

## John 11:20-27

11:20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

11:21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

11:22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

11:23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

11:24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,

11:26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

11:27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

## Sermon: Different Ways

I'm going to take an indirect route toward today's text. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus had to go through Samaria to get to Jerusalem. This morning, I believe we must go through Mark and Luke to get to John. So...bear with me, I promise I'll get there! Here goes!

In the seventh chapter of Mark's Gospel, we encounter a difficult, even traumatic story: Jesus' encounter with a Syrophenician Woman. I wrote a sermon about this text in 2024 (linked [here](#)) seeking to reclaim and reframe this story as one worthy of our attention. In that sermon, I reflected that this text gives me hope, and helps me relate to Jesus, because he's willing to admit that he's wrong. Jesus receives thoughtful and provocative feedback from a neighbor, and in response, he recalibrates his entire ministry.

Here's the 10,000-foot view: Jesus has been focusing his ministry primarily on Jewish neighbors, because, honestly, the task of ministering to the needs of this singular community is overwhelming enough in its own right. But more people from other places keep seeking his healing and his resources. And in a moment of stress, Jesus makes the unfortunate decision to dehumanize the Syrophenician woman by comparing her to a dog stealing food from children. To which, she responds, "Yes, good Sir, but even a dog receives scraps from the table." And Jesus realizes, in an instant, his ministry cannot and will not be confined to one set of people. It must be expansive.

In the Tenth Chapter of Luke's gospel, we meet two sisters, Mary and Martha. Mary exhibits a rigor in self-reflection and theological discourse. Martha exhibits a rigor for administration; she is the consummate host, and her household runs with precision. Jesus comes to visit. And Martha, frustrated by her sister's intense reflection, asks Jesus, "Hey man, would you tell my sister to lend me a hand!" Jesus answers: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

*The better part.* I tend to believe Jesus might have chosen his words more carefully. Additionally, two millennia of scholars might have molded their interpretations of this event with more grace. Because the tone of his statement infers that one sister models a proper form of discipleship and the other does not.

I interpret this interlude as a scene that affirms Mary without intending to dismiss or rebuke Martha. Luke's gospel seeks to prioritize inclusion, and the intent of this passage is to affirm Mary's seat at the theological table; Mary has standing, vital standing, among the other male disciples, just as other marginalized characters throughout the gospel have gifts and insight that reveal an inbreaking kin-dom. This part of the text is to be commended. Regrettably, the story, regardless of intent, backhands the contributions of Martha. And I believe it is fair to say that Jesus, in his response, reveals a blind spot in understanding the perspective of a First Century woman. And we're left to sit with this tension.

Here's a curious thing, though. Luke's gospel omits the story of the Syrophenician Woman. There are two possible reasons for this. Luke's author may not have had access to this source or story. It could also be that Luke's author considers this story to be too abrasive; they didn't want the harshness of this story, as well as conflict to upset a narrative of inclusivity. It's one thing for the disciples to demand exclusivity; it's quite another for Jesus to do so.

Here's a thought? Could it be that Jesus responds to Mary and Martha *before* his revelation with the Syrophenician Woman? Could it be, that at this point in his ministry, Jesus is not as fully attuned to the impact of his every word and interaction? Could it be that Jesus has not yet integrated a kind of intentionality that fully activates his empathy?

I believe that most of us get better, improve, grow, mature, become more insightful in our relationships, in our vocation, in our discipleship as we gain additional life experience. If Jesus is a human being, that's a very natural human progression.

And here's the other thing. Conflict is not comfortable. As the leader of an organization, I can tell you unequivocally that life is SO much more fun when people agree with you, when they affirm your decision-making, when they show you that you've gotten it right. It's a lot less fun, when you, even with the best of intent, fall short. Sometimes, maybe even a lot of times, we are unable to see, or to hear, or to accept avenues of correction. But good leaders, especially with life experience, learn that skill, too. Our empathy can generate better understanding. Our understanding can create action. Our action can create fuller, richer community.

