

“I am: The Resurrection and the Life”

For those of you who have not been with us throughout the Lenten season, I have been preaching a sermon series on Jesus’ “I am” statements from the Gospel of John. Four of his messages were given to everyone who had gathered there. Jesus proclaimed to those following him out of loyalty or curiosity, “I am the Light of the world, I am the Gate, I am the Good Shepherd and I am the Bread of Life”. To his disciples only, Jesus revealed, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life and I am the Vine.”

On the first Sunday of Lent, we had a visit from Lazarus’ sister Mary. And as John records it, only ONE statement was given privately. “I am the Resurrection and the Life”. His words to Lazarus OTHER sister Martha. So, it seems only fitting that we should hear Martha’s thoughts on this Easter Sunday. Therefore, I am going to ask you to open your hearts and unclutter your minds and lend me your imaginations for a few moments, if you will.

My name is Martha. I have lived in the town Bethany, a little east of Jerusalem my whole life, with my sister Mary and my brother Lazarus. We are blessed in many ways. Our parents left us very well off and we are also well respected in our little town. Because of this we have tried to give back to our community in whatever ways we can and to be champions of faith in the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob..

I LOVE to entertain. I am never happier than when I have an excuse to organize and cook and clean. I am ALWAYS busy – it seems to keep me out of trouble. So, we have lots of dinner parties and almost every Shabbat, some of our friends from the Temple come to share the Sabbath meal with us. Honestly, I am never more in my element than when we have guests.

My sister is more of a quiet friend, one who will deliver the meal after I prepare it and then sit and pray with you. She sits with Lazarus so often while he reads the Scriptures that he has even taught HER to read, something most unusual for women in our day. She says she like to read the Psalms and the prophets to friends who are looking for consolation or hope. How two sisters could be so different is beyond me but, in the end, I guess we good team.

But Lazarus of course, is the real head of the household and very respected by the Rabbis and other leaders of the Temple. However, he caused quite a stir with some of the Pharisees when our little family became followers of Jesus, the one we *now know* is the Christ. Some still say he is only a prophet, but our family believes he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the promised one of the Scriptures who has come to save us all from our sins.

Now that you know a little about us, I want to tell you what happened just a few weeks before Jesus' death. One day Lazarus came in from Temple and clearly had a fever. He was coughing and perspiring and struggling to breathe. We called for the village healer who prepared some tonics for my brother, but he only grew worse. Mary sat by his bedside for many nights, soothing his forehead with a cool cloth and reading the words of King David to him while I prepared soups and broths and herbal teas, one after another. But nothing seemed to help him.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and I told Mary, "We have to DO something!" Her idea of reading Scripture was a good one – I am sure it kept him calm. But let's be practical! This was a time for action. Lazarus always says that if I wrote a Proverb it would be: "Don't just sit there, DO SOMETHING!" But Mary's would be, "Don't just do something, sit here!"

And for once we agreed and Mary had a wonderful idea. She suggested we send word to Jesus, whom we had seen perform healing miracles, to come and lay hands on our brother. Surely, if any one could heal Lazarus, it was the Great Physician! We found a messenger who

ran to give Jesus the news. Lazarus and Peter are Jesus' closest friends and we knew he would come right away. So we were saddened beyond belief and very disillusioned when Jesus went to Judea instead. And to make a long, sad story short, our brother died.

Mary and I could not believe it! Our whole world changed in just a matter of days. What would we do without Lazarus, our beloved brother and head of our household? While we are modern women in a sense, Lazarus was still the real decision maker and took care of all of our business needs. And we love him so! We felt as if no amount of time would heal our hearts.

Then we heard through the village grapevine that Jesus was coming after all. Mary, being Mary, said we should just wait and see what happened. That Jesus would come to us in his time. Her faith always seems so much stronger than mine. But of course, I didn't listen to a word she said.

I immediately ran to the edge of the village before he could even get to our house. I planned to be diplomatic for once, but that is so unlike me. Instead, as soon as I saw him, I just blurted out, "If you had been here, our brother would not have died." What a bold thing to say to our Lord. In fact, my words and my thoughts really surprised me. We had so much faith in Jesus. But my actions let me know that, even though I did not DISTRUST the Lord, I really didn't really trust him completely. Maybe you can relate.

In truth, while Mary just sits quietly in prayer, I know she has heard me cry aloud more than once, "Why?" or "How?". And this time my only thought was "WHAT IF?" Maybe you have asked the same questions. Looking back now I realize that I have a faith that sometimes limits God – limits his work to the time and place that suits me. Because I followed by saying, no, really begging Jesus, "Even now I know that God will give you what you ask!" You see, I had faith, as long as it followed my plan for action!

