

It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.

Weekly Edition – August 17, 2018
Gospel According to St. John – Third Year

Two Sisters, Two Reactions

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then 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 have kept this man from dying?"

The Gospel of St. John

Part I

- Prologue 1:1-14
- First Year 1:15 – 2:22
- Second Year 2:23 – 6:71
- Third Year 7:1 – 12:50

Part II

- The Last Discourse 13:1 – 17:26
- The Arrest and Trial 18:1 – 19:16
- Death and Resurrection 19:16 (b) – 21:25

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Entering Into Scripture: A Meditation on the Sister's Reactions

There are friends, and there are special friends. There are some with which we hold such a special bond that merely being together seems to enlarge life. No matter how long the passage of time since we have last been together, upon reunion the friendship takes up right where it left off. There is a certain safety, a certain familiarity, a certain comfort in really being known and in knowing. There is that warmth of unconditional acceptance and accepting by the same measure. Lazarus is that kind of friend to me – to all of us.

Lazarus was always so happy to see me and I him. I don't really have words to describe the ache of loss or the hole in my life that was Lazarus. As we make our way towards Bethany, all I can think of is how different it will be without him.

Now Bethany sits on the southeastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side is Jerusalem. It is less than two miles away. But the slope is steep, and it is a strenuous hike to reach the city. Bethany is a familiar place to us. We often stay in the house of Martha where she lives with her younger sister Mary and Lazarus, her brother, when we come up to Jerusalem. They are like extended family to us, and Lazarus might be regarded as one of us twelve since we share such close kinship. There is a warm affection and genuine intimacy among us. I consider Lazarus to be my brother, and his sisters are my sisters.

It is a two-day journey to reach Bethany from Bethany beyond the Jordan. From where we began, a few miles north of the Dead Sea, it is mostly up. We walk at our ordinary pace; leisurely but deliberate. Nothing would indicate any rush or sense of urgency. Jesus is particularly quiet as we go. So are the rest of us. I wonder to myself if He is more concerned about the Judeans and Pharisees than He let on. I know I am concerned, but each time that thought pushes up

in my mind it is swept away by the heartache of the death of my friend.

We make our way along a well-traveled route. It leads through the desert wilderness which is carpeted in wildflowers this time of year. Although it is winter and the wet season is upon us, it hasn't rained in a couple days. Mid way through our second day the lush green hills of Bethany come into view.

Bethany faces to the southeast. Rising above are an elaborate series of ancient terraces. The climate is ideal for agriculture. Nestled onto these terraces are gardens and fields – an assortment of crops and grains; dates, almonds, fig trees and olive groves. Here sheep and goats are raised, many will be used in service at the Temple. The people here are salt of the earth. Laborers. Shepherds. Tanners. There is no great wealth here – only working-class people eking out a living from the land. My people. I am at home here.

It has now been four days since Jesus told us our friend, Lazarus, had died. Four days. The thought makes my heart feel heavier, if that were possible. We Jews believe that the soul of the departed hovers near to the grave for three days in the hope of reuniting with the body. But when the fourth day comes, and decomposition sets in, the soul departs never to return. I have never heard of anyone being reunited -soul with body. It doesn't matter. The thought that our friend has now departed for good makes me feel empty. I miss him already.

"It's Martha!"

I look up ahead to see her. She is dressed head to toe in black mourning robes. She is moving with haste to come to us. She seems, well, not herself.

Martha is an exceptional woman. She is pretty, but modest. A person of great character and self-restraint. She is strong, but gentle and exudes a quiet confidence, yet is kind towards all. She runs

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an efficient and well-ordered home and manages the household business with great care and frugality. I have only seen her lose it once, when she was upset with her sister, Mary, for not helping out with guests.

But now as she stands before us, her sunken eyes tell it all. Deep rings cut into her face expose the magnitude of her loss and the depth of her grief. I begin to well-up.

"Martha." Jesus greets her warmly.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her words belie her mixed feelings; one-part confession, one-part accusation. She looks into His eyes, as if she is trying to find the right words. Then she adds, "But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask."

Her words startle me. Grief salted with hope. Loss seasoned with expectation. I feel ashamed that I had neither hope or expectation.

She steps forward and Jesus draws her into His embrace, her head falls heavy on His shoulder as she quietly weeps.

"Martha," Jesus said. His voice was tender. "Your brother will rise again."

They let go of each other. Martha looks down. Then after a few moments, she looks up at Jesus. Eyes meet. "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," she said.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus said. "The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die."

His words seemed to hang in the air like a sweet perfume. I look around at the faces of the others. Their expressions say it all – some hang on His every word whereas the furled eyebrows of others barely conceal their hostility towards Jesus. A stillness settles over all of us. Martha's eyes seem to brighten up.

"Do you believe this?" Jesus asked her.

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is even He who comes into the world."

I am amazed at her faith. Suddenly I am very much aware of two things: the shallowness of my own faith and how precious this moment is. The magnitude of her statement sinks in. Jesus appears to be well-pleased with her.

Jesus speaks again. "Where is Mary?"

"She is back at the house with our friends and many visitors," she said adding, "let me go and bring her to You." With that, Martha turned and walked quickly in the direction of their home.

