

Opening Words

Jesus was late, and Lazarus was dead. But God was in control and he used these circumstances to teach us a lesson that will determine our eternal destiny.

20 The Grieving Sisters of Bethany 2

When the servants left Jesus and his disciples, with joy, thinking that Lazarus would be healed and not die, the disciples said, “Well, Master, are we going to Bethany or not?” But Jesus remained quiet and said nothing, and the disciples waited and wondered why he gave such assurances to the servants but did not immediately travel with them to heal his beloved friend.

They walked outside and began discussing these events among themselves. One of them said, “you remember a couple of years ago, when we were in Cana? Do you remember that royal official who came and told us about his sick son in Capernaum? Jesus didn’t go with him and yet his son was healed without Jesus even going there. Maybe Jesus did the same with Lazarus.”

Another said, “Yes, but also, maybe Jesus does not want to go to Bethany. Bethany is in Judea and only a couple of miles from Jerusalem. The religious leaders are angry with him over the stories he has been telling and all he has been doing. And you remember what happened the last time we were there, they wanted to stone him.”

Two days passed, and the disciples assumed that the crisis in Bethany was over, but Jesus surprised them all and said, “Prepare your belongings. It’s time. We are going to Judea again and first we must stop in Bethany.”

“But teacher,” one of the disciples said, “you do remember what happened the last time we were in Judea. The leaders tried to kill you. They wanted to stone you. Are you sure you want to go there again?”

And Jesus said, “how many hours of daylight are there in a day? Twelve? Yes. That is the time to do the work of God, when it is day. If you try to walk or work when it is night you will stumble in the darkness. But if we go while it is light, we won’t stumble. We are going to do the work of God. Our friend, Lazarus, awaits us. He has fallen into a deep sleep, and I go to awaken him.”

The disciples then breathed a sigh of relief. “Lord, this is such good news about Lazarus that he has fallen asleep. If he is asleep he will recover. He will be healed.”

But Jesus said, “You don’t understand. When I said that Lazarus has fallen asleep, I did not mean that he was just asleep. Lazarus is dead. Lazarus died shortly after the servants returned home.”

“What?” the disciples said, “But you said that Lazarus’ sickness was not to end in death. You said his sickness would be to the glory of God. You sent the servants away thinking Lazarus would be healed and now you say he died?”

“I am so glad, for your sakes, I was not there. I am building your faith. I want you to believe like you have never believed before. You must trust me. Let’s go. We’re going to Judea and there we will find death, but we will also find the glory of God.”

The disciples were confused. They thought Jesus would heal Lazarus. But Jesus had not gone to him and allowed his friend to die. The disciples were also afraid. They shuddered at the mention of death and the memory of those who wanted to kill Jesus and them. They knew the religious leaders were looking for Jesus. They knew the religious leaders wanted to kill him. It seemed that Jesus was walking into a trap.

Finally, Thomas said, “Come on guys. We may not understand everything but it’s time to go. Are you faithful only when the times are good. If he dies, we die with him. But we will stay by his side.” And off Jesus and the disciples went to Bethany.

In Bethany, the sisters and the servants were grieving. Many friends and family had come to be with them. It had been four days since Lazarus became ill and since the sisters sent the desperate plea for Jesus to come and heal their brother. But Jesus had not healed him. Jesus had not even come to the funeral or to grieve. Lazarus, their beloved brother, was lifeless and cold in the tomb.

On the day of his death the servants washed his body. They wrapped it in linen cloths, placing spices within the folds of the garments. They carried his body outside the village to a cave owned by the family. In years past they had laid other family members to rest. Now Lazarus was placed among them on a ledge hewn into the rock. A stone was rolled against the opening, and the sisters had returned home weeping over the sudden loss of their brother.

Often the sisters were given to fits of weeping and wailing over this loss and the attempts to comfort them seemed futile. Then, someone said, “Mary, Martha. He is coming. Jesus is coming. He is headed for the place of burial and he wants you to come to him.”

“What? He is coming now? Why now?”

“Jesus is calling for you.”

And when the sisters heard this news Martha immediately got up to see him, but Mary stayed back with the other mourners. “You go Martha. I cannot go to that tomb. Not yet. I cannot go see Jesus. My heart is too heavy.”

And so, Martha went alone to see Jesus. She had so many questions and so many emotions going through her heart, and one of them was – anger! Jesus had healed so many other people. Why could he not have healed her brother? Why did Jesus stay away? Why did Jesus not come? Why did he come now?

When she arrived at the burial site, she ran to Jesus and with sorrow in her voice she said, “Lord, Lord, why did you not come? If you had been here my brother would not have died. I have believed in you. I believe that even now, whatever you ask of God he will give you. I believe if Lazarus were still alive you could ask God and he would hear your prayer and heal him. But you didn’t come.”

