

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

*Women Who Followed Jesus*

**Luke 8:1-3**

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We’ve spent fourteen weeks learning from Jesus, the Twelve, and Paul about being disciples. I trust that men and women can learn a lot about discipleship from those men. But Jesus had many other disciples and a good number of those were women. I have a hunch it’s helpful for women to see female models of discipleship. And I expect men will find something helpful here as well.

This little section is unique to Luke. It gives a summary of Jesus’ ministry and makes a transition between two larger sections of the Gospel. Notice the themes: Jesus’ traveling ministry, proclamation, bringing good news, the kingdom of God, and Jesus’ ministry of healing and release. In chapter 6, the Twelve were selected, but nothing more has been said about them. Now we see that they are *with Jesus*, which is one of the main characteristics of disciples. But notice who else is with Jesus: *some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases*. Luke names three of these women and says that there were many others. The names of some of the others are likely mentioned in the crucifixion and resurrection scenes.

These women gave from their own possessions to help support Jesus’ ministry. Using possessions in the right way is another theme in Luke’s Gospel.

For a Jewish rabbi to have female disciples/students was unusual. And for women to travel with Jesus and the male disciples was probably scandalous. A lot of people would have questioned their morality. Allowing women to be with him, follow him and learn from him was another way Jesus challenged conventional thinking and demonstrated that God’s reign is open to everybody. These women who had been ill or demonized would have been excluded in various ways from society. Now, as healed people, they are joining the new community being formed around Jesus (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* NICNT).

Luke mentions these women here to show that the women who witnessed the crucifixion (23:49) and the empty tomb (24:10, 22, 24) had been with Jesus from the time of his ministry in Galilee, which basically meets the qualifications for being apostles (Acts 1:21-22). It also shows that women may have and will have influential roles in the church, as Luke demonstrates at several places in Acts. This passage also shows that financial generosity is a mark of discipleship and is needed for the ministry to continue (Craig Evans, *Luke* NIBC).

So, who are these women and what can they teach us about being disciples of Jesus? Luke gives the names of three of them here. Let's take them in reverse order. Then we'll go to some other places in the Gospel to see some other female followers of Jesus.

This is the only mention of *Susanna*, so we only know that she had been healed by Jesus and was a disciple who helped provide for the ministry.

*Joanna* is mentioned here and at Jesus' empty tomb. She's identified as the wife of Chuza, who was Herod's steward. That's Herod Antipas, who imprisoned and executed John the Baptist and who would later have an audience with Jesus before sending him back to Pontius Pilate. Chuza had a position of responsibility in the royal court and was probably well-off financially. We're left to wonder how his wife, Joanna, met Jesus and what Jesus healed her of. It seems likely that she used some of her family's wealth to help support Jesus and the others. Not all of Jesus' followers came from humble backgrounds and means. God has a place for all kinds of people in this new community of the kingdom that centers around Jesus.

*Mary Magdalene* is the most famous of the women named here. She's mentioned in all the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Still, we know hardly anything about her. Luke simply points out how severely she was demonized and how Jesus delivered her. He drove seven demons out of her. We don't know how she came to be possessed or what her life was like before Jesus healed her. Though some have identified her as the sinful woman in 7:36-50, there's really no reason for that. That woman, like many other Bible characters, remains anonymous. There's also

some confusion because the Gospels include several other women named Mary (see handout, "Women Who Are Named in the Gospels").

Mary Magdalene is most prominent in John's account of the empty tomb (20:10-18). After discovering that Jesus' tomb was open and empty, Mary ran to tell the other disciples. Peter and John ran out to the tomb, then they went home. But Mary Magdalene stayed at the tomb, weeping, thinking that someone had stolen Jesus' body. Maybe she was feeling hopeless and wondering if the darkness Jesus had driven out of her would come back to reclaim her. Then she sees angels in the tomb, who ask why she's weeping. She says, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him." Then Mary notices a man standing behind her. He asks, "Why are you crying? Who is it you're looking for?" She thinks he's the gardener, so she asks where Jesus' body is. Then he says her name, "Mary," and she realizes that he is Jesus. And Mary exclaims, "Teacher!" The Good Shepherd called her by name and she knew his voice.

Mary is a disciple and a model of discipleship—she is healed and delivered by Jesus, she is with Jesus in his mission, she uses her resources for kingdom purposes, and she hears the Lord's voice, knows him and follows him. Part of the process of discipleship is learning to hear and recognize the voice of Jesus. And, Mary Magdalene is a model of discipleship as she runs to tell others that Jesus is alive. She was the first witness of the empty tomb and the risen Lord. She was a messenger, an apostle, to the other apostles.

