

Martha's Ever Increasing Faith

Last Sunday I shared the message, "It's Labor Day and Mary Won't Help." We talked about Martha and her sister Mary and the conflict they had when Jesus came to dinner at their home.

This morning I want to look again at the two sisters. Actually last Sunday most of the focus was upon Martha. I said then that I was no doubt painting her in a bad light. I think I actually said I was probably being too hard on the old gal. This morning I want to once again focus on Martha and consider the progression of faith that we see occurring in her life.

Turn with me to **John 11**. This chapter records the death of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha and his miraculous resurrection from the dead. (I guess there is no other kind of resurrection from the dead besides miraculous, is there?) It seems appropriate to preach from this passage with "Thunder on the Westside" beginning this evening, because I think the greatest sermon I've ever heard about Lazarus was preached by Bishop Frederick Hardy right here during Thunder on the Westside.

But we are focusing upon Martha. I was thinking about this message Thursday evening and thinking about the kind of person I picture Martha as being. One of my mother's sisters was named Martha. I can't help but picture this biblical Martha with some of the same characteristics as my aunt – always in the kitchen, always helping to get things done around the house, working hard.

Between the passage of Scripture we looked at last Sunday from Luke's gospel and the passages in John's gospel, we begin to get these rather distinct impressions about Martha and her sister Mary. I think we might suggest that Mary seems to be the more sensitive one. Martha was the take charge person. Mary comes across as delicate, fragile. Maybe she was the prettier one while Martha was the practical one. In Luke 10 Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus. In John 12 she is anointing his feet with costly perfume, an extravagant act of devotion and worship. I doubt that Martha had any perfume. While Mary smelled of perfume, Martha smelled of onions and potatoes and fresh baked bread.

Martha was the realistic one, the activist, the take charge person. Someone had to do it and she knew it wouldn't be Mary. It had never been Mary. There is nothing

wrong with that, that's just how it was. And now Lazarus was gone and someone has to step in and take charge and that someone would have to be Martha. I'm glad for Martha. I'm glad for her ability to serve, to organize, to take charge.

You know the story in John 12. Lazarus becomes ill and the bible says, **“So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick.’” John 11:3.** Jesus' response is entirely unexpected. He tells the disciples that this sickness will not end in death and they stay where they were two more days. Then he tells them to prepare to go to Bethany because Lazarus is dead. You noticed it too, didn't you? Like Bishop Hardy did that night... Jesus said this sickness will not end in death and then he tells them that Lazarus is dead. Something about this doesn't seem right. It must be that Jesus knows more about death and dying than all of us. We would do well to remember that. And while you are remembering, remember that he knows more about timing than we do as well.

Lazarus is dead. The disciples warn Jesus that folks back in Jerusalem want him as dead as Lazarus but Jesus says we are going. Thomas just says, “Let's go so we can all die together.”

Lazarus has already been dead and buried, in the tomb for four days. He is not just mostly dead, he is all dead and when your all dead, well there's only one thing to do. Go through their pockets and look for loose change. Lazarus was totally dead. Look at verse 20. **“When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.”** Martha was the doer. She had already baked cakes and pies and set out a nice deli tray for those stopping by the house. She had served all the coffee she could make and now she just couldn't sit still in the house waiting any longer. It's interesting isn't it? Although Mary is the one that was sitting at Jesus' feet last Sunday, this time Mary is the one that stays at home. Martha is the one who walks away from Bethany in hopes of meeting Jesus as he arrived.

And, somewhat like last week, direct as always, without a greeting, Martha comes to Jesus and says, **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”** Martha gets to the real issue, doesn't she? I think one of the reasons I like Martha is because she is real. She says what I am thinking. She isn't trying to sound all super spiritual, she

sounds like a real person, a sister whose brother has died, who is trying to understand the whole thing with Jesus and healing and sickness and death. She is trying to sort out her faith in all of this. And she hasn't quite got it all figured out yet. That's why I like her. Because I haven't figured it all out either. And because I've stood where Martha was standing, and I've stood with hundreds of others who stood where Martha was standing, wondering what would have happened if only He had been here...

"If you had been here, Lazarus wouldn't have died." It's like she is saying, "I believe you loved Lazarus and I know you are a miracle worker so I know you would have touched him and healed him if you had been here. You can't win them all, and I'm sure you had a good reason why you couldn't be here for us. And just so you know, I don't understand all of this and how miracles work and how you make these determinations about who gets healed and who doesn't, but if it matters, I still believe that you can do miracles for people, even if you didn't do a miracle for me and my family." Of course, the fact she said she still believed that God would give Jesus whatever he asked had some limits to it as well because when Jesus tells them to roll the stone away from the tomb, Martha protests about how long Lazarus has been dead and worries that the body stinks from decay by now. She believed it in an impersonal, "God is big enough to do anything I suppose", kind of a way - but she didn't believe it for herself and her situation.

