

I Met Jesus: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus

John 11

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I saw a headline this week that said, "Church-goers More Optimistic." This study showed that those who go to church are 56% more likely to be above the median score of normal human optimism. Some might think that's pretty good. It seems to me that number is entirely too low. Only 56% more than normal human optimism? Seems to me it should be 100%. A pessimistic Christian is an oxymoron. What is there ultimately to be pessimistic about? This message will shed light on this.

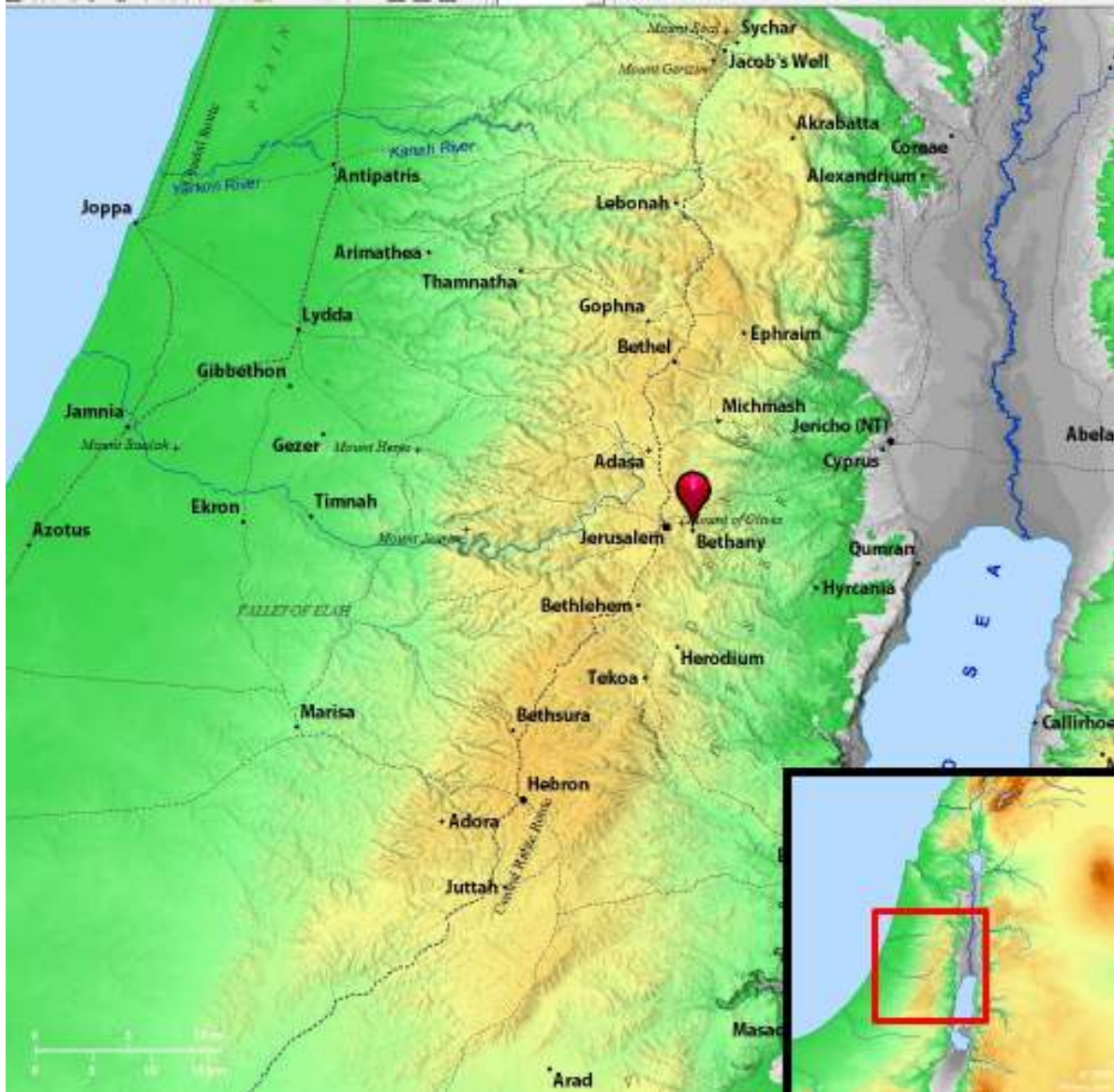
It has everything to do with death and eternity; not just death in general, but each of our personal deaths in particular. Our answer to the death question determines the joy we can have while we are living. As one example, I read Thomas Dubay's perspective on atheism and death, "...for the thoughtful atheist death must loom as a crushing catastrophe. Everything good, noble, beautiful experienced throughout life is about to vanish, not simply for a week or two, not only for a century, but forever. On the atheist's premise death is a nightmare unbroken by a dawn." (Thomas Dubay, S.M., *The Evidential Power of Beauty*, p. 99.) For the Christian, is death a "crushing catastrophe"?

