

"Encounters With Jesus"
"Mary and Martha"

One of the more interesting places Nancy and I have traveled to is a town in Oregon called "Sisters". Sisters, Oregon. It has kind of a western flavor to it. I bought a George Strait western shirt there. As I recall, we saw a deer just casually walking on one of the main streets in town, stopping to munch on a plant. It was even more fitting because Nancy and I were traveling with her sister and husband. Sisters, Oregon. Today in this series of messages from the Gospel of John we're going to be looking at Jesus' encounter with two sisters – Mary, and Martha.

Isn't it interesting how sisters can be so different! (Brothers, too). Parents sometimes marvel at how completely different two of their children can be. Ladies, maybe you have a sister, and you're just different in many ways. You men may have a brother, and it's like, how did we grow up in the same family? Well, this is true of the two sisters we're looking at today: Mary, and Martha.

We're introduced to them in John, chapter 11. They have a brother named Lazarus. Lazarus is ill. John writes, "So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill'" (John 11:3). Later, in verse 5, it says that Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus. So, it's pretty clear that Jesus knew the family, and there was a bond between them.

But when Jesus is told that Lazarus is sick, He delays in going there. "Having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (verse 6). While Jesus stays where He's at, Lazarus dies.

But, before we see what happens next, let's check out something the gospel writer Luke has to say about Mary and Martha. Luke relates an incident that probably took place before the episode with Lazarus' illness and death. "Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:38-42).

Jesus is traveling, presumably with His disciples, and Martha welcomes Him into their home. Remember, at that time, and in that culture, hospitality was a sacred duty. And Martha fulfills that important obligation in a very serious manner. I can imagine she's diligent in making sure the home is presentable, that things are in place, that the food is prepared. No doubt she's been busy at those tasks for hours.

What about her sister, Mary? What's she doing? "She had a sister Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (Luke 10:39). She wasn't helping at all! C'mon Mary! Can't you at least do *something* to help? It's not surprising, then, when Martha complains to Jesus: "Don't you care that I'm left to do everything? My sister won't lift a finger. Tell her to help me!" I can understand why Martha would be upset! Can't you?

So, Jesus says, "Martha, I agree! I get it! Mary, get moving, and give your sister a hand!" No, He doesn't say that! Look at what he says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42).

Martha's hard work, and preparation, and hospitality was generous, gracious, and important – and I'm sure Jesus appreciated it. But there was something more important – being able to sit and listen to Jesus' words. Wouldn't you love to have an hour just to sit and listen to Jesus talk to you? Even a half hour, ten minutes. I would! Mary and Martha wouldn't have Jesus for that much longer. The house would still be there when Jesus was gone.

We can see how different these two sisters are. Martha is the practical one, the worker, the doer. Mary is more meditative, contemplative – perhaps more spiritual. So, do we see any of this in John's gospel, and what he writes about Mary and Martha? Let's take a look!

Lazarus is very sick, and by the time Jesus arrives, he's been dead 4 days. "When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home" (John 11:17-20). Martha hears that Jesus is coming, and she goes out to meet Him. Mary stays home.

Why didn't they *both* go out to meet Jesus? Is Martha again showing herself to be the "doer", that practical one? Is Mary so beside herself grieving over her brother's death that she's too broken up to leave the house? Someone suggests that Martha meets Jesus, explains the situation, while Mary is home "in black despair". Well, I don't know about that, but it does say that there are Jewish friends back at the house, *consoling* Mary. Mary appears to be the more sensitive, the more emotional, of the sisters.

Martha goes to meet Jesus, and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (John 11:21-22). Notice her great faith and confidence in Jesus! Even in the face of the fact that her brother has died! Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23). The interchange between Jesus and Martha that follows includes one of the greatest claims and promises that Jesus ever made: "Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'" (John 11:24-27). Martha may have fallen short in some ways – overly busy, fussy and distracted, but look at the great faith she expresses in Jesus!

So, Martha goes back home and says to Mary, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you" (John 11:28). When she hears this, Mary quickly gets up and goes to Jesus. The Jewish friends in the house follow her, and when Mary gets to the place where Jesus is, she kneels at His feet, and

says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (verse 32). She's crying, her Jewish friends are crying, and Jesus starts to cry! (The shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." John 11:35). And if you recall, even though Lazarus has been dead for 4 days, Jesus raises him from the dead. And the last word we have about Martha is this: When Jesus says to take the away the stone from the burial tomb of Lazarus, Martha says, "Lord, by now he'll stink!" Good old Martha: practical minded, honest, realistic!

