

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Christ Within Reach*

Colossians 1:15-20

July 20, 2025

The gospel reading this morning takes us into the home of sisters Martha and Mary, who with their brother Lazarus, are remembered for all time as friends of Jesus. Martha welcomed Jesus at the door and into their lives. To welcome someone is more than being the one who happens to answer the knock on the door and opens it. To welcome is to invite the guest in, tend to the guest's needs and comfort. It likely involves serving some drink and some food. It can be a joy to be the one who welcomes. It can also be some work. Martha's doing the work, and while she may be enjoying it, she grows irritated at the same time. Her irritation is directed toward her sister. Which, by itself, is a universal story—one sibling annoyed at another. She appeals to Jesus to solve it. Mary, her sister, is letting Martha do all the work.

She's not wrong. While Martha hustled to offer hospitality, Mary sat at Jesus' feet. The word for *sit at* is the only time it's used in the Bible, a compound word emphasizing nearness. Mary is as near to Jesus as she can possibly be. Until she was distracted by her irritation, Martha was also doing what she was doing to be close to Jesus and welcoming him close to her, in her own way. Martha is the symbol of hospitality for a guest to be received with generous warmth. Mary, drawing as close to Jesus as can possibly be is the symbol of a contemplative spirit, the image of prayer. She is an icon of single-minded devotion to Jesus. Martha offers for Jesus what any hospitable host would give to any guest in first century culture. Mary gives something more. Because this is no ordinary visitor who has come to their home.

Today's reading from Colossians 1 answers, in part the question: who is this Jesus who has captivated Mary's vision and attention? Who is Jesus who is the center of the vision and existence of all Christians. If we are to welcome, follow, love, and worship Jesus, who is he? And what does it mean for us?

This question is the main subject of the whole New Testament. Four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—answer the question “Who is Jesus?” by telling the story of his life, his death, and his resurrection. Each gospel reads similarly; each adds something important.

Who is this Jesus?

For Matthew, Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham, the fulfilment of the promise for a Messiah, come to redeem God's people. For Mark, Jesus is the Son of God, coming to conquer the forces of evil. For Luke, Jesus is the Son of Mary, embodying the love of God for all God's people, with God's special care for the poor and vulnerable. For John, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, incarnate, walking among us to bring us to the presence of God,

who is beyond us. If you want to remember this, just look at the four verses of the hymn, *Crown Him with Many Crowns*. Each verse of the verses of the hymn echoes each of the four gospels in order.

The whole New Testament is on the same subject. Who is Jesus, what does it mean to me, to us, and to all the world? No where, in all the New Testament is the answer given with such exaltation and such expansive vision as in Colossians 1. It's probable that our reading preexisted the writing of Colossians and was used by the writer to remind the early Christians of the confession they were already confessing and possibly singing together. Scholars call it the Christ hymn, so maybe they sang it in their worship or chanted it like a prayer or a creed. Who is this Jesus we worship? Who is this Jesus Mary sits at the feet of? He is no ordinary man, not in the least. Quite the contrary.

He is the image of the invisible God.  
He is the firstborn of all creation.  
In him, all things in heaven and on the earth were created.  
For him, all things were created.  
He is before all things, and in him, all things hold together.

It's a mind-stretching, full-throated, heart-bursting, all-encompassing assertion about the one standing right before Mary, Jesus of Nazareth. The early church couldn't just say it. They sang it.

When you come near to Christ in contemplation or in service, you come to the one by whom, in whom, and for whom everything that is, is—including your very self.

Jesus is the center of creation which exalts Jesus because, well, creation is very big and very old, and full of wonders and mysteries. And here we confess, Jesus is at the center of it all. And this, in turn exalts creation because, well, Jesus is not the destroyer of creation or its escape hatch, but the fulfillment and purpose of all that exists from the beginning. And in him, it is very good. If we get even a little overwhelmed by the vision here, it's understandable, but let us not be numb to it.. Five times in Colossians is the phrase *ta panta*, "all things." All things are by him, and for him. All creation exists, from the beginning, for the purpose of God's incarnatio--that God may be known and loved by his creatures.

Can we even begin to comprehend this?