It's kind of a mixed message isn't it? There is love and faith present but there is still this doubt, this uncertainty. She managed to believe but managed to limit Jesus as to what he would do in her circumstances. I think a lot of us are guilty of the same thing aren't we? Let's take the limits off. Jesus isn't limited by time or space or severity of the circumstances. He isn't even limited by Martha's unbelief or your unbelief or lack of faith. If he isn't limited by any of these things, then let's not try to limit him in our own mind. Take the limits off.

Ok, I'll give her one point for believing that Jesus could have and would have healed Lazarus if he had been there. But, I'll have to deduct one point for assuming that Jesus and his healing power was in some way limited to a particular physical or geographic locale. "If you had been here, that's one thing - but long distance - you probably can't do miracles. And once your dead, I understand you're dead." Martha

hasn't gotten very far in her faith.

Jesus then told Martha that her brother would rise again. Once again Martha responds with truth and faith, but it's limited in its scope, its reach. **“Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’” John 11:24.**

Martha believed what many Jews believed in her day, that there would be a final day of judgment that would include the resurrection of the dead. She believed, but once again it was an impersonal belief. “I believe someday something will happen and probably Lazarus will be raised up, but that doesn't help much today, does it Lord?” Martha was willing to embrace a formal and general doctrine of the resurrection, but she wasn't ready to risk believing it for her brother and herself right at that very moment. She wasn't ready to own it as a possibility for her circumstances.

And Jesus responded to her with this incredible revelation about who he was in the face of death. **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”** Sounds like a paradox, doesn't it? You live, even if you die and if you live and believe in him you will never die. Huh? Even though physical death will come to those on this planet, if you have spiritual life, eternal life through your faith in Christ as your Savior and Lord, then even if you experience physical death here, you will still live spiritually, eternally with Jesus. By placing our trust and faith in Christ as Savior, trusting in the one who is the resurrection and the life, then by believing in and living in Christ, we will never die. We have eternal life in Christ.

It is a powerful statement of life and hope. And then, Jesus kind of lowers the boom on Martha. She is a pretty direct person as we've said. But now Jesus is direct himself and he asks Martha the key question: **“Do you believe this?”**

Friends, this is the question of the century, the question of the hour, the question of the moment for everyone of us. “Do you believe this?” Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Do you believe that he is who he says he is and that he can do what he says he can do? Do you believe that he can still turn things around in your life? Do you believe that you can trust him even when death comes to your family, to your home? Do you believe that he is faithful and trustworthy? Do you believe this?

And look at Martha's response! **“Yes Lord, I believe...”** She believed, but like a

lot of us, she still had some unanswered questions. Martha was saying, “I don’t get it all, I don’t understand it all, I’ve still got a list of questions here that I would love to have answered, but the bottom line is, ‘Yes Lord, I believe you.’”

She didn’t understand it all, but she decided she could believe him because she knew him to be trustworthy. Jesus said his words were truth and that even more than that, he himself was truth. Jesus said, **‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’**

John 14:6. The starting point for any discussion about religion or ethics or any other issue of life starts here, with what Jesus said and did, because he is the truth.

James Boice points out in his commentary on John that we live in an age where people have grown tired of the bible so they have cast it off as a guide or the source of authority for their lives. But it is not because the bible is unreliable or the words are not trustworthy – in spite of all the textual criticism, most folks can’t point out one real error in Scripture that they would have a problem with. The problem is simply they don’t like what the Bible says – to them, or about them or about their friends. The bible reveals the fact that we are all sinners and we are all in need of a Savior. That’s stuff most folks don’t want to hear anymore. But the bible, the word of God is trustworthy. It is true.

So we can start here. **The basis for Martha’s belief: The word of Christ.** Martha says, “I don’t understand it all, but I believe you. I believe what you say is true and trustworthy. I can believe your word.”

Martha believes what Jesus says because she believes he is trustworthy. It’s the same reason we believe the bible, because we believe Jesus’ words are trustworthy. But then Martha also gives us an idea of the content of her belief. **The content of her belief: “I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world.”**

Martha believed that Jesus was the Christ. Christ means Messiah or Anointed One. By saying this she was confessing that she believed Jesus to be the Jewish Messiah, the one they were expecting to come at the end of the age.

