



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
WASHINGTON, DC

DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?

John 11

March 18, 2018

Dan Claire

We love sorting ourselves and one other into personality types and identity categories. I'm one of nine Enneagrams, and one of 64 Myers-Briggs types. I also know my top three strengths-finders and my personal love language. Tell me your results, I'll tell you mine, and then maybe we can be friends.

Has all this identity technology made us happier? It seems like we're not loving each other much better than we were before. Understanding our *wiring* isn't enough. We long for so much more—to be truly known. For us to go beyond *knowing* one another to *loving* one another—well requires real sacrifice, and we all have our limits. When I think about the people I love the most, whose deepest heart longings I truly want to satisfy, I know that I don't have what it takes. Only God is sufficient to meet our deepest needs.

The Jesus we meet in John's Gospel comes into our world to show us what God is like. With each story of Jesus, we discover the extraordinary depth of his interest and concern for every person he meets. He knows and loves each person as unique. For the unprepared bridegroom in John 2, Jesus knows his "love language" is good wine. For the Samaritan woman looking for a seventh lover in John 4, Jesus knows her heart's desire better than she does, and he invites her into an intimate friendship with God. In John 11, there are three more people Jesus loves really well: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. John wants us to see not only how well Jesus understands each of their needs, but also his willingness to do whatever it takes to meet their needs. John's aim is to convince us that Jesus loves us in the same way. He knows us intimately and still loves us, and he has already done what it takes to meet our deepest needs.

In John's introduction to this story (11:1-16), he highlights Jesus' love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus. When Lazarus fell ill, Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus saying (v 3), "Lord, he whom you love is ill." And then a little later John reiterates Jesus' love in v 5: "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus." Through the rest of the story, John will demonstrate how Jesus "reads" Martha and Mary and loves them individually. He will also show us what it will cost Jesus to truly meet their needs. And again, Jesus' love for these people is special but not unique. The whole point of John's story is to invite us into the same love, the love that John and all the other disciples experienced, the love that Jesus gives to all who come to him.

JESUS LOVES MARTHA (John 11:17-29)

Jesus and his disciples made their way to Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem, where Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived. By the time they arrived, Lazarus had already been buried in the tomb for four days. Martha was the first to greet Jesus. John captures their meeting in vv 17-29.

John's Gospel was the last of the four gospels to be written. John assumes that his readers are already familiar with Jesus' story through the other three gospels. In particular, John expects that we already know about Martha and Mary from Luke 10:38-42:

Jesus entered a village and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

We're probably all familiar with this sort of dynamic, particularly those of us with siblings. Though it's not always the case, usually it's the older brother or sister who is more task oriented, while the younger brother or sister is more attuned to relationships. Martha was probably the responsible older sister who was "doing the right thing." But it distracted her from Jesus, who turned out to be the only necessary thing.

John expects that we already know how Martha was wired—that she was "distracted with much serving." John also has clearly told us that Jesus loved Martha, which ought to come as a great relief for all of us who are too often distracted with responsibilities, and who neglect the one thing that is necessary. Jesus loved Martha, and he loves us too.

When Martha found Jesus, she said (v 21), "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." I wonder what Martha was thinking when she said that. Perhaps she felt towards Jesus what she had felt towards her sister Mary on the first occasion Jesus visited their home. Once again, she had been doing her duty, but Jesus wasn't helping, just as Mary hadn't helped before. Maybe Martha felt *abandoned* by Jesus. He was supposed to be her friend and teacher and protector, but in her hour of need he was nowhere to be found. Now there he was, and despite her disappointment with him, she still sort-of believed in him because she said (v 22): "I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."

Jesus' response to Martha shows that he really understood her. What she needed most was a truth that would set her free. So the first thing Jesus offered her was a promise (v 23): "Your brother will rise again." If Martha had been willing and able to take Jesus' words to heart, she would have heard him speaking her language and could have found hope in his promise. But her walls were up, and all she heard was a platitude. Of course she knew Lazarus would rise again. Didn't Jesus remember that she was the responsible one? She went to Sunday school.

She learned her catechism. So said (v 24): "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." In other words, I know all the stuff they taught us, but it's not helping right now, because Lazarus is dead, and you didn't come when we called.

