

John 11:17-27, NRSV

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, '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.' 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. 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?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

During lent this year, we are looking at the stories of people who encountered Jesus according to the Gospel of John.

In this particular encounter, we see Mary and Martha, again. We've talked about these two ladies in this service before. Mary is the one who, in the next chapter of John, will pour very expensive perfume on Jesus and then clean his feet with her hair. Judas will object to her extravagance, but Jesus will approve of it. Martha is the one who will be serving food at the party where all that happens.

Lazarus, who we probably haven't seen in this service before, is their brother. The family lives in Bethany, a small town just outside Jerusalem. Jesus had a relationship with the family, and was friends with not only Lazarus, but also his sisters, Mary and Martha.

The three of them had been following Jesus' ministry:  
they had seen Jesus cure sick people  
and heard him teach about a day when God would have final victory over death:  
a day when the dead would rise again.

In this particular encounter, Lazarus falls ill and Mary and Martha send word to Jesus. Jesus takes his sweet time in coming to visit, and in the mean time, Lazarus passes away.

When Jesus and his disciples eventually show up, the family is in the middle of a crisis, and Martha is quite angry with Jesus. Jesus had known that Lazarus was sick, and had taken his time in showing up.

In her anger, Martha says something quite pointed: she looks at Jesus and says, "If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died."

"If you had been here..."

She had four days since her brother had been buried. Martha had four days to sit and fume at Jesus. Under the surface of Martha's "pointed if" are probably a lot of other thoughts:

"If only you had done what I asked you to do..."

"If you really cared about us..."

"If you wanted what was best for us..."

"If you knew how much this hurts..."

"If you actually loved us like we thought you did..."

You see, Martha is the kind of person who gets things done. Martha is that person at the office who, when you have an ugly job that just has to get done...you go to Martha and ask her, and she'll make sure it happens.

And then Jesus fails to get the job done for her when she needs it the most...

"If you had been here..."

Now, many of us know the rest of this story.

Many of us know that this story is going to end well.

Many of us grew up with a flannel-graph Lazarus...

We grew up with a story that was told in 3 minutes or less, and from the tone in Mrs. Smith's voice, we knew that the story was going to turn out well.

But that's not where Martha finds herself. Martha doesn't have a flannel-graph Lazarus or a Sunday School teacher telling the story with a sense of excitement for the climactic resurrection that comes at the end.

For Martha, this is not a small bump in the road,  
this is not a minor adversity to be overcome by the next plot device,  
Martha finds herself in the middle of this story  
where the truth about the world she lives in has just changed  
in a permanent, painful, difficult way.

Martha finds herself in the deep, dark middle of this story  
where a dearly loved brother isn't with her any more  
and a best friend has just betrayed her trust  
and the community of faith that she thought supported her just fell down  
on the job.

Martha finds herself not at the end of the story, but in the middle:  
the deep, dark, painful middle.

And Jesus responds to her "pointed if..."

Jesus responds by looking her in the eye and asking her to have some faith in him.

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life..."

John's Gospel points out that as far as Martha knows, Jesus is talking about that day in the far off future when God will perfect creation and the dead in Christ will rise.

As far as Martha knows, Jesus is reminding her about a time in the way-off future.

Then Jesus asks, "Do you believe in this?"

Jesus asks, "Do you really believe that I am the Son of God?"

"Do you really believe what you say you believe?"

Those aren't very comforting words.

Those are not the words of the apology that Martha likely hoped she would get.

Those aren't the words of a conciliatory friend.

And Martha does not reply, “Yes, Lord, I believe that dead people will rise again,”  
Martha responds, “I believe that you are who you say you are.”  
“I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Martha, because she is Martha, would probably rather that Jesus tell her what to do.

Martha would rather Jesus give her some marching orders.

But Jesus doesn't.

This Jesus, the one in John's Gospel, simply asks her to have some faith.

A couple of months ago, we talked about Jesus' response to another crisis. We looked at Jesus' response to the execution of John the Baptist. If you'll remember, we said that Jesus demonstrated four healthy responses to that crisis.

Do you remember that story? Herod executed John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. Jesus' followers found out and started gathering around Jesus. The disciples wanted to send them home because there was no food to feed them with, so Jesus turned a few loaves and fish into enough food to feed the crowd, then had the disciples hand it out. Then Jesus walked on water and told his disciples that they could carry on his teachings and legacy.

Do you remember that story?

In that story in the book of Matthew, when Jesus' followers were in a crisis and a panic, we said that Jesus:

- Gathered the community together to support each other
- Took care of the community's physical needs by feeding them
- Extended a call to his disciples to join with him in gathering and providing
- Reminded his disciples that they had all the gifts they needed to make the world a better place, even in light of the crisis happening around them.

