

Faith and Belief

Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

Texts: Luke 10: 38-42. Jesus visits the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus

John 11: 1-44. The death of Lazarus

The Gospel of Luke is dated around 85-90 CE. It is believed that the author of this Gospel was a Gentile Christian. The Gospel of John is dated around 80-90 CE. The author is anonymous. The name 'John' was attached to this Gospel by the church and is identified as being the apostle John.

The Gospel of Luke has a number of women present in the narrative. These two Gospels are the only ones that record Jesus' friendship with Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Jesus often visited the town of Bethany in his journeys. Jesus' final weeks of ministry prior to his death, took place in and around Bethany.

Who were Martha and Mary?

The home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus was located in Bethany, a town situated beyond Jordan. Jesus visited the home in Bethany twice. Luke and John are the only Gospels that record these two visits. It is probable that the family were known in the community. Martha was the owner of the house (Luke 10:38) and not Lazarus, which would have been unusual during this period in history. The two sisters were in their home when Jesus visited them. Lazarus was away.

In John's Gospel the death of Lazarus is central to the story. Martha is the dominant figure in this episode.

Retelling their story: What follows is a retelling based on the Biblical narrative. It is a composite of the episodes from the two Gospels. It is by reading into the silences around the events and the people in the text that this imagined reflection is written.

Martha reflects: *As I look back on the events that occurred before our friend Jesus was arrested I am glad that my sister Mary, my brother Lazarus and I were able to share special times with him. There was the time when he visited our home for a meal. Lazarus was away when we heard that Jesus was going through Bethany and that he would be coming to have table fellowship with us.*

Mary and I set about making preparations for a meal and tidying the house. Although Lazarus would be away, Mary and I were quite capable of hosting Jesus. As we talked while preparing the vegetables we wondered what our neighbours would think when they saw a man coming to visit us when our brother was away! We talked about the news that Jesus was now teaching his male followers about being disciples. We recalled hearing that he had sent seventy disciples to visit every town that he would be passing through. (Luke.10: 1-20). Many stories were told about his claim to be the Son of God. To us Jesus was friend and Teacher. I thought often about the demands of being a follower or a disciple. I tried to be realistic since women were often not noticed when we came to listen to Jesus' teaching.

The cooking was nearly finished when I heard Jesus at the door. I rushed to greet him. I led him into the room we used when we had visitors. I thought that Mary was finishing the cooking. I looked into the room and saw her waiting for Jesus. I was irritated that she left me to serve the meal while she sat at Jesus' feet listening to what he was saying. Of course I complained to Jesus! I wanted him to tell her to help me. (Luke.10:40). But he pointed out gently that Mary had chosen to sit and listen to him. He actually added that my sister had "chosen the better part". Well, I never! Did he not realise that there would have been no meal if I was also sitting and listening to him?

Mary reflects: I remember how impatient my sister Martha was when she saw me sitting with Jesus while she rushed around getting the meal ready. She was always the strong one in the family. She would organize our home, tell Lazarus what to do, and always find time to teach me. She was the anchor of our home. That night I didn't mean to deliberately discredit her. I had so many questions I wanted to ask Jesus. I had heard of some of the parables he was using when he taught his male disciples. I wanted to ask him to explain to me whether I could become a disciple too. It was good to be able to talk with him without any of the men being present.

PAUSE. REFLECT:

What aspects of discipleship do you see in the two sisters? How is the understanding of discipleship reflected in Christian communities today?

Martha reflects. Not long after that visit from Jesus tragedy struck in our home. Our dear brother Lazarus took ill. For days we tended to him. Friends brought us healing herbs and oils. Nothing seemed to work. Mary and I were desperate. We sent Jesus a message hoping that he would come to heal Lazarus. (John.11:3). Jesus never came. A

few days later Lazarus died. We wrapped his body in burial cloths and laid him in a cave with a large stone at the opening.

A few days later Jesus arrived with his disciples. I faced him angrily. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." (John 11:23). Jesus said to me, "Your brother will rise again." (John 11:23). My impatience with him must have shown when I said that I knew that my brother would rise again on the last day. (John. 11:24). His next words made me ashamed. He said, "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. Do you believe this?" (John 11: 25-26). I knelt down before him and said, "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John. 11:27). I got up and ran to get my sister.

PAUSE. REFLECT: "I am the resurrection and the life." (John. 11: 25-26).

How do we understand these words when we think about the dying of someone we love?

What does this mean as we think about our own dying? Does it make a difference to how we live?

Mary reflects: I was in the house crying and mourning the death of my brother when Martha burst in saying that the Teacher was here and was asking for me. (John 11:28). Jesus was still outside our village as I ran to him. Some of the women who were mourning with me ran by my side. As I met him I fell to my knees and cried, "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died." (John. 11:32). As I continued to weep I saw the tears in Jesus' eyes as he too wept for his friend Lazarus. I led him to the cave where we had placed Lazarus. "Take away the stone," he said. Martha reminded him that Lazarus had been dead for days and that the smell of death would be unbearable. (John.11:37). Jesus reminded us that if we believed in him we would see God's glory. Someone moved the stone from the entrance to the cave. Jesus then prayed thanking God for hearing his prayer that would make all those present believe that God had sent him. (John.11:41-42). He then called Lazarus to come out. Our brother walked out of the cave, still wrapped in his burial cloths. "Unbind him and let him go," commanded Jesus (John.11: 44).

Our family was restored. Jesus walked away to a town named Ephram and stayed there with his disciples. (John 11:54).

REFLECTION

Martha and Mary not only believed in Jesus they had faith in him as the Son of God – the Messiah. This ancient story of the family in Bethany and their relationship with Jesus transcends centuries of re-telling to speak to us today. It draws us into understanding spirituality as a combination of faith and belief, of moments of quietness and times of action. It can be a combination that replaces doubt with certainty.

As science and knowledge expand in our time how does it affect our faith?

Are we challenged in our faith in God as Creator when we become aware of a universe that seems greater than the biblical record of creation?

As medical research continues to push the boundaries between life and death is our faith challenged?

God of life and faith
may I know your presence in my life as faith, not fear.