

Opening Words

Jesus has performed his greatest miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead, but not everyone is happy in Jerusalem and danger is in the air.

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It was the final stop before Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples had travelled many miles from Galilee in the north, where his fame was greatest, on their final journey to the city of the great king, Jerusalem. The disciples did not know it was his last journey. Only Jesus did, and a woman, who gained great insight into the things of God. Her name was Mary, and she and her family loved Jesus dearly.

Jesus had been in their home before. On his first visit, he was teaching the men gathered around while the women busily prepared a meal for their special guest. Well, not all the women were preparing. While Martha was busily engaged in the meal, she noticed that her sister was missing and discovered her sitting with the men, and not just sitting with them, but she was up front, at Jesus' feet, listening with fascination to every word that came from his mouth, oblivious to all that needed to be done for the meal.

“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work to get this meal ready?” Martha had asked. Jesus replied, “Martha, Martha – you are worried and bothered about so many things when only a few things are necessary, really, only one, and Mary has discovered what this one thing is as she sits at my feet.”

It was a great lesson for both sisters, and this first encounter with Jesus in their home, his compassion for them both, and the wisdom of his teaching showed them the treasure to be valued above all other treasures – Jesus himself. They believed he was the promised Messiah, and their love and devotion to him was steadfast. They knew he had the words of God. They knew he had authority over evil spirits that afflicted men. They knew that in him forgiveness could be found, and they knew that he had power to make the sick well.

When their brother Lazarus fell gravely ill, the sisters urgently and confidently sent their servants to Jesus that he might come and heal him. They knew he would come. Jesus loved them. They knew Jesus loved their brother, Lazarus. They knew God would hear their prayer, and Jesus' prayer for healing, and everything would be alright.

But in their longest night and in their greatest test of faith, Lazarus grew weaker, Jesus did not come, and Lazarus died. The grief was overwhelming. Their beloved brother had unexpectedly died, and their beloved Master, Jesus, had failed them, so they thought. He had not come in time to heal Lazarus, and when Jesus did arrive, four days after his death, they wept at his feet, and Jesus wept with them.

But the death of Lazarus was an opportunity to teach the sisters a deeper lesson – Jesus had power to heal, and he had power to raise the dead. Jesus not only had power to raise the dead, but he said, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, shall live forever with me.”

Did the sisters believe this, he asked, and when they said “yes,” Jesus took them to the tomb and raised their dead brother to life. “Lazarus, come forth,” Jesus said, and their dead brother breathed again and walked out of the tomb and lived. Astonishment and indescribable joy swept over the sisters. Their love for Jesus deepened and they were committed to him – the great treasure – above all else.

But not everyone was committed to Jesus. After Jesus raised Lazarus, some of the bystanders, who were not sympathetic to him went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. The Pharisees went to the chief priests in the Temple in Jerusalem and told them, and they convened a council.

“What are we doing? This Jesus is a deceiver and is performing great signs. If we let him go on like this, he may perform more signs, and these uneducated people will believe in him.”

“Yes, and this will only stir up the Romans. They always are watchful for insurrection from us. When they see the people following Jesus they will take it as a threat, and they will remove us from our place of leadership. They may even destroy our nation.”

Caiaphas, the high priest, listened for some time as the council discussed the problem of Jesus but did not seem to know what to do about him. It was clear that he was performing many miracles, but they did not believe the miracles were from God. They believed Jesus was a deceiver, but what should they do about him? Finally, Caiaphas spoke, “Brothers, brothers, please quiet. It is obvious from this discussion that none of you knows what to do. But I believe our course of action is clear. One man must die. Either this man dies, or the nation dies. Either we arrest Jesus and charge him, or we lose our nation to the Romans.”

All fell quiet. It was a conclusion many had considered for some time – that Jesus must die – but they had been afraid to say it aloud. And now, Caiaphas had uttered the words that the religious leaders had wanted to hear all along – they must do away with Jesus – and from that point forward, they planned to kill him and gave orders that if anyone found him, they must report his location so they could arrest him and begin the proceedings against him.

The Passover of the Jews was near. Pilgrims from across the land and from the far corners of the Roman empire journeyed to Jerusalem. As they journeyed and as they congregated in the Temple in preparation for the great feast that commemorated their deliverance from Egypt, they asked, “Do you think Jesus is coming to the feast? And if he comes, what will he do? And what will the leaders do for there is a rumor they are seeking to arrest him.” And the people wondered what would take place in the days to come.

Jesus and his disciples were finishing the long walk from Jericho to Jerusalem, 17 long miles upward from the valley floor to the mountains of Judea. But rather than go straight to Jerusalem. Jesus stopped in one of his favorite places. It was the city where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. Jesus

was in Bethany. But this time, he was enjoying a meal at the house of Simon the leper, one of the lepers that he had healed.

The disease of leprosy that afflicted many in that part of the world was doubly difficult. It was difficult because of the obvious physical infirmity that it brought, and it was difficult because it cut off a person from the rest of the community. When Jesus healed the lepers, it was a double healing, for the person's affliction was now gone, and the person could be restored to the community and re-enter the social life of his friends, family, and worshippers of God. When Jesus went to the home of Simon the leper he was showing that Simon was physically healed, and he was restored to the family of God.

Many people were there. The disciples, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Martha was busily engaged in the kitchen preparing supper for this great host of people, and the crowds swarmed around the house. Some came into the great banquet room and stood along the walls to watch the great feast. They wanted to see Jesus, and they wanted to see Lazarus for all knew that he had died, was buried in the tombs for four days, and that Jesus had brought him back to life. But not everyone in this crowd was full of joy. Some were spies from the council of the religious leaders and they were sent to arrest Jesus and to kill Lazarus. Because of Lazarus, more and more people were believing in Jesus. That could not continue!

Finally, the men came in to recline at the table. First came Simon the leper for he was the host. He welcomed the disciples, then Jesus, and there at Jesus' side was Lazarus, alive and full of health and vitality. Some of the people whispered, "It is true. There is Lazarus! He did raise Lazarus. Praise be to God! Jesus must be the Messiah."

Simon the leper turned to Jesus and said, "Master, giver of life, will you offer our prayer of thanks before we recline at table." All grew quiet, Jesus lifted his face and his hands to heaven and said, "Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." All said "Amen," the servants began to wash the men's feet and anoint them before they reclined at table, the women prepared to serve, the crowd stood along the walls, but someone was missing. Where was Mary? She had not been in the kitchen helping her sister, and this time Martha did not seem to be disturbed as she and the servants joyfully prepared the meal for Jesus and her brother and for Simon and the disciples. Martha half expected to see her bold sister, Mary, in the room with the men, listening to Jesus and preparing to eat with them! But when she looked in the dining room, Mary was nowhere to be seen.