Jesus does not follow her, instead choosing to remain in place. At first, it strikes me as odd, but as I think about it more it makes sense. The family is so well-loved that surely the house is packed with friends and relatives mourning with the sisters.

Even had we set out two days before, I think to myself, we would have missed the funeral. We Jews bury our dead right away, typically the same day their eyes are closed. The body is lovingly prepared with spices, the head shrouded in a linen veil, the hands and feet wrapped in strips of linen. Then the body is carried to the burial cave in a procession led by the women and mourning wailers. Once the body is carefully laid in the tomb, two lines form, and the family members pass between them as they return home to begin the period of mourning.

There, foods prepared by friends will await the family and the daily host of visitors that will come to sit with them in grief. This will last for seven days during which the family members will not leave their house except to visit the tomb. After the initial week has past, it is followed by a year-long period of lighter mourning.

"Look here," says one of our companions. I turn to see the sisters coming towards us followed by a throng of mourners. When Mary sees Jesus, her pace quickens. We step aside, making way for her. She falls at the feet of Jesus and clings to

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His legs, wailing loudly. I fight to hold back my tears.

"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died," she laments. Mary is inconsolable. Hers is a grief that knows only torment with no relief. Her heartbreak is naked with no attempt to conceal it or dampen the pain.

Jesus reaches down to her, and gently guides her to her feet. As He stands up I see an expression on His face that is utterly unrecognizable. His eyes are filled with sorrow, but His eyebrows and thinned out lips seem to conceal a forceful anger. His voice betrays agitation as He queries, "Where have you laid him?"

Mary is unable to speak. Those with her spoke up, saying, "Come and see, Lord." Then it all seems to flood down upon Jesus, and He begins

to weep. And seeing Him weep, and Mary's grief, I collapse into convulsing grief. Tears flood. I let out a deep moan, and I hear others do the same.

"See how much He loves him," I overhear. It is some of the visitors from Jerusalem speaking of Jesus. And a new wave of grief washes over the assembly.

Slowly the group begins to move, led by some friends so the sisters can walk with Jesus.

"Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" I do not see the one who speaks, but I do see heads nod in agreement. My grief is now broken by anxiety. I am reminded of the danger of being here in Judea, and how the authorities want to stone Jesus. I suddenly feel very naked and vulnerable. What are we doing here?

Reflection 3: Beyond Appearances

Faith is deeper than appearances. Faith claims what cannot be seen. It claims Your promises even when the prima facie evidence says something else. That's why the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says: *"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."* Faith transcends appearances. Apparently, Lazarus was dead. The evidence was irrefutable: he had been in the tomb for four days. Decomposition would have set in – the odor of death and decay. You challenge Martha to trust You as the source of eternal life. You cannot be that source unless You also have

mastery over death. Your word challenges us to see two dimensions of life, no three – first, this physical life as we know it; second, the hidden interior spiritual life, which when absent, robs us of the fullness, joy and freedom of the first life, and finally, the life to come. And there are three deaths: the death of this body; the death of our inner spirit, and the death that will come to those who fail to enter into Your eternal rest. You do not demand that we lead spotless lives. You do demand that we trust You as resurrection and as life and to put our faith on You.

Application: *Is there some circumstance in my life right now where I am struggling to believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life?*

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Reflection 4: Do You Believe This?

"Do you believe this?" Not, do you understand this? Not, how do you feel about this? Not, do you agree with Me? But do you believe... It is an invitation to deeper faith, not an invitation to debate or theological understanding. The raising of her dead brother was not contingent upon her expression of faith; You had already determined to do that. But You use her circumstance, and You use my circumstances, to call us to something higher – to call us beyond the facts of our circumstances to faith in You. You call me to see You as greater than my circumstances. You call me to a radical trust in You as my resurrection and my life. "Yes, Lord, I believe." The saying goes that God has no grandchildren.

Others cannot do the believing for me. I must believe for myself. I cannot borrow my faith from another. I must cultivate my own garden of faith. Martha's confession of faith is remarkable. It is a three-fold confession – You are the Christ – the Messiah promised through the Jewish Scriptures we call the Old Testament. You are the Son of God – the only begotten, true God of true God, who cloaked Yourself in humility to be born of a woman and live and die as one of us. You are the One who is to come into the world – the long-awaited hope of Israel – the one spoken of by the prophets of old. The One who would break open the veil and shower God's love upon the earth in surprising ways.

Application: If Jesus were here right now and asked the same question of me, how would I respond to Him?

Reflection 5: Mary's Regret

Mary offers the same rebuke as her sister – "if You had been here my brother would live..." But unlike her sister, Mary does not go further. She offers no expression of hope or expectation. She is mired in loss and grief. She is associated in the story with the unbelieving Jews. The focus is on death – not resurrection and not life. She is shown to be hopeless. The end is the end. She cannot raise herself to higher aims. So she and the Jews sit in their grief, but cannot rise above

it. In a little more than one month from now, evidence of Mary's own resurrection will be revealed: she will anoint Your feet with expensive perfume and wipe them with her own hair. But for right now, she cannot imagine You as resurrection or life. And she cannot fathom why, when You have so generously healed strangers – You would not heal her own brother whom You loved.

Application: When have I been angry at God for not doing for me or a loved one what I had seen God do for others?