

This morning the Gospel is the story of how Jesus raised his friend, Lazarus from the dead. It's a wonderful illustration of our Lord's power over death. In this story, however, there are two other stories, two subplots, involving Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary. This is what we're going to talk about and what this means for you and me in our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

JOHN 11:17-37

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "**Your brother will rise again.**" 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "**I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?**" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Even though Martha and Mary were sisters, they were very different kinds of people with very different sets of needs. You might remember another story about these women. In **Luke 10:39-40**, we read that Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving." Martha was a woman of action, always running around, busy doing things. But Mary was a heart-girl, content to sit at Jesus feet, listening to His words.

As regards the story of Lazarus, consider Martha's reaction to Jesus. The Lord was on his way to Bethany upon hearing that his friend had died. Martha was informed that he was on his way, and she didn't waste any time. She left the house in a flurry, running to meet him on the road. Jesus didn't even make it into town before Martha met him and got in his face. I imagine her standing in front of him, her face red, her eyes popping out of her head, and she flailed her arms, and she shouted, **"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!"**

And Jesus said, "Get out of my face woman! Calm down! Take a chill pill already!" No, he didn't say that, did he? But he ministered to her. He didn't react. He never did. But He met her in her heart, and He comforted her with the words she needed to hear in a way that spoke to her. Jesus said to Martha, **John 11:23, "Your brother will rise again."**

I think Martha was a lady who was nothing if she wasn't talking! Extroverted, very social. So if you wanted to minister to her, you had to connect with her on her terms. You had to talk to her, reason with her, and you'd have to use words she could understand.

And she was a quick learner. After Jesus told her that her brother would rise again, she said, **John 11:24, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."**

Obviously, Martha had not missed a day of Sunday school; she'd been listening to Jesus all along. So Jesus continued, drawing everything together for her. He said, **John 11:25-26, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"**

Jesus expanded Martha's understanding of what the promised Resurrection meant with a teaching she could grasp because of her faith in what she already knew. In the process, He helped her to understand that God's saving, redeeming power is not an abstraction, but it's real, it's for today. Martha responded, **John 11:27, "Yes, Lord; I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."**

With Jesus' ministry – straight forward and without frills – Martha's fear of death and her powerlessness over her brother's death were wiped away. Jesus spoke to Martha in a way that spoke to her heart, lifted up her spirit, and filled her with hope.

On the other hand, there was Mary: Jesus' ministry to her was much different. We read, **John 11:32**, "**when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet....**"

On the one hand, Martha was in Jesus' face flailing her arms, but then there was Mary who fell at Jesus' feet and cried inconsolably. Some preachers say that one behavior is better than the other. But based on the Lord's response, I don't think such a case can be made. What I'm reading here is that we should be ourselves before the Lord, and show Him our heart. That's what he wants us to do.

At Jesus' feet, Mary pleaded with tears, **John 11:32**, "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" Now that sounds familiar. In fact, these are the exact same words Martha used. But they were said in a much different way!

We read that after Mary spoke, **John 11:33**, "**Jesus saw her weeping.**" Consider how Jesus responded to Mary. She was crying inconsolably, and He yelled at her, "You're such a baby! Stand up and be strong! After all, you're a full grown woman!"

No! Jesus didn't say that! But we read, **John 11:35**, "**Jesus wept.**" We miss this if we fly over the passage too quickly. Jesus said some things after He saw Mary weeping. But He was speaking to the crowd that had gathered all around them not to her. Jesus' ministry to Mary was not with words. Unlike her sister, this is not what she needed. What she needed was time with the man she trusted, the one with whom she could safely share her heart.

So as Mary wept, Jesus wept with her. That's what she needed, someone who could walk with her in her grief. I'm reminded of Jesus' words in **Matthew 11:28-29**. He said, "**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.**"

I hear Jesus saying He can and does walk with us wherever we find ourselves, as He did with Mary, as He did with Martha, whatever challenges and heartaches, fears and frustrations we may have. This is Jesus' resurrection-ministry for us today. He lifts us up from the gloom, from the darkness, from the valley of the shadow of death of this world. He embraces us as heirs of His Father's Kingdom where there is no death, where there is no sadness, but where there is only love and joy.

When my father died 9-years ago I was sad. There had been so many things that we had not said to each other, which I wish we had had the opportunity to say. I was sad for that, and I was sad because I missed him. It makes me sad now to remember that he is gone.

But then I remember our Lord's words, **John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"**

Jesus' call to faith encourages my heart. He's asking me, He's asking you: "Do you believe? Do you believe I am the Resurrection and the Life?" My answer is yes, I believe. Do you believe? (Yes, I believe.) With this faith the Holy Spirit lifts us up and gives us peace in our hearts and minds.

We don't have to "be strong" in the face of tragedy and loss, as some of us no doubt have tried to be. But we may be like Martha and get in the Lord's face, and yell and scream. Or we may be like Mary and weep inconsolably. Or maybe we do both, screaming and crying. That's okay, for God's love is so great.

Friends in Christ, what are your struggles? How is your heart? How do you feel about your family? Your work? Your school? Your church? How would you describe your sense of well-being?

Brothers and sisters, there is nothing too great or too small for Jesus. He loves you. And He wants to walk with you. He wants to deliver you from the pain and sorrow, the darkness and death you experience in your daily life. Like the sun shining down on a garden in full bloom, Jesus wants to shine down on you with His light, His love, His life, and raise you up.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, this week may you be filled a sense of encouragement and peace for having been taken up in the resurrection-ministry of Jesus.

May your heart be strengthened with confidence, for our Lord is greater than any sorrow we might confront in this life. He loves you so.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.