But there's one more story that further highlights the difference between these two sisters. It's in the next chapter of John's gospel, chapter 12. It's only 6 days before Passover, when Jesus will eat His last meal with the disciples, then be sentenced to death. Once again Jesus is in the home of Mary, Martha, and the newly resurrected Lazarus! "Martha served" (John 12:2). Isn't that a surprise! And Mary? She gets up from the meal, takes some super expensive perfume, pours it on Jesus' feet, and wipes His feet with her hair. She loves Jesus so much she pours out anointing oils worth *almost a whole year's wages!* This costly act becomes an expression of her pouring *herself* out completely for this Savior and friend, whom she worships!

So, what can we learn from looking at these 2 sisters? *We're all different, and the Lord has room for all kinds of personality types.* Some sisters are different. Some brothers are different. All people are different! You know that! But it's a reminder that Jesus loves people of all personality types – the quiet and the boisterous, the outgoing and the shy, the practical and the mystic types. And there's a place in God's kingdom and God's plan for all!

Martha, while lacking in some areas of spirituality, still had great faith in Jesus. The fact that Jesus had to kind of scold her for getting too distracted with house preparation doesn't mean she was lacking in faith. Isn't that true to life? Doesn't that describe most of us? In some ways we have faith in Jesus, we trust the Lord, but in other aspects of our life, we may be lacking. We can trust Him in some areas of our life, but not in others. Sometimes we're at the feet of Jesus (in prayer, in the Word), but often we're too busy and distracted by what's going on around us. In some ways we obey Jesus, but in other ways we're not there yet. We're like Martha – we do have faith in Jesus – but our love for the Lord is not as reckless and over the top as Mary's – being willing to truly pour ourselves out for Jesus in a costly, sacrificial way.

This is not to excuse a lack of spiritual depth, or a half-baked commitment to Christ. It's just to say that even the best of Christians have both strong and weak areas in our relationship with Christ. We're always *in process, on a journey.* We've never "arrived" this side of the grave.

But perhaps the most important thing we learn from looking at these two sisters is, you've got to seize the moment, and do the most important thing. Sometimes an opportunity presents itself to us, and if we don't seize the moment, we never get that opportunity again. I think this is why Jesus said what He did to Martha. A good lady. A hospitable host. But He knew His time was short. Mary seized the moment by listening to Jesus' words. Martha forgot that housework would still be there, long after Jesus was gone.

A while back a lady from a former church sent me an article, "Dust If You Must". It said this:

"Life is short. Enjoy it! Dust if you must, but wouldn't it be better to paint a picture or write a letter, bake a cake or plant a seed, ponder the difference between want and need?"

"Dust if you must, but there's not much time, with rivers to swim and mountains to climb, music to hear and books to read, friends to cherish and life to lead.

"Dust if you must, but the world's out there with the sun in your eyes, the wind in your hair, a flutter of snow, a shower of rain. This day will not come around again.

"Dust if you must, but bear in mind, old age will come, and it's not kind. And when you go – and go you must – you yourself will make more dust!"

Haven't we all looked back on missed opportunities? We probably feel worse about adventures we didn't try than about challenging things we tried, and didn't quite succeed.

Mary and Martha remind us that it's easy to be content with what's GOOD, and trade that for what's BEST. Martha's devotion to hospitality was not *bad*; it was *good*. But Mary zeroed in on what was *best*: spending priceless moments with Jesus.

There's a family in one of the church's I served that I've kept in touch with, even after leaving that church. When I first came to the church, I discovered that the husband for a while played on the same ice hockey team the first year I played hockey. Her son and family lived out of state, and whenever they were in town they would come to church, and I loved to see their grandchildren. The lady every once in a while would come into my study, and talk about family issues and spiritual issues. After I left the church our families continued exchanging Christmas cards. Every once in a while we'd talk on the phone, or she'd send me a letter.

Her husband died not too long ago. And over the summer she wrote me a letter. In her shaky handwriting she explained how she was very sick, and felt the end wasn't far away. I kept that letter on my desk at home. I thought of writing back, but decided to call. Day after day I'd look at that letter thinking, "I've got to call ____." Day after day, I didn't do it.

Then I heard she was very, very ill, and had gone to a nursing home. I tried to track her down, to find what nursing home she was in. But before I was able to do that, I heard that she died. I opened her letter once again, read it, and wept inside. I attended her funeral – but the sadness I felt was not just her death, and the grief her family was experiencing.....All those weeks and months I looked at her letter on my desk, I was writing sermons, preparing Sunday School lessons, making calls to parishioners. I was doing a lot of *good things*! I just didn't do what was *needful and best*. There are always sermons to write, Sunday School lessons to prepare, but there was only a limited amount of time to visit my friend Betty one last time.

Let's try to be like Mary – seizing those opportunities to do what's *best and needful*, before those opportunities slip away!