Jesus did not seem offended or upset. He was so calm. He placed his hand on me gently and said, “Martha, your brother will rise again”. Well as much of a miracle worker as Jesus is, it seemed he didn’t understand what I meant. I wanted action and I wanted it then! But in an effort *not* to sound irreverent I DID say, “I know that! If there is one thing you have taught us to believe it is that we all will rise on the day of resurrection.”

Can you imagine that I talked to the LORD that way? Looking back, it is a wonder that I am still here! But Jesus is always gracious, slow to anger and steadfast in love. Honestly, I have never seen anyone whose eyes were more filled with love as in that very moment. Then he steadied me and said with both gentleness and force. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believe in me will never die.” Then he said so gently, “Do YOU believe this?”

And friends, I DID! In that moment, I understood something that I had not before. Maybe, it was the wisdom that Mary gleaned from sitting so quietly at the Master’s feet. But the whole realm of Jesus’ teachings seemed to enter my heart and fill me with peace.

Jesus was telling me that resurrection begins the very moment we believe that he is the Messiah. I realized that, with his words, Jesus had moved resurrection from being just an idea or a concept or even a belief to an actual person. HIM. Jesus of Nazareth. That everything about THIS life takes on new meaning when we are certain of the next life. Of being with those I love who has already died at that very moment – Lazarus and our parents, friends, aunts and uncles. That all of them are just waiting for me and yet with me now!

I will tell you that I don’t know how it happened, but I knew there was something holy, something otherworldly that mysteriously connected us all. And even though my heart still ached because of my grief, I had no fear about the future anymore. I knew without a doubt that I

would see Lazarus again, in God's time, and that would be just fine. Jesus' promise filled me with hope – not just for the future – but for the present. Somehow, I knew that Jesus had given me the faith to believe in the power of resurrection. And received that power right then.

And Jesus could see that my heart had changed. So, he asked me to take him to my sister and I did. I wanted to tell her everything but for once, I was as calm and quiet as she was. I think I knew in my heart that Mary needed to have a personal encounter with Jesus in order to receive peace, just as I had.

I led Jesus, and our friends followed, and when we arrived, we found Mary weeping. Have you heard that when Jesus saw her, he began to weep too also? Friends, I know he was truly sad that Lazarus was dead, but I believe he was weeping because WE were weeping. Maybe this will give you comfort when you sit in sadness and feel so alone because your loved one is not here with you. When you face anger because your husband has gone and left you with a mess or confusion because you didn't expect to lose a child before you lose yourself, then perhaps the picture of Jesus sitting right beside you weeping WITH YOU, as he wept WITH Mary will be of help. Maybe that deep love and compassion will be what gets you through until morning's light.

After Jesus talked to Mary, the three of us went to the grave where Lazarus had been dead for FOUR DAYS. By this time, the word had spread about what was going on and many people were following us – friends and strangers. And when Jesus called for our dead brother to come out of the tomb, I just blurted out, “But Jesus he will smell so awful!”

Mary gave me the “couldn't you show a little sensitivity and diplomacy for once” look that I have often received, though even SHE seemed confused. Especially when Jesus followed with a prayer “Thank you Father for always hearing me”, even before anything happened.

Everyone around was so perplexed but I knew in my heart that a miracle was unfolding right before our eyes. And sure enough, Lazarus walked out, shook off his graveclothes and we all went home to celebrate in Martha style. Of course, our joy was short lived because only a few days later, Jesus was crucified. He suffered so horribly and was not even given a proper burial. And that is why Mary and I went with the other women to his tomb, to anoint the body of our beloved savior.

I know that the very reason you are here today is because just as Jesus did not leave Lazarus in the tomb, God did not leave his Son there either. The stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb and two angels told us not to waste time looking for Jesus because he was alive! And he was!

And as Mary Magdalene and Peter ran to tell the others, I remembered the precious moment I had with Jesus. When his words changed my whole life. "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!"

And here is what I have come to know, even in my very busy heart. God's love does not prevent us from experiencing pain or suffering. Yet "The Lord can move into 'dead' and seemingly hopeless situations, and by his resurrection power, transform people and circumstances and infuse life that make everything new." (1)

You know, when Jesus raised Lazarus from his tomb, what he really said was, "Unbind him and let him go!" And oh, what a hope we all have. Because one day, we too will be unbound and let go and will live in His eternity with Jesus! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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(1) He Walks With You, David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, 2016. Pg. 98.