In 10:38-42, Luke tells about two other women who were disciples of Jesus. They are the sisters, Martha and Mary. We learn in John's Gospel that they had a brother named Lazarus. This family lived in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. Their home was a place of welcome and hospitality for Jesus and the other disciples.

Martha, the practical one, the hostess, welcomes Jesus into the home. Her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to what he is saying. Rabbis didn't typically allow women to "sit at their feet," that is, to be disciples. But Jesus did. Martha is distracted by many tasks, trying to show hospitality to the group of disciples and get a meal prepared. She comes to Jesus and

says, "Lord, don't you care that my sister's left me to do all the work? Tell her to help me."

Jesus tells Martha not to fuss so much, not to go to so much trouble for his meal, not to be anxious and distracted. "Just a simple meal is fine for me—then you could concentrate on the one thing you need: to be with me and hear my word."

One writer describes Jesus' response to Martha and Mary:

Jesus is not chiding her for cooking or being hospitable or because he knows there is no faith in her heart equal to Mary's. He is pointing out to her that the service she is rendering is coming out of frustration, anxiety, and anger and that it isn't necessary for her to be in such a state. If she's not happy doing the cooking, if she's not finding God there, why not join Mary and talk with him a while? There is a place for physical food, certainly, but it is never more important than taking in spiritual vitality, the robust kind that affects in the most positive fashion everything we do. Jesus is emphasizing ... that drawing close to his words and Spirit [is] essential. Everything else, no matter how important it is, is secondary. Instead of agreeing to send Mary off to the kitchen, Jesus indicates that her choice to drink in his words is [essential and not to be criticized]. Jesus appears to be offering the same choice to Martha, which considering the tremendous growth in her spirituality by the time of Lazarus' death, we might conclude she accepts. (*The Renovaré Study Bible*)

There's an ancient story from the "desert fathers," those Christians in the Fourth Century who went into the desert to devote themselves to God. A brother came to Abba Silvanus on Mount Sinai. When he saw the brothers working, he said to the old man: "Labor not for the meat that perishes" and "Mary has chosen the best part." And the old man said to his disciple, "Call Zacharias, and put this brother into a room where there is nothing." And when 3:00 came, the brother kept looking at the door, to see when they would send someone to call him to eat. But no one spoke to him. So he got up and went to the old man and said, "Abba, do the

brothers not eat today?" And the old man said, "Yes, they have eaten already." And the brother said, "Why did you not call me?" And the old man answered, "You are a spiritual person and do not need food. We are earthy, and since we want to eat, we work with our hands. But you have chosen the good part, reading all day, and not wanting to take earthly food." When the brother heard this he fell on his face in penitence and said, "Forgive me, Abba." And the old man said, "I think Mary always needs Martha, and by Martha's help Mary is praised" (*Western Asceticism* 119-20).

Fred Craddock says not to be too hard on Martha or she may give up serving altogether. And don't commend Mary too greatly or she may sit there forever. Knowing when to go and do and when to listen and reflect is a matter of spiritual discernment (*Luke Interpretation Commentary*).

That's true. But the real contrast is between Martha who is anxious and pulled in many directions and Mary with her focus on and devotion to Jesus. Christian action is not motivated by anxiety; it's not rushing all around, doing whatever comes to mind. Discipleship, being focused on Jesus, is in contrast to anxiety and distraction. We can be anxious and distracted during our devotional time as well as when we are busy and trying to serve. We need to keep our attention on Jesus and hear and do his word at all times.

We see Martha and Mary again in John 11. Their brother Lazarus gets sick. They send for Jesus, who waits a couple of days before starting out to their home. Lazarus dies. By the time Jesus gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. Jesus doesn't go into the village, but sends word for Martha to meet him outside town.

Years ago, I read a novel about Martha entitled *I Came to Love You Late*. In this scene when Martha comes out to meet Jesus, he hugs her. That helped me see the humanity of Jesus as well as his compassion.

Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." Both love and blame are in that statement. When have you faced loss and wondered where Jesus was or why he wasn't doing something about it?

But Martha goes on, "Yet even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." What is she hinting?

Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again." Martha thinks he is just giving some words of comfort and she replies, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. I know there will be a resurrection *some day*."

But Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life*. Do you believe this?"