This week we are introduced to three people who met Jesus. Their lives and their stories are intertwined in such a way that we are going to take them as a group over the next two weeks. We are introduced to them in John 11:1-2,

*"Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha."
"It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill."*

Geography plays a role in this story (see map on next page; Bethany is approximately two miles from Jerusalem). At the end of chapter 10, Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication and made the statement that God the Father and He were one (Verse 30). The Jews were outraged at such a blasphemous claim and in verse 31 picked up stones to kill him. They didn't, but this near miss on His life led Him to leave Jerusalem. Where He went is a matter of debate, but he is clearly "out of town."

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John 11:1 mentions them by name – Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. What is significant about them? Verse 5 says, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." (John 11:5)

You may be tempted to say, "But Jesus loves everyone, like the song says, *Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.*" We see here a glimpse into the real humanity of Christ. Would we think Jesus was fully human if you asked Him, "Jesus, do you have any friends?"

"No. I have to love everyone the same because that kids' song says I have to." What is more common to being human than to have friends? Jesus had special friends. Beyond Martha, Mary, and Lazarus we could point to his inner circle of Peter, James, and John. He often spent extra time with them, including the night He was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Another example is the author of this gospel who identifies himself as the disciple *whom Jesus loved* (John 13:23). Jesus had friends; among them were Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

Martha

- The oldest of the three
- Preoccupied with preparations and hospitality needs (Luke 10:39-42)
- Loved by Jesus

Mary

- Younger sister
- Extravagant devotion to Jesus by anointing him with expensive perfume (John 12)
- Loved by Jesus

Lazarus

- Youngest of the three
- No record of anything he said
- Died, and then...well, come back next week
- Loved by Jesus

They were apparently financially well off. Lazarus has a private tomb and Mary anoints Jesus with extremely expensive perfume. Still, they were a family. In Luke 10, Mary and Martha have a sister spat. Martha as the oldest and responsible sister is rushing around taking care of things, getting ready for the meal. Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet unconcerned about the preparations. Martha complains to Jesus that Mary isn't helping her. It's hard to believe that sisters would act and say things like this about each other, isn't it? That is part of the beauty of Jesus' friendship with these siblings. They were flawed people just like us, yet Jesus loved them and liked to be with them. You may want to keep that in mind with Thanksgiving family time approaching.

The Death of Lazarus and the Delay of Jesus (Verses 3-16)

"So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." (Verses 3-4)

Does that sound familiar? Last week with the blind man, the disciples asked why the blind man was born blind. Jesus said that his blindness would be the context for God to be glorified. Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick. What is the purpose of his sickness? *So that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" (Verses 5-8)

On the surface this looks like Jesus is hardly acting like a friend. If His friend was sick, why not rush to his aid? Or better yet, why not just heal him from a distance like he healed the boy from Capernaum in chapter 4? Why wait two days? Jesus displays the absolute control and foreknowledge of deity. He knows Lazarus is sick. He knows he is going to die. He knows how his death is going to be yet another context to unveil the full glory of his identity to the world. So he stayed two more days.

The disciples are not at all excited to go back to the area of Jerusalem where just earlier, a mob had nearly stoned Jesus to death and presumably, them with him. They remind Jesus, "Those people are trying to kill us!"

After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (Verses 11-16)

Within those two days of waiting, Lazarus had died. Now Jesus determines to go back to Bethany – back to his friends...and his enemies as well. I don't know how to read Thomas' comment, *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* It is either fatalistic (we might as die and get it over with) or faithful (Let's go with him and even die with him).

"Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. (Verses 17-19)

Here is the Jewish funeral practice on display. They would bury the body the same day of death. Mourners would come and stay with the family for some days, grieving with them. If Lazarus was in the tomb four days, being buried the day of his death means he has now been dead four days. Why is the fourth day important? There was a common belief that when someone died, their spirit hovered near the body for three days. After three days, it left and went to God. Three days was the limit. The fourth day, the soul is gone to God. The Bible doesn't teach that; it was just the cultural understanding. By waiting four days, it made what Jesus was about to do even more incredible.

Martha and Jesus – *I am the resurrection and the life (Verses 21-27)*

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 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. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." (Verses 20-27)

We see in Martha an understandable grief. She is mourning Lazarus' death but she also mourns that it could have been averted. Jesus is a healer and He was their friend. *Why wasn't Jesus here? Why didn't Jesus heal Lazarus? I thought he loved us.*

Is this really so unusual? When a loved one dies, the living are left asking really hard questions, *Jesus, why did this have to happen? We prayed. We fasted. We trusted. And yet, our loved one is dead.* Implicit in our questions was also in Martha's: *I thought you loved us. I thought we were special to you.*

I want you to see Jesus' gracious response. He doesn't rebuke Martha for her lack of faith. There's no sign He's even offended by her question. Jesus knew the answer to her question would be the same as the thirsty woman at the well, and the searching religious leader Nicodemus, and the hungry 15,000, and the man who couldn't walk, and the man who couldn't see. What they all needed was not what they thought they needed. His friend Martha still did not begin to comprehend the glory of Jesus...but she is about to.

