

Sermon- The Right Kind of Believing

Scripture: John 11: 17-29

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Today we are going to finally reach Bethany and get into the action in Jesus' final sign miracle. Jesus and his disciples have reached Bethany from Perea near Galilee. By the time Jesus reaches this place, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Now Jesus did not just reach there after Lazarus was dead four days by accident. You see this four day period is very significant because the Jewish belief about death was that when a person died they thought that the person's spirit leaves the body at the moment of death but then still hovers around looking for a way to reenter the body. However by the third day decomposition becomes visible with changes in the body's color and this they believed removed all possibilities for the spirit to reenter. In other words, the third day onwards is the point of no return for the dead. That is when Jesus enters the scene.

Another aspect of today's passage is this. Lazarus had two sisters, Mary and Martha. They have very distinct personalities and we know from a famous story found Luke chapter 10 where when Jesus comes to visit their home Mary spends time sitting at Jesus' feet learning from Him, while Martha is busy cooking and even gets frustrated that Mary is not helping her. What you can see there is a personality trait of Martha's. She is an anxious person who showed her hospitality by being super busy preparing for the guest while actually not being present with the guest. If this is how she was with everyone, in psychological terms this is described as an "anxious-avoidant" attachment style. That is just my opinion. Take it for what it's worth. Mary her sister on the other hand was present with Jesus and sat at his feet and listened to him very carefully. And Jesus himself said that what Mary did was better. Right? Now you don't have to be a psychologist to see the distinct personalities of the sisters. But with those distinct personalities comes their own unique chemistry with Jesus. And that difference is on full

display in our passage. Next week we will get into more details of the Jesus - Mary interactions. Today we will focus mostly on Martha.

So here is how the scene unfolds. Jesus and his disciples approach the Lazarus house. Before Jesus reaches the house, the message of his arrival reaches the sisters. When there is a death in the Jewish household, the custom at the time is that the family members sit in the house while people come and sit quietly with the grieving members and sometimes even mourn with them. Now Bethany which was less than two miles from Jerusalem so there were a lots of people from Jerusalem among the mourners. Actually there was a very big crowd at the house, indicating that Lazarus was a man of some standing in society there. Now this is just the way Jesus wanted it. Jesus did want a lot of witnesses to testify about what he was about to do there. Anyway, when news of Jesus' arrival reached the house, maybe it reached Martha first, we don't know but we are told that at first only Martha gets up and goes to meet Jesus.

Now the first thing she says when she sees Jesus is, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died". Let's unpack that statement for a minute. What Martha is saying is, look Jesus, I know your power to heal people. And whatever condition Lazarus had, I know you had the capacity to heal him. If only you were here at the right time. But for some reason, you were not, and Lazarus died.

I want you to hear what Martha is acknowledging and not acknowledging about Jesus in this statement. She is acknowledging that Jesus had great power to heal an individual. But clearly in her mind Jesus' power ends with the death of the individual. Based on her own observations this is a reasonable conclusion for her to make.

Now you might say, wait a minute! If you look at the next verse, Martha is saying, "But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you". What do you make of that statement? Well, it is easy to think that because we know the end of the Lazarus story that Martha is open to the idea that Jesus had the capacity to change Lazarus'

condition even at that point. Actually if we peek ahead to verse 39 we can clearly see that that was not what Martha was thinking. You see in verse 39 when Jesus asks that the stone over Lazarus' tomb be rolled away what does Martha say? She says, by this time there will be a stink because he has been in the tomb for four days. So she is saying to Jesus, whatever you do, don't open the tomb now. So what did she mean by "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask?" Well, as a good Jewish woman she would have been familiar with the scriptures that talk about God listening to the prayers of the righteous person right? Verses like Ps 84:11 "no good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly" or Ps 34:15 which says, "The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous And His ears are open to their cry." So Martha is simply acknowledging that God hears the prayers of righteous people and she still believes that Jesus is a righteous person, even though he did not show up in time to save Lazarus. And now that he is here, he could still pray for the family. After all they would have plenty of needs. It was quite likely that Lazarus was the only earning member of the family and so they would be in a considerably difficult situation because they most likely lost the only breadwinner of the house.

At this point Jesus jumps in and tells her, "Your brother will rise again" And to that she tells Jesus, "yes I know he will rise again like everyone will rise again on the last day". Martha is here showing her alignment with what the Pharisees believed about resurrection. In the Jewish world at that time, the Pharisees believed in the general resurrection on the last day, while the Sadducees believed that this life is it, that there was nothing more to come. So anyway Martha already believed in the general resurrection and when Jesus said, your brother will rise again, she did not think Jesus was telling her anything she already did not know.

Jesus then presents a next level revelation, a big I AM saying at that. He tells her, "I Am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in, though he may die, will live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." Jesus presents her with two big ideas.

The idea that when you believe in Jesus, even when you die, you will come back to life-the resurrection. And the die that if you live and believe you will never die, or the idea of eternal life. And then he asks her if she believes this.

