

Questions of Life and Death

(Preached @ Footscray Baptist Church by Cheryl Williams, March 26th, 2023 - John 11:1-45)

My name is Lazarus and for many years I had been ill. Really ill, so ill I could not work and be the bread winner in my family. I lived with my two sisters in the family home in Bethany. They did a truly great job looking after all my needs. It is interesting though to think about how different they were.

For a number of years, we had been friendly with a young radical Rabbi called Jesus. He and his friends often had meals with us, sometimes they would stay overnight with us on their way to Jerusalem or elsewhere.

Now Martha, my older sister was really the head of the household. Some would have said she was well a bit bossy, I just think she was a very practical and capable woman. Hospitality was important to her, so she cooked and cleaned and made sure every visitor felt at home. She was always busy and frankly I think she did too much and I know she got frustrated when Mary didn't help her as much as she thought she should.

On the other hand, my younger sister Mary, well she just seemed to wear her heart on her sleeve, prone to tears. She was quiet and very sensitive. I don't think she meant to upset Martha as much as she did, they were just so different.

Now Jesus was such an interesting character. Young, radical, to me a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately, he was upsetting the religious leaders quiet a lot. But he cared, he healed, he taught the people differently, questioned some of the traditional understandings. He welcomed those on the margins into his group – fishermen, tax collectors, women, foreigners, guess that was a bit confronting for the really religious folk. I remember one day at our place, Martha was fussing around and Mary just sat at Jesus' feet – listening and learning, something unheard of in our day. Anyway, Martha complained to Jesus and guess what – rather than tell Mary off, he invited Martha to come and sit and listen and learn - amazing, he had no problem teaching women! Anyway, he had been going around the countryside teaching, feeding the crowds for seemingly nothing, healing where he could, counselling others, teaching his take on religion and God.

Anyway, I was getting sicker and sicker and knew there was not much that could be done to help me. I had come to terms with the fact that I didn't have long. My sisters were not so at peace about this.

As it happens, I died.

Mary was consumed by grief. She just wept uncontrollably, no one could console her really. Some of our Jewish friends from the capital Jerusalem came to be with her, to provide comfort.

Martha on the other hand dealt with things differently. She got things done, but she was angry too. She ensured that all the right burial rites were carried out, that I was buried properly. She busied herself with cooking and providing hospitality to all who arrived at the house offering sympathy.

Neither Martha nor Mary could understand why Jesus our friend, who had a reputation for healing people, did not come quickly when they got a message to him about my declining health.

He was a few miles away but for some reason he got delayed and by the time he got to Bethany I had been buried.

Of course, when he got there my sisters had totally different reactions to his arrival. Martha, now she was still a bit angry that Jesus took his time to get to Bethany after she had got a message to him. So she got word he was on his way, so out she marched to greet him, and I think tell him in no uncertain terms what she thought. If you'd been here none of this would have happened, she said to Jesus. She did though have a little bit of faith that he could still change things a bit for the better, so she said that too. Before she knew it they were talking religion, talking about resurrection, Jesus was saying I would rise again. Martha took this a bit too literally and responded that she knew in the last days everyone would rise again, but Jesus went on – said he was the resurrection and the life and asked her if she believed him. Not sure how long it took her to think things through and put two and two together, but she found herself saying yes she did believe he was the Messiah, the Son of God – first confession of faith and by my sister, a woman.

Mary soon arrived on the scene after being called by Martha. She responded a bit differently, knelt down before Jesus – this should not have surprised me I guess, given how she had interacted with Jesus before. She too suggested that if only he'd got there sooner that I might have lived.

Jesus was deeply moved by this and I guess had reflected a bit on our friendship and started to weep. He asked where I was buried, they took him there and at the tomb he was really consumed by grief, you know that gut-wrenching pain, grief for me but also perhaps for his own future -he had heard the rumours, he knew others wanted him eliminated. Anyway, he asked for the stone to be moved. Well, Martha couldn't believe it and reminded him in no uncertain terms just how long I had been there and just how much things would smell. Despite her great declaration, the practical side of her kicked in and she thought about the smell, wavering in her faith perhaps.

Me, well despite my being entombed for a few days, he ordered me to come out of the tomb. I did, all bandaged up. I had a new chance at life. Was this what was meant by resurrection? I could only explain how it reminded me of that story from Ezekiel where God breathed life into old bones in the valley – certainly I felt a sense of new life, that somehow God had breathed new life into me.

Of course, this act only added to the trouble Jesus was in. Already they were planning to get rid of him but now perhaps because of this miracle or a culmination of all the things he was doing and saying, or because he called himself the Resurrection and the life, the plot thickened, deepened. The plot also got larger, they wanted me gone too and maybe any other of Jesus' friends they could round up.

All I know, is that our friend Jesus, truly cared.

I could only imagine what was going to happen next!