

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Extending Jesus' Healing Ministry"  
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(Lent 5)

The apex of Jesus' earthly ministry comes at an unexpected time. The crises, trials and challenges of this life mostly come at unexpected times, don't they? Jesus' friends were in need. Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus was gravely ill. Word was sent to Jesus; who had been a house guest in their home many times, this illustrated by the phrase "the one you love is sick," expecting Jesus to know it is Lazarus. Jesus tells his disciples that this incident will not end in death, but will draw attention to the glory of God. The disciples probably don't know what he is talking about at this point.

But since we know the story in advance, and because we have the benefit of the Narrator's perspective, we know that although Jesus could go and heal Lazarus right away, he chose not to. Bethany, where Mary and Martha and Lazarus live, is less than two miles from Jerusalem (v.18) on the road to Jericho. So they could've made it there fairly quickly on foot. But Jesus decides to stay where they are for two more days.

When that time is up, he tells his disciples it is time to go back to the region in which Bethany is located. They reminded him that the last time they went there he was almost stoned to death. So he tells them in his cryptic way, that he doesn't have much time left in his earthly ministry, so he has to go back. Remember we are in chapter 11 of John, and in chapter 12, the Palm Sunday story is recorded. So this incident could have happened fairly close to the last week of Jesus' life. I'm sure he had much on his mind about his own death, about his own short life and ministry, but instead he was living his life in service of others, right to the end. He was still thinking about Lazarus. He prophetically knew that his friend had died. He told his followers that Lazarus was asleep as a metaphor for that death, but they didn't understand. So he told them plainly, but even then they misunderstood, at least Thomas did. He thought Jesus was still speaking spiritually, and offered the strange comment, "Let us go and die with him." Still, it shows Thomas' courage, to speak his mind and to act in light of his willingness to follow Jesus.

So they go there to the sisters' home. We find out Lazarus died the day that Jesus got the message he was sick. Many mourners had come from all over

the region, just as many people come to the funeral of a younger man, taken in his prime. Martha was the first to see Jesus. She was outside, possibly grieving in the loud manner of the day. You know the wailing we often see on TV, when a Palestinian mother loses her son or daughter.

Now I want to spend some time with you talking about Martha. I believe Martha has gotten a bum rap, because in the one story Luke tells us in chapter 10:38-42. It is a brief vignette about how Martha is concerned with house work and practical things, but Mary is concerned with simply sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening. And so Martha's complaints to Jesus are only resolved by Jesus saying that Mary chose the better of the two options, and that won't be taken from her. So from this we get a black and white picture of Mary the spiritual one and Martha the not so spiritual one, of Mary the meditative one and Martha the outspoken, whining one. You get the picture, in fact, many of us have this as our only picture of Martha and Mary. And I won't even touch the subject of the various women named Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary of Bethany (whom we are talking about now) and Mary Magdalene, three of six women named Mary in the New Testament. (see Edith Deen's *All the Women of the Bible*, p. 210.)

Back to Martha. If you have this picture of Martha in your head, then prepare for a surprise. The first thing she says is perhaps not a surprise. "If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died." We're not sure about the tone here. Was it an angry tone, in line with the stages of grieving, or was it a courageous statement of faith? Martha knew that Jesus had healed many people, she knew he could heal whatever ailed her brother. I'm sure that Martha was courageously putting forward her faith, her trust in Jesus. Why? Look at the next sentence. "I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." There is a powerful statement of faith, particularly if we had any notion that this woman was more interested in house cleaning and cooking than spirituality. It appears she even now understands way more than the disciples in saying that she is ready for a resurrection experience.

And Jesus responds to that faith, that trust in Him, just as He did when the Roman officer came to Jesus and said that he didn't need to go to his home to heal his servant, all he needed to do was to give the word and it would be done. Remember that story? Jesus commended this Gentile's faith as something which was greater than any other faith in Him at that point.

I believe Martha may be in that same category. When she hears Jesus say that Lazarus will rise again, she acknowledges the resurrection of the dead in a general way “on the last day.” She agrees with Jesus’ statement about him being the resurrection and the life, and that whoever lives and believes in Jesus will never die. She acknowledges him as the Messiah, the Christ.

I believe Martha’s faith welcomed what Jesus was about to do. She was a woman of great faith. So please don’t put her in a category of practical only, or worried only. She trusted Jesus as deeply as anyone in the New Testament.

And then she went and got her sister. Mary came and said the exact same thing that her sister Martha had said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And Mary simply weeps. So does Jesus.

At that point we see the depth of the Lord’s compassion, and His willingness to do something about the death that we all face. Some there were doubting why Jesus had not healed Lazarus earlier.

But he orders the stone removed. And at that point he challenges not only the religious and cultural sensibilities of the crowd around him, he also challenges his disciples and the sisters who are in a particular depth of grief. Martha, however, still does have her practical side about her. She reminds the Lord that Lazarus has been dead four days and that the body has already begun to decay, thus producing an odor that no one wants to confront. He in turn reminds Martha that if she keeps trusting Him, she will see the glory of God, the same thing that he said to his disciples at the beginning of the story. Then Jesus prays. And he prays out loud with an editorial comment that the out loud prayer was more for everyone else there, than for him.

And then he does something that extends his healing ministry to the ultimate place. He performs the seventh miraculous sign in the book of John. He simply tells Lazarus to come out. Now I remember a preacher saying that had he not mentioned Lazarus by name, everyone would have come out of that cave full of bodies and bones. Jesus is the captain of the army sent out to bring salvation, the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision.

And as we all know, Lazarus comes out. He is still wrapped in the linen and spices. That is the way the Jews buried their dead. I say “buried,” but you

know that most bodies were placed in caves in the rocks. And Jesus instructs the people to take off the linen strips and let him go.

What Jesus did changed history. Now we would not have to fear death, and what came after. Jesus would teach more about this in the coming chapters of John. He would tell us that this life would be like a moment in eternity, when we came together at the Great Reunion coming.

All we need to do is to trust Him, to give our lives to Him, and know that He has the power and the right to give us life beyond life, because He is Life.

Now the story is more than an historical account of what happened between Jesus and his friends. It is about us coming to grips with our own death and the death of our loved ones. It is about trusting God with the legacy of our lives and encouraging our loved ones to do the same. It is about Jesus really being who He said He was, and proving it.

At Easter, we look more intently at the life part, now we consider the ultimate context of our deaths, our mortality, the dust to dust part, and ask, "Lord, what would you have me change in my life, that I might better trust you?" What losses am I truly anxious about? Am I willing to give up control to Him in my relationships, my health, my work, my friends and neighbors, my family, my children and grandchildren? Because I cannot control all these people and situations, but I can trust Him even as He trusted God for the timing, for what to say, for when to simply weep.

I don't have all the answers for length of life, quality of life, amount of pain and suffering, material wealth, wealth in friends... I don't have the answers. But I know the One who holds this life and the next in his hands.

Let us trust Him together. Let us pray.