Martha hearing all this says, “yes Lord I believe” and makes one of the best declarations of who Jesus is unto this point in John’s Gospel, if you exclude the prolog. She says, “You are the Christ, the Son of God who has come in to this world.” And then almost as if things are getting too intense for her, she leaves Jesus and goes back into the house and quietly tells her sister Martha that Jesus wants to talk to her. On hearing that Mary leaves the mourners and makes her way to see Jesus.

The question we need to examine from this interaction is this. Jesus makes a powerful truth claim. “I AM the Resurrection and the life, if anyone believes in me, though he may die, he will live” Then he asks Martha if she believes what he just told her. She immediately says yes. But when we look ahead just a little bit to verse 39 where Jesus is literally in front of the tomb and asking for the stone to be rolled away and she is telling Jesus not to have the stone rolled away because Lazarus’ body would be smelling from decomposition by now.

So how do we put what Martha has just declared with her words and shown with her actions together? She says she believes that Jesus is the Resurrection and the life, but she does not think Jesus’ claim means anything in the practical sense. And Martha as you know is a very practical “doing oriented” person. So she can quickly say yes to Jesus’ claims but in terms of practical reality, Jesus’ claims did not mean much to her.

When I speak critically of the faith of Biblical characters I do feel bad at one level. The Bible writes the story in such a way that the faith holes of its characters are exposed for us to see. Yet we know that the Martha of verse 39 is not the final Martha right? I am sure she grew spiritually from this point to a point that is much more Christlike than what you and I are today. But the Bible puts on display the middle school stage of

Martha's faith journey so that you and I can move up from our own Middle school or maybe even elementary school stage faith right?

Coming back to this incredible revelation that Jesus drops on Martha, "I Am the Resurrection and the life" and what's Martha's response? She tells Jesus, I knew that. I know you were a pretty cool guy.

That response is as frustrating as the opposite response, where Jesus feeds 12,000 people and walks on water and then Jesus tells them, and the people's response when Jesus asks them to believe that he was sent by God was to say show us a sign that you are sent by God. Indifference comes in many forms. And to Jesus' final I AM revelation, Martha says, she believes and goes back to stuff that she had to do.

This kind of indifference brings back memories for me with my first Bible study with students from another religion. These students were faithful to come to Bible study for a whole year. In that year, I went through the Salvation history lesson spanning the whole Bible. And what was their response? That was very good, we enjoyed it and everything you shared about God, that is exactly what we believe from our religion. And I was thinking to myself, exactly what you believe? Then what has this Bible Study added to your life, if you are the same now as you were one year ago?

Let me further clarify the problem for you. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is telling his listeners, all they have to do is believe in him. Believe in what He is saying and believe in who He is. And here you have an example of someone who has done just that. Yet at the practical level, nothing has actually changed in Martha's life.

This is where we have to understand what Jesus really means when he says we have to believe that he is the Resurrection and the Life. For the belief to count, Jesus wants us to not just believe in the words of Jesus, we have to believe in the power of Jesus.

Because only when we believe in the power of Jesus' words will we be able to shift gears and change the actions of our life to match the words.

Much of the church today in the US has aligned with political power because political power is intoxicating. If you have political power you can influence laws in your favor, you can influence the highest courts in the land, you can have state protection and state privileges. And for political power, the church has been willing to compromise its witness tremendously.

What troubles me is this, you can only be desperate for what you don't have. If you are seeing power from a political source, it is signaling to the world that you don't have any other power source.

The reality is that the faithful church is not short of power by any measure. God has given the church and its faithful members access to Jesus' power. And Jesus power is more powerful than the power of all its enemies put together. It is the power to heal dangerous diseases. It is the power over sin. It is the power over confusion. Jesus power is the power over fear. Jesus power is the power over your circumstances. Jesus power is power over the news cycles of the day. Jesus power is power over the grave even. That is what it means when Jesus says, "I AM the Resurrection and the life". You and I, the church are supposed to be living in this power. And when we have Jesus power we are not supposed to be impressed with or drool over worldly power, because worldly power will amount to nothing one day. [Ezekiel 21:26](#)

This is what the Lord GOD says: 'Remove the turban, and take off the crown. Things will not remain as they are: Exalt the lowly and bring low the exalted. [Daniel 2:21](#) He changes the times and seasons; He removes kings and establishes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.

I don't know if you saw the news this past week but Robert Kraft the owner of the most successful football team the Patriots, just this week was charged with soliciting

prostitution in Florida. The guy who has everything, charged with paying for sex in a massage parlor. Quite a contrast from the triumphant moment at the Super Bowl just a month ago. Don't be impressed with worldly power because the pursuit of worldly power causes you to lose sight of Jesus power.

Yes Jesus wants you to believe he is the Resurrection and the Life. But not just as a string of words put together in a sentence. Jesus wants you to believe in the power behind those words. Power that can be yours. Power that can change your life and the lives of the people around you. Power that defines a righteous people as that person that can never be shaken. Do you believe that Jesus has the power to Resurrect and the power to give eternal life? Do people around you feel the Jesus power in you?

May God give us the capacity to live and breath Jesus power in our lives. The power of the Resurrection and the power of Eternal life. Let us pray.