And as Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", he was not then and is not now asking about religious beliefs or creeds. He is asking about our experience of the Christ in our own lives. Look at your life. Listen to it. I believe that our Episcopal tradition helps here. It emphasizes fixed prayer, that being our beautiful liturgy, and free thought—we don't have to leave our intellect at the door when we enter church.

The 16th century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker coined the concept of the stable three-legged stool as the three core sources of authority and theology for the Anglican and later our Episcopal Church. The three legs are scripture, tradition, and reason—reason based upon our experience in life. I believe personally that of those three legs, reason is the most important. It is what will determine our own Christological confession, and what will ultimately guide our actions into the world around us. It will reshape and transform us, transforming us into becoming the love of Christ into the world.