From the beginning, from the first miniscule particles that collided, danced, and fused with one another, from the beginning when light first shone, and the sun rose in the sky. From the beginning when the first ferns reached out for the first dew of the first morning. From the beginning when the first rivers fell down from the mountains and the first fish swam in the salty sea and the first animals played and ate and died in the forests and jungles and savannahs of the world. From the beginning of human life—the births and deaths and lives and joys and tears and all of it.

All of everything, from the beginning was for a world brought to existence by God, in which God would become incarnate. From a chronological and material point of view, you can say no universe, no Christ. The affirmation of the primacy and preeminence of Christ completes the circle: no Christ, no universe.

All things that exist are from him, in him, and for him. He is the beginning.

With such a wide-angle lens, we can stammer out a stunning realization and implication. Something like this: everything that ever existed was so that Mary could sit at the feet of Jesus Christ and draw near to God. When she had the chance, she didn't miss it. She sat as close as possible. She drew near as close to God as humanly possible.

And because of him, so can we---any of us. The incarnation is for everyone. All things. All people. The subject of the New Testament is who is Jesus and who can come to him. All people can come to him because the firstborn of all creation is also the firstborn from the dead. The final all things is reconciliation made possible by his death. He reconciles all things, making peace by the blood of his cross.

This whole beautiful, expansive passage—this song--is about bringing things together that should not, by any rationality, be brought together. Indeed, this is the gospel: bringing together the invisible, holy, immutable God with contingent, sinful, distracted humanity. This is the hope of the gospel.

But it can seem impossible. Any one person may find themselves able to tick off reason after reason why this may be true for others but not be true for them. Oh, the arrogance of our own shame. Each of us has his or her own history: we think of our mistakes, our sins our good times, and our bleak times. God, or the idea of God, or the wishful thinking that we could somehow be pleasing or known to God... seems so far away. "I am a sinner; I am a sinner," we repeat to ourselves like a sledgehammer. Confession is good for the soul, and knowing and telling true things about ourselves takes off the masks that keep us from being who we are before the mirror and before God. Repentance frees us.

Yet, this is our true and only hope. We would do well to tell ourselves sincerely and quietly his words, "Come to me, all of you..." This, too, is the song of Christ: "You who were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him." That is the point of the whole cosmic vision.

The exalted, unmatched cosmic Christ hymn of Colossians isn't for the purpose of exalting Christ beyond reach. Ironically, by exalting Christ in all things, Christ is even more within reach. He's not just back there in history, doing Jesus stuff in the first century or back there in creation history, doing Word of God stuff at the dawn of time. He's not just high in the heavens, raised at the right hand of God the Father, somewhere beyond our imagination. He's certainly not dead in a tomb somewhere outside Jerusalem.

Christ is all in all. All that is, exists to receive Christ--God Incarnate--that we may serve him as Martha and draw near to him as Mary and [add your name here] love him as you are created to. You, too, exist to receive Christ, which means that everything in your life has a place in your relationship with Christ. Everything has a place and a purpose in your life—your created, fragile, precious life. Every experience, every moment—wonderful and tragic, joyful and so-hard—each becomes part of the bed the straw laid in the manger of your life into which Christ was born. Your life story is the winding road on which Christ travels in the world. Your sin is the cross on which Christ is crucified, and your heart is the tomb which is transformed into glory upon glory, as Christ is risen and death and darkness is overcome. And in him, he in whom all things are created. And in him, you are a new creation—in him, all things are made new. We are all made new--all things in the world, and all things in each of us--made new.

The sign of this newness is our participation in our baptisms, as we go down into the water and rise to walk in new of life, and the sign of the newness, born again and again and again within us is the sign of the bread broken. Then, inhabiting each of us as we receive it, and then walking around together into a world as those who are called to be light to that world. So let us in humility, let us in confidence born of grace, let us with our eyes turned to heaven, higher and higher than we ever imagined, with our hearts full of Christ born in us, let us come near to him again and again and again, in the gift and grace of the Spirit, come as close as we can, in prayer, in service of others, and in love. Our confession for all time and now: for Christ is the fullness of life as it ever was and as it will be. This is the gospel. This is our hope. This is the good news.

Amen.

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