In verse 23 he tells her, *"Your brother will rise again."* Martha's mind interprets this comment through the grid of her understanding. The prevailing belief in that day was that there was a resurrection at the end of the time; at the final consummation of all things. She took Jesus' comment like she took the comments of the other mourners there who probably tried to comfort her with the same words.

We do the same. I hear it often at funerals and visitations. We have little funeral and visitation truths we say to one another. "She's in a better place." "He's at peace." Or the very common, "You will see her again." The person grieving with Christian faith affirms these statements. "Martha, your brother will rise again."

"Yes Lord, he will rise on the last day. Someday in the murky future, I will see him again."

But Jesus isn't a normal person attending a funeral and Martha shows that she really doesn't comprehend the possibilities when the Son of God tells you at a funeral, "Your brother will rise again." Jesus must have thought, *My dear Martha, even after all this time, you have little idea of who I am and what I can do and what I mean when I say, "Your brother will rise again."*

"Jesus' concern is to divert Martha's focus from an abstract belief in what takes place on the last day, to a personalized belief in him who alone can provide it." (D.A. Carson, *John*, p. 412) Martha's thinking "someday." What day is Jesus thinking? Today. Right now. *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."* (Verse 25)

What have we seen? To the thirsty woman, He is living water. To the hungry crowd, He is the bread of life. To the blind man, He is the light of the world. And to a grieving sister and friend, He is the resurrection and the life.

He says, "I." First person pronoun. He is describing himself. "Am." Present tense. Not past tense "was." No hope in that. No future tense, "will be." Present tense. Martha, what I am about to tell you about myself is a reality right here, right now. I am the "resurrection and the life." The two clauses of the second sentence unpack each of these words in sequence.

Resurrection – *though he die, yet shall he live*

Life – *everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die*

Resurrection brings the dead back to life. "Life" is short-hand for "eternal life." Eternal life is life without the possibility of death. Jesus says, "I am the one who brings those who die back to life and I am the one who sustains eternally that resurrected life so that it will never die again. *I am the resurrection and the life.*"

Dead people need both! If He could sustain a resurrected life, but couldn't actually resurrect anyone, what good is that? If He could resurrect the dead, but then they just die again, what good is that? Dead people need resurrected life and ever sustaining life. But who has that power? No doctor I know. This is a supernatural statement and only an eternal God could make it. The condition for this he says is, "whoever believes," Believes what? *"believes in me."*

So let's put this all together. Jesus is, not was or will be, is one in whom resides the power to bring the dead back to life and to sustain that life forever conditioned upon that person believing in him.

Then he asks, *Martha, do you believe?* In a sense, He is asking this room today the same question, *Friend, do you believe?*

What About Jesus' Claim to be "the Resurrection and the Life" Today?

It is either lunacy or the great hope for mankind

I often think of those who may be visiting with us as either seeking answers for life's hard questions or skeptics who sit here wondering what the big deal is. Jesus' statement here is one that makes it hard to admire Jesus in a kind of religious sense without it driving you to a very personal decision about who He is. Who says things like, "*I am the resurrection and the life?*" Such a claim is so absurd unless you are who? God. Only God could make a claim like this and the conditional clause of "whoever believes" forces us to internalize our admiration in what the Bible calls "saving faith."

I don't see how people can admire Jesus generally, not with statements like this. He is either a madman, in which case you wouldn't want to admire anything about Him, OR He is who He claims to be – eternal God, giver and sustainer of life eternal for all who believe in Him. It is impossible to rationally sit on the fence about Jesus. So like Jesus said to Martha, I ask you, do you believe?

Jesus' promise is nothing less than an indestructible, eternal life

Of all the "I am" statements, this one is the most dramatic because it is filled with the most far reaching promise. To believe in Jesus is to be promised by God an indestructible life. The skeptic will quickly say, "Christians die." Yes. But so did Lazarus and Jesus resurrected Him as a demonstration of His power to raise the dead.

How can this be anything less than about the most wonderful news we could ever hear? For the natural man, death is a nightmare unbroken by a dawn. Death is emptiness. It is the absence of everything, including everything I value and want from beauty to love, to family, to relationships, and even deeper to my personhood and whether anything matters at all.

I was recently asked to speak at a high school that was dealing with a suicide. The condition was that I could not mention or insinuate anything about God or the gospel or faith, and definitely not Jesus. As I considered it, I couldn't think of anything I would say. How do you speak hope into a grieving student body filled with young people asking very personal questions, like "What really matters?" "Why did this happen?" "What will death mean to me?" I declined the offer.

The only thing I know to say is what Jesus said at a funeral so many years ago, "I am the resurrection and the life." There's hope in that. There's hope in Him. I couldn't say it at the high school, but I can say it here, and I can say it to you. The question is, like for Martha, *do you believe this?*

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