So Jesus met her with an even deeper truth. A missile to the heart, if Martha was willing to receive it. He said (v 25-26): "I am the resurrection and the life." In other words, "I am here. I'm with you right now, and I'm the key to unlocking both resurrection and life." With regard to resurrection, Jesus said (v 25) "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." So, everyone who believes in Jesus will rise again. And then with regard to life, Jesus said (v 26) "Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." While it's true that Jesus promised eternal life elsewhere, that's not what he was talking about here. In this case, what he was saying was that he is the key, not only to resurrection life in the future, but also to life in the present. John will write later, at the end of his Gospel, "These things I have written so that you may believe and have life in his name." What Jesus was saying to Martha was that there is a way out of whatever current brokenness or sadness you may be experiencing, and it's through him, because not only is he the resurrection, but he's also the life. Jesus declared that he is both, and then he asked Martha—and us (v 26): "Do you believe *this*?"

Martha controlled her emotions and gave a proper response, revealing an excellent statement of faith (v 27): "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." It's precisely what Jesus wants people to believe about him. Yet Martha's answer was evasive. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe *this*?" Martha couldn't say. Her heart was too heavy. The loss was too great. Jesus' late arrival was too painful. Rather than open her heart to Jesus, she held everything inside and went off to find Mary (v 29). I imagine her excusing herself by saying something like this:

Of course I believe he will rise again on the last day. And I'm very sorry about feeling so down. I'll cheer up, I promise. By the way, my sister Mary is the one who's really broken-hearted about Lazarus, so I'll just go get her. Don't worry about me, Jesus. I'll be fine.

Have you ever done something like this? I have, plenty of times. John would have us understand that Jesus speaks to us now through this story. Whatever your own tragedy, whether it's the loss of a loved one, or some kind of abuse or illness or hardship that you have suffered, or the bitter reality of unmet expectations, or anything else, maybe you're holding it all in just like Martha. Maybe you're afraid to open your heart to him, because you're afraid of what might come out: "Lord, if only you had been here." Jesus loves you, and he wants you to hear the same promise that he gave to Martha. Listen again to what he has to say:

I am here. I am with you right now. I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me you will rise again from the dead. And if you believe in me you will also live in the present. Do you believe *this*?

JESUS LOVES MARY (John 11:30-37)

Martha went inside and sent Mary out to talk with Jesus. John mentioned (v 2) that it was Mary who anointed Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair, a story John will tell later, but he expects that we're already familiar with it through the earlier gospels. In any case, we know that Mary *loved* Jesus, and Jesus *loved* her as well.

After she found him outside, Mary assumed the same posture that she had taken with Jesus during his first visit (v 32): she fell at his feet. But this time she didn't come to listen to his teaching. Even though she had a different temperament than her sister, Mary's complaint was word-for-word the same as Martha's: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She couldn't hide her deep disappointment with Jesus for not coming as soon as he heard that Lazarus had fallen ill. Why had Jesus taken so long?

Unlike her sister, Mary wasn't one to hide her emotions. John tells us (v 33) that when Jesus saw her weeping, "he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled." Through the centuries, translators have often struggled with this verse. It's not hard to translate, but the meaning of the words don't seem to fit. We expect that when Jesus saw Mary weeping, he felt deep empathy and he broke down too. But that's not what John wrote; his choice of words conveys more displeasure than empathy. A more accurate translation might be that when Jesus saw her weeping he was disturbed and shaken. I think John's word choice is important and he wants us to see something else that's going on.

Certainly Jesus was brokenhearted over Lazarus' death. In a couple more verses (v 35) John will report simply that "Jesus wept," and the bystanders will say (v 36), "See how he loved him!" There should be no doubt that Jesus grieved with Mary over the loss of her brother. Just as Jesus met Martha in a way that was deeply attuned to her own wiring and needs, Jesus also responded to Mary the feeler in a way that showed great sensitivity to her needs. He felt it too, and he let Mary see his grief. Likewise, whatever pain you're experiencing, know that Jesus weeps with you too, just as he did with Mary. It's not a tactic. It's really his heart. He feels it too, and he weeps with you.

Nevertheless, when John says (v 33) that Jesus was disturbed and shaken, he's telling us something else about Jesus in addition to Jesus' emotional resonance with Mary. The crowd's ironic question (v 37) helps us see it. They asked, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" It's a good question, and of course the answer is yes, Jesus could have. In fact, Jesus will reverse the death of Lazarus momentarily. But how? How will Jesus do it? And at what cost? What will it take for Jesus to conquer death and become the resurrection and the life for all who believe? He knew that it would cost him his life. And if you or I knew that what we next had to do was going to result in a death sentence, I expect that we would be disturbed and shaken too.