Jesus said to her, “Martha, your brother will rise again.”

“Oh Lord, I know he will rise again. I know that on the last day, the great day at the end of the age God will raise him and everyone else. He will rise again with all God’s people, but Lord”

“Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live again, even if he dies. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die again. Do you believe this, that I am the resurrection, that I am the life?”

Martha wiped away her tears. She stood up. She looked at Jesus’ face. There was such compassion in his eyes, such tenderness in his voice, such conviction in his words, and she said, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are Messiah, you are the Son of God, the king, you are the one we have all been waiting for.”

Jesus said, “Where is Mary?” And Martha said, “She did not want to come. She said she wasn’t ready to come to this tomb, and she said she wasn’t ready to see you.”

Jesus looked with great sadness upon Martha and said, “Martha, go get Mary and bring her here,” and Martha went home and said, “Mary, Jesus is calling for you. He insists that you meet him at the tomb. I will go back with you.” And so, Mary got up to go to the tomb and when she got up all the friends and family members who had come to console her got up with her to go to the tomb. They thought she was going there to weep over Lazarus.

When they all arrived at the tomb, Mary fell at the feet of Jesus and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. I have believed in you. I believe that even now, whatever you ask of God he will give you. I believe if Lazarus were still alive you could ask God and he would hear your prayer and heal him. But you did not come.”

Then the entire company of people began to mourn over Lazarus. It seemed the whole world was weeping over the death of this man. Jesus looked upon them all. He saw their grief. He saw their sorrow. He saw their pain. And then Jesus said,

“Where have you laid him?” And they said, “Lord, come and see.” And they took Jesus to the cave where Lazarus had been laid four days earlier and when he saw the place he was overcome with grief for his friend, and Jesus burst into tears and wept with all those who were weeping.

When the friends of Martha and Mary saw Jesus weeping at the burial site they said, “Look, look at how he weeps. Behold how he loved Lazarus. Jesus is overcome with grief for our friend and brother.” Another said, “We have heard so many stories of this man. He has healed so many people. He has even given sight to the blind. Could not this man, if he had been here, could he not have healed Lazarus? Could not Jesus have kept him from dying? If only he had come in time!”

Jesus listened for a few moments. He listened to what the people were saying. He listened to their words of pain. He listened to their hearts that had been disappointed. He listened to their weeping and sorrow. And then, deeply moved within his heart he walked to the cave entrance. The stone was exactly where it had been placed four days earlier, against the entrance to the burial cave, and Jesus said, “Remove the stone.”

But Martha said, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench. He has been dead four days.”

But Jesus turned to Martha and to his disciples and said, “Did I not say that if you believe, you will see the glory of God? Remove the stone.”

So, they removed the stone and stood back, waiting to see what Jesus would do next. Jesus lifted his hands to heaven and said in a loud voice, “Father, I thank you that you have heard my prayer. I know that you always hear me but for the sake of all those here with me I say this – thank you for hearing me – so that they may believe that you have sent me.”

Jesus finished. He looked toward the tomb and His face became full of anger at death. His face became full of fury at sorrow. His face became full of anguish over the pain of all mankind. He breathed deeply, and then in a loud voice he said, “Lazarus, come forth!”

Martha and Mary looked at each with astonishment. What was Jesus doing? They looked at Jesus. They looked at the entrance of the cave. The crowd was silent. All held their breath, and then they saw him, Lazarus standing at the cave entrance, burial cloths wrapped around him – breathing, walking, and alive!

Jesus said, “Go to him and loosen his garments. Your brother lives!” And the people shouted and wept, but this time they wept for joy!

Oh, my friends, if only we could have been there, if only we could have seen the grief and the anguish of the sisters and their friends and their family and ... Jesus. If we could have been there and seen Jesus weeping. If we could have been there and seen Jesus praying. If we could have there and seen his anger over death that robs us all. If we could have been there and heard his voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” If we could have been there and seen Lazarus rise from the dead.

What would that have been like? But we were not there. We are here. I am here telling you this story and you are where you are listening! And what do we learn from it?

Jesus purposely was late. Jesus allowed Lazarus to die so that he could teach them a greater lesson. They all believed Jesus was a teacher. But their faith needed to grow. They all believed Jesus was a healer. But their faith needed to grow. They needed to believe that Jesus is the One who raises the dead. He is the one who gives life. He is the one who is the resurrection and the life.

What do you believe about Jesus? Do you believe he was a great teacher? That is good. But you must believe more. Do you believe he was a great healer? That is good. But you must believe more. Do you believe he was a great prophet? That is good. But you must believe more. You must believe that Jesus is the Lord of life! You must believe that Jesus is the one who has power over all sickness, all sorrow, all evil spirits, all sin, and that he has power even over death. Jesus and no one else is Lord.