

The Beloved Disciple

John 20:1-10

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

This morning, we have a mystery on our hands. In the Gospel of John, and nowhere else in the Bible, there is a character known only as The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved, or, The Beloved Disciple. Not only does he appear only in the book of John, he appears there in only four short stories. Who is this anonymous disciple? Why isn't he mentioned by name?

I suppose the first thing we should do is look at each of the four instances when the Beloved Disciple is mentioned. The first time he appears is in chapter 13. Jesus and his disciples are gathered for the Last Supper, the Passover meal when Jesus institutes the sacrament of communion. Here we read that during the meal, Jesus was sitting next to the Beloved Disciple.

The text says:

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish."

The next time the Beloved Disciple is mentioned is when Jesus is crucified. In chapter 19, we read about Jesus being whipped and beaten, mocked and crucified. While he is hanging

on the cross, Jesus speaks several times. At one point, he addresses the Beloved Disciple, who is standing in the crowd. This is what we read in the gospel:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

The third mention of the Beloved Disciple comes at the empty tomb, when it is discovered that Jesus has been resurrected. We read that story this morning. We read that though Mary Magdalene was the first one to the tomb, she immediately went to tell the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter. Those two then ran to the tomb, and the text tells us that the Beloved Disciple outran Peter, but didn't enter the tomb right away. Peter entered first, then the other disciple. Both then believed and went home.

Finally, the Beloved Disciple is present in one of the post-resurrection stories. Seven disciples are gathered together, fishing. When Jesus appears to them, they don't recognize him at first. Not until he speaks. The text reads:

Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

So now we are ready to address one of the greatest mysteries of the Bible. Who is this Beloved Disciple? Scholars have enjoyed working with this puzzle, and naturally, they have come up with several possible solutions. Also naturally, they don't always agree on the answer. But there are several key clues that they do agree upon.

First, the Gospel of John uses the word ‘disciple’ to mean both the 12 closest followers of Jesus and to describe any follower of Jesus. So Beloved Disciple may refer to someone who wasn’t one of the 12 original disciples.

Second, the Beloved Disciple is always described with male pronouns. So although some people suggest the Beloved Disciple may have been Mary Magdalene, this disciple was almost certainly male.

Third, in chapter 19, we read that Jesus’ mother Mary went to live with the Beloved Disciple. In the book of Acts, we also read that Mary was part of an early group of followers who lived in Jerusalem. So that means the Beloved Disciple must have lived in or near Jerusalem.

Fourth, in John’s gospel we have lots of details about the interrogations of Jesus during the trials leading up to his crucifixion. The presence of these particulars only makes sense if the Beloved Disciple had access to what happened behind these closed doors. So he must have had a connection with at least one high-ranking Jewish official.

So with those clues in mind, who fits? The oldest answer to this riddle comes from some of our earliest church fathers. As early as the second century, theologians were writing about this mystery. And they were pretty much in agreement that the Beloved Disciple was John. You remember John, the son of Zebedee and brother to James. Jesus called them to be his disciples while they were fishing. Early Christians had several reasons for believing John was the Beloved Disciple.

First, we look to the closing words of the gospel. Jesus is talking about his return, and Peter asks if the Beloved Disciple will still be alive at that time. Jesus brushes off the question, but the rumor started to circulate that the Beloved Disciple wouldn’t die. The next verse reads,

“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.” Since this is the Gospel of John, the thinking goes, it must have been written by John. And here the author reveals that he is the Beloved Disciple.

Second, we note that the title Beloved Disciple doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible but in the Gospel of John. It may have been the author's way of referring to himself with humility. Okay, maybe it doesn't sound so humble to refer to yourself as the one Jesus loved, but in a different culture, it may have been more pride-filled to list your name. This title left some anonymity.

Third, early theologians assumed that the Beloved Disciple had to be one of the disciples who was closest to Christ. There were three – James, John, and Peter – who were with Christ at the Transfiguration, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and at other intimate moments. We know Peter wasn't the Beloved Disciple, because he looks at and talks about him. Between James and John, it just makes sense if this is the Gospel of John that John is the one.

But this mystery is far from solved. There are several holes in this theory. The foremost is that it may not have been John Zebedee who wrote this gospel. John was a common name. And the Greek this text is written in is an elegant, high-class dialect. It is not the writing of a common fisherman. Also, despite the claim of humility, if this gospel were written by a direct disciple of Jesus, he probably would have mentioned his name in the text. It would have added authority and legitimacy to the gospel. And as a Galilean fisherman, John probably didn't have a home anywhere near Jerusalem.

Some modern scholars suggest that instead, the Beloved Disciple was a secret disciple. Someone who followed Jesus' teachings without following him literally from place to place. This man may even have been a priest with access to top Jewish officials. Author Hugh

Schonfield suggests that this man was the one who let Jesus and his disciples use his house for the Last Supper. Which would explain his presence at that meal. Others point to Joseph of Arimathea, the secret disciple of Jesus who had enough authority to request that Pilate give him Jesus' body after his death.

Others suggest that the Beloved Disciple was actually Lazarus. He first appears in the Gospel of John in chapter 11, when Jesus receives the message, "Lord, the one you love is sick." Three times the gospel says that Jesus loved Lazarus. The Gospel of John only mentions two people whom Jesus loves: Lazarus and the Beloved Disciple. After Lazarus is raised in chapter 12, he isn't mentioned again. And when is the Beloved Disciple first mentioned? Chapter 13, leading some scholars to suggest that the author simply changed the way Lazarus was referred to. Furthermore, the text tells us that Lazarus lived only two miles from Jerusalem. Of course, we know nothing about Lazarus having any high-ranking political connections.

One final post-modern interpretation is that the author intentionally inserted this disciple with anonymity. Which disciple did Jesus not love? Every time we read about the Beloved Disciple, we are meant to remember that Jesus loved all his disciples. Including those who follow him today. Perhaps this nickname even calls out to us today. In some way, could you be the Beloved Disciple?

DISCUSSION

I'm guessing that most of what you heard today was new to you. Turn to your neighbors and discuss. What do you think? Which solution speaks most to you? What do you think about having this great mystery in our Scriptures?