And even in her disappointment and confusion, Martha makes a confession of faith every bit as sincere and powerful as the one Peter made earlier (Matthew 16:16). She says, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One coming into the world." Martha is an example of having a faith that can keep believing God's word and keep looking for God's purposes even through disappointment.

Martha gets Mary and she comes out to meet Jesus and falls at his feet. Mary is always at Jesus' feet, listening to him or honoring him. In the next chapter, she is the one who anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. But now even Mary raises the same question and struggle Martha expressed: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus sees Mary and other people weeping and wailing and he is deeply moved and troubled. The word here expresses *anger*. It's used sometimes for Jesus' reaction to sickness. Not that Jesus is angry with the person who is sick or who dies. But he is angry at sickness and death, those enemies. Shuddering with anger, Jesus asks, "Where have you placed Lazarus?"

"Come and see, Lord," they reply.

Now Jesus weeps at the grave of his friend. Then once more he is greatly disturbed and angry. He comes to the tomb and says, "Take away the stone." The tomb is a kind of cave with a round stone blocking the entrance. Martha, ever the practical one, says, "Lord, he's been in there four days. There's bound to be a bad odor." Jesus replies, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Martha perhaps nods to some servants or neighbors and they roll the stone away.

Then Jesus prays, acknowledging his dependence on the Father. Then he calls, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man emerges from his tomb, still wrapped in burial cloths. Jesus says, "Loose him and let him go!" Jesus

calls us to come alive and he sets us free. He reunited this family and we see them with Jesus in the next chapter hosting a feast to celebrate.

There were many other women, named and unnamed, who were disciples of Jesus. They were witnesses of his death and resurrection. After his ascension, they were with the others in Jerusalem, waiting and praying when the Holy Spirit came and filled them all. They began telling about God's mighty works. Peter interprets this as fulfilling what the prophet Joel had seen:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

God calls us all to be his people. God calls men and women, young and old, to be delivered by Jesus, to be with Jesus, to learn from him and follow him as faithful disciples.

### **Women Who Are Named in the Gospels**

**Anna** (Luke 2:36-38)—prophet in the Jerusalem Temple. Seeing the infant Jesus, she praised God and told others about Jesus.

**Elizabeth** (Lk 1)—mother of John the Baptist.

**Herodias** (Matthew 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29; Lk 3:19-20)—granddaughter of Herod the Great, wife of Herod Philip, mother of Salome. Conspired in death of John the Baptist.

**Joanna** (Lk 8:3; 24:10)—follower of Jesus; wife of Herod's steward, Chuza.

**Martha** (Lk 10:38-42; John 11:1-44; 12:2)—sister of Mary and Lazarus; lived in Bethany, outside Jerusalem.

**Mary Magdalene** (Mt 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mk 15:40, 47; 16:1, 9; Lk 8:2; 24:10; Jn 19:25; 20:1, 11-20)—follower of Jesus; seven demons cast out of her; first witness of the empty tomb and risen Lord.

**Mary the Mother of James (the Younger) and Joseph (Joses)** (Mt 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mk 15:40, 47; 16:1; Lk 24:10)—follower of Jesus, among those who got the first message of Jesus' resurrection.

**Mary the Mother of Jesus** (Mt 1-2; 13:55; Mk 6:3; Lk 1-2; Jn 2:1-12; 6:42; 19:25-27; Acts 1:14)—“blessed among women”; model of discipleship: “behold the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.”

**Mary of Bethany** (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11:11-45; 12:1-8)—disciple of Jesus. He commended her for choosing the “better part” (Lk 10:42). Sister of Lazarus and Martha.

**Mary the Wife of Clopas** (Jn 19:25)—with other women at the cross.

**Rahab** (Mt 1:5; Joshua 2, 6; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25)—mentioned in Jesus' genealogy, one of four Gentile women who were ancestors of Jesus.

**Ruth** (Mt 1:5; Ruth)—another ancestor of Jesus.

**Salome** (Mk 15:40; 16:1, also possibly Mt 27:56)—one of Jesus' disciples at the cross, possibly the wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John.

**Susanna** (Lk 8:3)—a follower of Jesus.

**Tamar** ((Mt 1:3; see Genesis 38; Ruth 4; 1 Chronicles 2:4)—another ancestor of Jesus.

**The Wife of Uriah (Bathsheba)** (Mt 1:6; 2 Samuel 11; 12:24; 1 Chron 3:5)—  
another ancestor of Jesus.

(D. M. Scholer, "Women," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*)