The resurrection of Lazarus will be the sixth miraculous sign that Jesus performs in John's Gospel. It won't be his last—a seventh sign is coming. But for the authorities, this will be the last straw. This miracle will lead directly to Jesus' arrest, torture, and brutal execution. By dying on the cross for us, Jesus will make a way for our own sins to be forgiven, and our death sentences to be repealed. That's how Jesus will be able to do for us what no other loved one can. For everyone who believes in him, the cross will become the way that Jesus will be able to keep his promise of resurrection life. But this sacrifice will cost Jesus *everything*. If it were me, I wouldn't do it. We all have our limits. Why would Jesus go through with it? Why would he willingly enter into torture and death? Why not preserve himself from the pain? Why?

Love. In less than two weeks' time Jesus will say to his disciples gathered in the upper room, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That's the nature of Jesus' love for you and for me, and for Martha and Mary. And for Lazarus, who has been in the tomb for four days.

JESUS LOVES LAZARUS (John 11:38-44)

Earlier (v 11) Jesus said to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to waken him." The disciples misunderstood, and so Jesus told them plainly that Lazarus had died. What's important here is that Jesus called Lazarus his "friend." This is the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus called anyone *friend*. "Up until now... the men whom Jesus chose to follow him are called disciples, not friends. There is an inequality between them, an inequality which Jesus came to level into the mutuality and equality of genuine friendship. It is only later in this gospel that Jesus calls them 'friends.'"¹ As we have heard, Jesus will soon tell them, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

A great reversal is about to be set in motion. Jesus asked the crowd (v 34), "where have you laid him?" And they said to him, "come and see." Where have you laid him? Come and see.

Soon it will be Jesus who is laid in the tomb. On Good Friday he will lay down his life for his friends. On the cross he will cry out, "Father, if only you were here!" But no rescue will come, and his dead body will be laid in the tomb.

Then on Easter, the risen Lord Jesus will meet a woman named Mary weeping outside his tomb. She's probably the very same sister of Martha and Lazarus. She will say, "Tell me where you have laid him." Then he will say, "Mary" and Mary will see the seventh sign. Death could not hold him! Jesus was victorious over the grave!

This great reversal, of Jesus taking Lazarus's place in the tomb, shows the extent of Jesus' love. It's what Jesus will do in order to keep his promise to Martha, and to be of real comfort to

¹ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*. Paulist Press, 2004.

Mary, and to raise Lazarus from the dead, and to become the resurrection and the life for all of us who believe.

Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. And he said (v 39), "Take away the stone." Martha protested of course. Being the sensible one, she knew how inescapable the odor of her decomposing brother was going to be. Jesus only reminded her of his promise, saying (v 40), "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" Then they rolled away the stone, and there was no odor. And Jesus prayed (v 41), giving thanks to the Father for hearing him, and inviting everyone who was watching to put their faith in him. Then he said (v 43), "Lazarus, come out!" And he did! Still wrapped up like a mummy. So Jesus said to them (v 44), "Unbind him, and let him go!"

Lazarus was raised from the dead. But how did Jesus do it? And at what cost? Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. Jesus laid down his life for Lazarus, and for you and me. By believing in him, we have life in his name. He frees us from everything that binds us, loving us to the very end.

JESUS LOVES YOU (John 11:45-53)

John describes two responses to Jesus' sixth sign in the epilogue (vv 45-53). Some of the bystanders (v 45) who saw what Jesus did believed in him. Others (v 46) told to the Pharisees, who then (v 47) told the Jerusalem Council, who gathered and asked, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place [the Temple] and our nation." Their concern was that if the people united under Jesus as King, then their little kingdom wouldn't stand a chance against the massive Roman Empire. Even though Jesus could turn water into wine, and heal the sick, and raise the dead, they figured that he was no match for Caesar. The status quo was better than being crushed by the Roman Empire. So they made plans to put him to death. They couldn't have afforded to have a renegade hero randomly healing people and bringing others back to life. So Caiaphas, the high priest, gave an unintended prophecy that Jesus would die for the people, which John notes (v 51) as a reference not only to the Jews, but to all God's people scattered far and wide. To all who believe, Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

At the beginning of the story, (v 15) when Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus had died, he added that he was glad that he had not been there to heal Lazarus, because he would use this horrific tragedy so that others might believe. *Believe* is the most important word throughout the entire chapter, occurring nine times in this passage. That we might believe is why Jesus hung back and waited. That we might believe is why Jesus did everything that he did in John's Gospel. That we might believe—in him, and have life in his name.

Jesus knows you better than anyone else does. Jesus loves you more than anyone else does. Jesus loves you in the same way that he loves Martha, Mary and Lazarus, individually, personally, as friends. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for you and for me, his friends.

Some of the bystanders believed in Jesus that day. How will you respond?

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe *this*?"