

At a Funeral Martha Meets Jesus

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Preached on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, (10April), 2011.

Text: John 11:24-25

“Martha said to [Jesus], ‘I know that [Lazarus] 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.’”

We have met several characters in the Gospel of John during Lent: Nicodemus,¹ the woman at the well,² a man born blind³ and now Lazarus and his sisters. Each encounter gave Jesus the opportunity to demonstrate his power over one of the *inevitable*s of life which often keeps us from God. For Nicodemus it was the way things have always been. How do you start over at my age? He knew a lot about God, but did he know God? For the woman at the well it was a series of failures with men, at least five husbands. How can someone become a disciple of Jesus with that record? With the blind man, he had been held back by his disability, reduced to begging. Yet, after he met Jesus he saw what others could not. Today in chapter 11 we read about the greatest obstacle to belief: death. Again, Jesus overcame it. Each person faced an obstacle. Each triumph by Jesus over these *inevitable*s provided a sign that he was Lord and Messiah. After each encounter, more became his disciples.

Today’s family—Lazarus, Martha and Mary of Bethany—were favorites of Jesus.⁴ Luke told us about the two sisters in that famous lunch scene.⁵ You remember it, don’t you? Martha worked to put the food on the table for Jesus and all the unexpected guests while Mary sat at Jesus’ feet soaking in his wisdom and teaching. Yet, he loved them both.⁶ He frequently stayed in Bethany with them when he came to Jerusalem. Today look at Martha. Her sister Mary has a few lines in John 11 and Lazarus doesn’t say anything. I guess that should be expected; after all, it was his funeral! Martha speaks her mind, as she did in Luke’s lunch time story. While Lazarus is the center of Jesus’ miracle, it is Martha’s encounter with Jesus which teaches its meaning.

Jesus and the twelve had been across the Jordan in the region where John had baptized when word reached him that Lazarus was sick.⁷ Oddly, when Jesus heard the news he delayed the trip to Bethany for two additional days. When he told the disciples he wanted to go back to Judea, the disciples cautioned him. “They wanted to stone you last time we were there and you

¹ John 3.

² John 4.

³ John 9.

⁴ John 11:5 “... Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus....”

⁵ Luke 10:38-42.

⁶ John 11:5.

⁷ John 10:40 and 11:2.

want to return?”⁸ By the time Jesus and his party arrived, Lazarus was dead and already buried. There were many people sitting shiva with the sisters as they grieved their brother. The two sisters felt disappointment that Jesus had not gotten to Bethany sooner. When they met Jesus both told him so. There is even an edge to Martha’s greeting, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”⁹ Her response confirms what we know about her: an activist, head strong, somewhat impetuous. For her religion was good so far as it got things done. Why hadn’t Jesus come sooner? Moreover, her response serves to heighten the meaning of the miracle. They took Jesus to the tomb. John tells us, “*Jesus wept.*”¹⁰ To the bystanders, some—not knowing what Jesus was about to do—thought his tears showed how much he loved Lazarus. But others considered quietly what Martha and many thought: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”¹¹ Jesus asked that the stone be rolled away from the tomb and Martha stated the obvious: “Lord, are you sure you want to do this? He has been dead four days and there will be a bad odor.”¹² Jesus said something about the glory of God which probably no one understood because no one except Jesus knew what was about to happen. He prayed by the open tomb and said, “Lazarus, come out!”¹³ The dead man stumbled out with the grave cloths still wrapped around him, and Jesus said, “Unbind him, and let him go free.”¹⁴

The response was immediate. With so many witnesses on hand, many believed in Jesus on the spot. Others slipped away and went to the authorities to report what had happened. It became the last straw for the Sanhedrin. They knew they had to do something. “If we let [Jesus] go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation.”¹⁵ It was this last sign that sealed Jesus’ fate. And because many believed because of this miracle, John tells us they conspired to do away Lazarus as well.¹⁶

The most famous line in this story is verse 25: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” Jesus said it in response to Martha’s, “Lord if you’d been here he wouldn’t have died.” After four days of funeral platitudes, she didn’t understand him when he told her, “Martha, your brother will rise again.” She replied, “O, my faith isn’t shaken; I know he will rise on the last day.” “No,” Jesus told her, “you misunderstand me. I am the resurrection and the life.” His primary verb is present tense. He was talking about everlasting life, but you do not have to die to find it. It starts now. I cannot tell you how many funeral sermons I have preached and quoted that central Christian affirmation. When a minister

⁸ John 11:8. Later in v. 16, Thomas the Twin said, “Let us go so we may die with [Lazarus],” meaning that the danger for Jesus’ return to Judea was serious and real.

⁹ John 11:21, 32.

¹⁰ John 11:35.

¹¹ John 11:37. It is an interesting question, given that Jesus knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead, as to why he cried? Was it because he knew that if he performed this miracle he would meet his own death? (Fred Craddock).

¹² John 11:39.

¹³ John 11:43.

¹⁴ John 11:44.

¹⁵ John 11:48.

¹⁶ John 12:9-10.

says it at a funeral, everyone thinks as Martha did: *life after death*. But that is only part of what Jesus meant. The life in Jesus arising from belief in his resurrection begins immediately. It is the source of Christian courage in the face of all life's *inevitable*s: road blocks, grief, doubts, sickness, death and moral confusion. We like to call these 'life's ambiguities.' Life in Christ is premised on Jesus' resurrection and is not deterred by any of these obstacles. He is Lord, even over these. He is "*the resurrection and the life*." When you face problems with faith, it makes a difference. Jesus understands the unfairness of your afflictions for he faced the same difficulties as you do. No matter what happens to you, me, he is ever *the resurrection and the life*. Belief does not shield us from problems—you will still have to face them—but with the assuring difference of knowing that he will face them with you and he is Lord over everything, even what we think are inevitabilities.

A week later, just before the Passover, Jesus was back in Bethany and came again to the home of Lazarus and his sisters. "They gave a dinner for him."¹⁷ Lazarus was at the table with Jesus, thereby underscoring the power of Jesus. Whom do you think served at the dinner? Martha, of course! Hers is also the confession of faith in this story: "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God."¹⁸ Mary, so grateful to Jesus for returning her brother to them, anointed Jesus with perfume. John tells us, "The entire house was filled with the fragrance of that perfume."¹⁹ Those who think Jesus was only a charismatic rabbi without power over both life and death really miss the point of the New Testament. Faith in Jesus as the resurrection and the life *is* the faith that animated Martha, Mary, Lazarus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, Nicodemus and all the rest. Such a faith gives a confidence in the face of every obstacle, that Jesus is Lord of all. These knew because they saw the evidence in their own struggles that indeed he had the power, the grace, and the authority. What about you? Are you, too, facing some inevitable obstacle in your life today? Do you not know Jesus is Lord over your problem?

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.²⁰

End

Martha Meets Jesus.DOC

¹⁷ John 12:2.

¹⁸ John 11:27.

¹⁹ John 12:3. The statement contrasts to the worry about the smell when Jesus had the stone rolled away at Lazarus' tomb.

²⁰ John 11:25-26.