

# *Martha and Mary*

Fifth in Lenten Series:  
Heart to Heart Talks with Jesus

by

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John 11:17-44

<sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup>She said to him,

“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”<sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.<sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.<sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.<sup>34</sup> He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep.<sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me.<sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”<sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”<sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Every single one of us can imagine what it might have been like to be in the cemetery near the tomb of Lazarus. Standing beside his grieving sisters, Martha and Mary, in so many ways, this scene in Bethany's cemetery is where the world is, right now. We have seen the pictures of stretchers in white protective covering, being carried out of homes by people, in white protective covering, from China and South Korea, to Seattle, New Orleans, New York. We have seen lovely churches in Italy filled with coffins, hospital corridors in Spain lined with patients on the floor, and lines of sick people waiting to be tested in our country worried to death.

We can imagine the grief of Martha and Mary and the circle of friends around them.

One of today's foremost experts on grief, David Kessler, was interviewed by the *Harvard Business Review* this week. He thinks a lot of what we are feeling right now is a number of different forms of grief. He said: "We feel the world has changed, and it has. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of the economic toll; the loss of connection. We are also feeling anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is that feeling we get about what the future holds when we are uncertain," and we begin to imagine uncertain futures.... like – there is a storm coming.

Kessler says that with this virus, the anticipatory grief is so confusing for us. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening but we can't see it, and it breaks our sense of safety. That is what is hitting us and we are grieving. Collectively grieving. And we are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air."

In our gospel reading for today, there is also collective grief in the air. Lazarus is dead, and this story is like our stories of what happens when someone dies. There is the illness that leads to the final breath. There is the shock that someone so deeply loved is gone. There are the sad repetitions of the "What if's..." If only you'd come sooner, Jesus,

our brother would not be dead. If only you had been here. There is the circle of friends, and the crowd of the curious gathering around to comfort the sisters, to grieve together, to hold vigil as we all do when a person we love dies.

There are tears in this story, just as there are tears in our stories. Mary's tears and Martha's tears, and Jesus' tears as well. Holy, compassionate grief from God streaming down the face of Jesus. This story washes over us with all the familiarity of what it is like when someone we love dies.

However, at the very center of the text, the heart to heart conversation between Jesus and Martha holds all of this collective grief up in the light of hope.

Martha is frustrated that Jesus had not arrived four days earlier. She believes Jesus could have healed her brother just as He has healed so many others. "Lord, if you had only come when I called, my brother would not have died." Jesus meets Martha in her grief, and begins to talk about resurrection, saying: I am the resurrection and the life."

Again, let us consider what is happening here with the contemporary help of the grief expert, David Kessler. Kessler says that the best way to calm our grief right now is to stay in the present.

We can counter anticipatory grief, when our minds race forward imagining the worst by staying in the present. We can breathe, wash our hands, maintain our social distance, and in the present moment we will realize that what we may be imagining has not happened. <sup>1</sup>

Jesus himself, the friend of the family, this agent of God's redeeming, healing presence in the world, is standing with Martha, and in that present moment he is assuring her of the power of God to

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<sup>1</sup> David Kessler interview from "The Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief," by Scott Berinato, *Harvard Business Review*, March 23, 2020. Thanks to Mary Bond for sharing.

raise the living from the dead. He himself is the answer to her brother's death and the answer is the gift of his life. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says to Martha, and then He adds a question so that she can put it in her own words: "Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Friends, in the midst of death, this Good News cannot be contained. As soon as His truth becomes her truth, Martha runs to find her sister Mary, saying: "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." Jesus is the agent of life for Martha. And Martha becomes the agent of hope for Mary. This is a very important word of scripture for our congregation... This heart to heart exchange of one person's faith becomes an invitation to another. "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." <sup>2</sup>

This intimate moment of shared faith between sisters – is the Word engraved in stone over the front door of our sanctuary. In the King James Version it reads: The Master is Come and Calleth for Thee. Words always over the front door of our sanctuary, now a banner over all of us wherever we are. The one who says – I am the resurrection and the Life – is come. He is come in today's season of grief.

Jesus is what the grief expert calls, our present moment. He is the Resurrection and the Life today, in our space, and in our time. Most biblical scholars call this story a Prelude to Easter, and God knows we need a Prelude to Easter these days. This is the last defiant act of Jesus against the powers of the world which will seal his fate. As professor Fred Craddock once said, "for Jesus to call Lazarus out of the tomb is to put himself in." <sup>3</sup>

We will get there – come Good Friday – soon enough. But the good news for us this day, is the assurance that Jesus is with us – in the

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<sup>2</sup> Kessler again.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock, *John*, Knox Preaching Guides, p. 88.

midst of this pandemic crisis; he is with us in the cemeteries of the world; he is with us in our grief and in our tears.

But none of that is the last word. The last word is his: “I am the Resurrection and the Life....

The front door that normally leads us into the sanctuary, also sends us out saying: The Master is Come and Calleth for Thee. May we heed this call of Martha to her sister Mary – with compassion and with hope by sharing faith in the present reality that Jesus Christ is with us even now.

AMEN.