Now understand that there were different expectations among Jews of that day concerning the Messiah, just as there are different expectations among Jews of today regarding the Messiah. Some expected a supernatural Messiah, some expected a

great teacher and spiritual leader, some expected a political leader and warrior like David who would lead them as they drove out the Romans. The thing that held all the beliefs together was the central idea that someday God would send an anointed individual and his arrival would announce the coming of salvation and God's deliverance. I don't know what Martha's understanding of the Messiah was, but somehow she knew he had come to deliver her and Mary and Lazarus. He was the deliverer and Savior.

Martha said I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God. Martha believed him to be the Messiah and the Son of God. I don't know how developed her understanding of Christ's divinity was. Did she understand that Jesus was God incarnate in human flesh? Did she understand that he was fully God and fully man, except without a sinful nature? I don't know how developed it all was, but she knew that she knew that she knew that he was more than just another man. He was the Son of God.

Is it important for us to believe that he is the Son of God? Yes it is, because if he isn't divine, if he isn't God incarnate, then his death on the cross means nothing more than any other person's death on a cross. It might have been courageous, but it didn't save us from our sins, if he isn't God in flesh.

And if Jesus is not God, then he didn't rise from the dead and everyone who teaches and preaches and believes that he did are fools and are of all men most miserable the bible says. If Jesus isn't God, then he hasn't gone to prepare a place for us and he isn't coming back and we are doomed without hope.

Martha believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed Messiah, the Son of God, and she believes him to be the one who was to come into the world. What did she mean by that? She meant that Jesus is the one of whom the Scriptures testify. He is the one promised in the Garden, that would come to crush the head of Satan. He is the seed of Abraham by whom all the world would be blessed. He is the one born of a virgin, the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecy, the one who would be wounded for our transgressions, upon whom the iniquities of us all would be placed. He is the crucified and resurrected one of the Psalms, the one who would rule on the throne of his father David forever, the one of whom the prophet said "of his kingdom there will be no end."

This is what Martha believed. And it is this belief that changes everything for Martha. It is this belief that allows Martha to stand in the cemetery, facing death unafraid, knowing that it is the Giver of Life Himself who stands beside her.

The faith that began in Martha as Jesus visited their home over the period of his ministry would take a bold step forward on that day. I believe something burst open and alive in Martha's heart as she made that strong confession, "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Did all the questions go away? No, but she knew to whom she would always turn for answers. Did all the doubts go away? Probably not, since she still questioned his instruction to roll the stone away from the tomb, but she knew the comfort that comes from being certain of the abiding presence of the one who is the resurrection and the life.

I'm glad for Martha and her doubts, her practicality, and I'm glad for this faith, this bed rock kind of no-nonsense Christ centered faith that was planted in her heart. Not faith in her own level of faith, not faith in her good works, not faith in her confession even, but faith in Jesus. I may not understand it all, but I believe in Jesus. I believe you are the Son of God. You are the One! Yes, I do believe. This is where it all starts.

The basis of our faith. Established upon what authority? Like Martha, it is established upon the trustworthy authority of God's word. The content of our faith? Like Martha's it must be centered upon the person of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Where do we get the faith to believe? The bible says he has given to each of us the measure of faith. There is faith resident in your life. Like Martha, are you ready to release it? Are you ready to reach out in faith and lay hold of this eternal life that Jesus has for you? Are you ready to put your total life and trust in him? Martha did, and nothing was ever the same again.

They walked to the tomb and over Martha's objections Jesus told them to roll the stone away. Look at verse 40. **"Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'" John 11:40**

If you believe you will see the glory of God. Not everyone gets raised from the dead like Lazarus, not at this point in time. Not everyone gets healed in this life. Not every ending is a happy ending, not when you are living in this fallen world. But Martha discovered that Jesus is life and hope and comfort. He is the way, the truth and the life and if you believe in him you will see the glory of God. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow,

but certainly for all eternity.

How's your faith? Is it growing? Increasing? Diminished? On the ropes? Maybe you've been coming to church for a while and you still have questions or doubts but like Martha your faith has been growing. It's time to release your faith. It's time to believe. Believe and you will see the glory of God. That's all I know. God figures out the rest. Maybe you feel guilty because you don't think you have enough faith. Can you agree with Martha? "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world." Believe and you will see the glory of God. That's his promise, to be revealed in his timing and in his way.