

Encounters with Jesus: The Grieving Sisters Sunday, 1/22/23

Last week we faced the troubling truth that even the most apparently upstanding individuals among us are stained by sin, putting other people and things before our love and commitment to Jesus. We all need to be reborn, surrendering our lives to the will and power of God's Holy Spirit.

This week, we meet three siblings (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus), all of whom had met Jesus previously. We know Jesus had met Lazarus before, because earlier in John 11:3 we see this message to Jesus from Martha and Mary: "Lord, your dear friend is very sick."¹ This suggests that Lazarus was, at least, very closely associated with Jesus. We know Mary and Martha had met Jesus before, because in Luke 10 we have the account of the time Jesus stopped at the home of Mary and Martha.² Do you remember that story? Martha was busy serving the houseguests while Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to him teach. When Martha complained to him that Mary was slacking off, Jesus said that Mary had made the better choice. Those are the same Mary and Martha from today's reading, so we already know something about their personalities.

By the way, based on that account from Luke, which of those two women do you most relate to? Mary, eager to sit at the feet of Jesus, or Martha, overwhelmed by her responsibilities and focused on getting tasks done? I wince when I read that particular Scripture, because so often in my own life I've struggled in the very way that Martha did. How about you?

Incidentally, the same sisters, along with their newly resurrected brother, make a later appearance in John 12³, in which they essentially play the same roles as before, with Martha once again serving the guests and Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, but this time anointing his feet with oil. I suppose we've all been like Mary or Martha at certain times in our lives, but which is your most likely response? Once our personalities are fully formed, it's really hard to shake our basic tendencies when push comes to shove.

We know that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus all lived in Bethany, a short two miles

¹ John 11:3. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² Luke 10: 38-42

³ John 12: 1-11

outside of Jerusalem. That nearness only served to heighten the drama behind Mary and Martha's implied criticism of Jesus. "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." And their implied question, of course, was this: "Lord, why didn't you come here? Why did you let my brother die?"

At the heart of this story is a contrast between two responses, but not Mary's and Martha's. If you pay careful attention to the Scripture, you'll see that Mary and Martha said the very same thing when they first greeted Jesus in Bethany. "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." It was Jesus who responded to the identical question in two radically different ways. Wouldn't you have expected Jesus to respond the same way to the same question? Let's try to unpack the responses of Jesus and what they might have had to do with the particular needs of Martha and Mary. Remember, both women were grieving the death of their brother, and both needed Jesus.

Something about Jesus that's almost impossible to get our heads around is the Jesus is both God and man. As Timothy Keller writes, "Jesus is both truly God and fully man. Not just God, disguised as a man: not just man, with an air of deity, but the God-man... He's not 50% human and 50% God, nor is he 20% God and 80% human, or vice versa. He's not just a human being with a particularly high God consciousness or a divine figure with the illusion of a physical body. He is God but also absolutely and totally human."⁴

It's the divine side of Jesus that Martha seemed to need to meet in this encounter, and so Jesus replied to her with a claim of deity: "I am the resurrection and the life." Think about how astonishing that statement really is. Jesus didn't say that he had knowledge, power, or the right connections to give life to whomever he pleased. He said that he himself is that life! Since that's true, then in a very real sense, what the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Philippians must also be true for every Christian: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."⁵ In other words, when we walk with Jesus in this life, we win, because we walk with life itself. And even when we die, we gain life again, because Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life! How cool is that? Following Jesus is a win-win proposition!

Is there any doubt that hearing the truth about the deity of Jesus is a comfort to us

⁴ Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*, pp. 44, 50. Penguin, 2013.

⁵ Philippians 1:21. New International Version (2011)

when we face death? His promises of life and resurrection are hollow if Jesus was only a wise teacher or a charlatan. They can only be relied on if his claim to be God is true. It seems that perhaps Martha needed some help with letting that truth sink into her heart. Perhaps if she had spent more time at the feet of Jesus, she might have been better prepared to face the death of her brother?

It was perhaps the more human side of Jesus that Mary most needed in her encounter with Jesus. He spoke no grand theological statements to her, offering her instead the simple and very practical question, “Where have you put him?”⁶ And then, no less astonishing than his divine proclamation to Martha, Jesus- seemingly at a loss for words- simply wept with Mary over the death of his friend.

How many of you know that grieving people often aren’t looking for theological platitudes or practical advice when the weight of the world is on their hearts and minds. Often the most comforting thing we can do as a friend is to offer the ministry of presence, sitting with them, crying with them, experiencing the moments of their loss with them. And that’s what Jesus did, for the sake of Mary, and I believe also for his own sake, because he surely loved Lazarus and hated the evil blight of death that sin ushered into the world.

We have the benefit of hindsight, so we know that the tears shed over the death of Lazarus weren’t the end of the story. Let’s pick up where we left off in the Gospel of John in the eleventh chapter, beginning with verse 38 in the New Living Translation. [{Read John 11:38-44 NLT}](#)

Well, there’s Martha again, still struggling to translate what she heard with her ears and said with her tongue into an active faith in Jesus. “Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible.”⁷ I wonder what we would do if Jesus showed up at one of our Celebrations of Life or graveside interment services and instructed us in the same way to “Roll the stone aside.”⁸ Would we protest, or would we just do it, eager to witness the resurrection? I honestly have no idea what we’d do. I hope that I’ve sat at the feet of Jesus long enough to have developed at least the basic inclination to obey him and roll away the

⁶ John 11:34. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁷ John 11:39. Ibid

⁸ Ibid

stone!

As for Lazarus, he simply answered the call of Jesus, obediently walking out of the tomb and allowing himself to be unwrapped. If you had been in the tomb, would you have come out, answering the call of Jesus? Or would you have been too comfortable lying in the dust of your self-pity to come out? Would you have been too afraid to take the risk of living again, knowing that you would inevitably face more pain and, eventually, even death again?

Three siblings, all experiencing a unique encounter with Jesus. Martha, the busy thinker who had her mind anchored in the stuff of her daily life. Mary, the feeler, perhaps feeling betrayed that her friend Jesus didn't come sooner to prevent the death of her brother. Lazarus, a man who had succumbed to death but with the courage to answer when life himself called his name. Which one of the siblings best reflect where you are with your relationship with Jesus today? Are you more like Martha, with your head full of facts about Jesus but in need of a baptism of your heart? Are you more like Mary, trusting Jesus but feeling let down by him or distant from him when you need him most? Or are you more like Lazarus, burned out, beaten down, and ready to give up on life all together, gravely in need of a resurrection? All three siblings needed the very same thing, to stand in the presence of Jesus. Your diagnosis may be a little different, but the solution remains the same. It's only in the presence of Jesus that we can really know what it means to be fully alive.

Brennan Manning wrote, "Religion is not a matter of learning how to think about God, but of actually encountering Him."⁹ When we encounter Jesus, we're invited to respond and to change, and we'll often be surprised, because Jesus is a complex person. He is both God and man, a lion and a lamb. In the words of Timothy Keller, "He has tenderness without weakness. Strength without harshness. Humility without the slightest lack of confidence. Unhesitating authority with a complete lack of self-absorption. Holiness and unending convictions without any shortage of approachability. Power without insensitivity."

Take a moment to reflect on this: When you next meet Jesus, how will you respond to his invitation? How might you be called to change?

⁹ Brennan Manning. *Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (p. 13). Revell, 1986.



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