That Jesus – we'll call it Matthew's Jesus – that is the Jesus that Martha wanted.

Martha wanted the Jesus that shows the community what to do.

Martha wanted the Jesus that immediately took care of everyone's needs

Martha wanted the Jesus that empowers her to make a difference in the world.

But that's not what Martha got.

Martha got John's Jesus – a Jesus who reminds us that ultimately, it is God who is in charge

It is God who is sovereign over creation and life and death and everything in the middle.

In the deep, dark middle of this story,

Martha would almost certainly have preferred to get Matthew's Jesus.

But she was handed John's Jesus

a Jesus who looked her in the eye, and reminded her that sometimes we're called to have some faith.

a Jesus who looked her in the eye, and reminded her that despite all that we do in faithful response to God's call, we are called first to trust in a God whose working in the world we do not always understand.

I think that you and I are often a lot like Martha.

I think that you and I really, truthfully prefer Matthew's Jesus.

Let me tell you a story about a friend of mine.

Chris and I were both 16 years old. We were working on the summer staff of a small scout camp in Southeastern Oklahoma.

A few months before we showed up to work, Chris and I had gotten our driver's licenses. Not too long after he got his license, Chris was in a really severe car accident. The wreck left him paralyzed from the waist down and left him in a wheelchair.

Now, you need to understand that before Chris had his wreck, he was a hiker, a camper, an athlete, and an all-around outdoorsman. Chris had seen sunrises and sunsets from the tops of mountains he had climbed.

When Chris showed up at Camp Dierks, he was assigned the job of running the camp store. Other youth staff were teaching hiking, swimming, canoeing, and all kinds of other fun stuff. And Chris was selling candy bars and cokes.

When Chris showed up at Camp Dierks, he was assigned a room in the Danner Lodge, a short walk up hill from where the rest of the youth staff would stay. He would stay in Danner Lodge with the old men who had a hard time getting around and went to bed at 9:00, rather than down the hill on Staff Row, where his young, able-bodied friends would be living.

Chris found himself in the deep, dark middle of a story that left him unable to walk.

Unable to hike.

Unable to swim.

Unable even to stay in a cabin with his friends.

When Chris arrived at Camp Dierks, the other youth staff rallied around him.

They made sure that every night there was a group that walked up the hill and hung out on the porch of the Danner Lodge with him after all the older folks went to bed.

They rolled that wheel chair down paths it was never meant to go down. And when it wouldn't go any further, they took turns carrying Chris.

The golf cart he brought with him to make the trips across camp with went home in far more pieces than it arrived in.

The lifeguards would occasionally get up early in the morning and go pick Chris up before he had to open the camp store and take him to the river, where two of them would carry him into the water and hold him in the current.

Those other staff members were busy being Matthew's Jesus.

They were busy gathering  
and feeding  
and supporting.

And as the summer wore on, Chris got more angry

Chris got more frustrated  
Chris got more defeated  
Chris got more beaten down.

You see, for all of the wonderful presence of Matthew's Jesus, John's Jesus was absent to Chris.

In Chris's mind, life was going to be an eternal, deep, dark middle.

For all of their gathering,  
for all of their providing,  
for all of their supporting...

...no-one was offering faith and hope in a God who is in control,  
even when we find ourselves in the deep, dark middle of a story  
whose ending we do not know.

Today, we're in the middle of lent.

Today, we find ourselves in the middle of the story.  
We find ourselves somewhere between Christmas and Easter.  
We find ourselves fully aware of the deep, dark middles in this world.  
But we find ourselves not quite to the resurrection just yet.

Where, today, do you find yourself in the deep, dark middle  
of a story that you don't know the end to?

Who, today, do you want to run up to and say,  
"If only you had been here..."?

Who has been Matthew's Jesus for you  
in the deep, dark middle of your stories?  
Who has gathered around you, fed you, supported you, and encouraged you?

Has anyone been John's Jesus for you  
in the deep, dark, middle of your stories?  
Has anyone reminded you that ultimately, God is in control?

Where in your stories today do you need that reminder?  
Where are those middles, where you need to remember that ultimately, God is sovereign.

My friends, there is good news:  
We know the end of Lazarus' story.  
We know that Jesus spoke and Lazarus rose from the dead.  
We know the end of this Lenten story:  
Jesus will die and rise again.  
We know the end of all stories:  
God is faithful and true;  
loving and merciful;  
sovereign and powerful.

In the middle of our stories,  
John's Jesus looks us in the eyes and asks us, "Do you believe this?"