I will tell you that there are very specific instances in my own life, where things I've said or done have wounded others, even when that was not my intent. And those people have loved me enough to tell me why that woundedness occurred. They offered me a chance to reconcile those trespasses. And those corrective suggestions have changed my long-term behaviors. You might say, because I now know better, I now desire to do better. And I believe, really and truly, if Jesus was fully human, then he, too, would have learned from similar experiences.

So...let me introduce a third story, today's pericope. Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus has died. His sisters, Mary and Martha, mourn their brother's death. And they await the arrival of Jesus.

I mentioned Martha is an apt administrator. She sends compelling correspondence to Jesus. And even though he is delayed, Martha

remains persistent. It is Martha who goes to meet Jesus when he first arrives. It is Martha who is sensitive to the fact that her sister Mary's deep grief leaves her in a kind of paralysis, unable to play the role of correspondent. It is Martha who proclaims, "If you had been here, Lord, I know you would have saved my brother, and even still, I don't doubt your power to do so now." It is Martha who proclaims her belief in her brother's permanent resurrection. It is Martha who asserts her belief in the Messiah in her midst. And it is Martha who runs back home, finds her sister Mary, and bids her to come and see Jesus at her brother's grave. Martha perceives her sister's giftedness. She recognizes Mary's bond with Jesus. And she knows their reunion is a profound space of healing. And Martha has the finesse to put it all in motion. And I would ask you, Millbrook, does this description, does this CV, in any way, sound like a person who pursues a lesser part?

Mary connects with Jesus, and just like Martha, she offers the loving, raw, critique that only friends can share: "Where were you? If you'd have been here my brother wouldn't have died." And Mary weeps. And Jesus, weeps, too, because he is moved not only by the depth of Mary's love for him, and her brother, and her sister, but also the depth of her faith in his abilities.

Mary and Martha each demonstrate a profound sense of discipleship, each one's expression undergirded by profoundly different gifts.

This, to me, is also of note: Jesus gets ready to raise Lazarus, and he must open the tomb. Martha says, "Oof, are you sure you wanna do this? This tomb's been sealed up for four days, and it's gonna leave an awful stench."

Jesus does not dismiss Martha's reservation anymore than he dismisses those of Thomas, Peter, or other disciples. Jesus offers an encouraging reminder: "Martha, remember what I told you earlier? If you believe, you're gonna experience the glory of God."

That's a gentle touch, Millbrook. That right there is a person, who even in deep grief, is aware of the space his friends are occupying. Jesus meets an earnest question with an earnest response. Yes, there are those who can leap into faith in an instant, but their journey is no more prudent, no more profound than those who need more time to process, those who battle anxiety and doubt.

There are those who give Martha low marks for her question. They place her in the category of Nicodemus, and Thomas, and Peter, those disciples not yet ready to fully embrace belief, perhaps not yet ready to leave behind the rigidity of earthly systems, not quite yet ready to defy gravity. But Jesus doesn't give up on such folks. He encourages them, he parents them, just perhaps differently than other disciples.

"Thomas, my brother, you know where to find me. I've told you that where my Daddy is, I will be there also. And you know the way there. You do!"

"Peter, one day, you're gonna be the rock that all this is built on."

"Nicodemus, this isn't engineering, my friend. Let your mind seek something less precise."

"Martha, remember, what happens when you believe?"

When it's all said and done, the Marthas of this world add to the great cloud of witnesses. I'm SO grateful for that.

And yes, Lazarus is a story of resurrection. It hints at the possibilities of God's goodness in the here and now. But I must tell you, I find resurrection beyond new life.

John's prelude tells us that those who come to believe in the Word, or the Spirit, or the Holy Umph, which manifested in the life of Jesus, know truth; they see and believe; they experience the abundant life. It is certainly inspiring to meet the woman at the well, and the blind man on the side of the road, and Mary, present at the feet of Jesus, and ready at the helm with anointing oil. Their realization is immediate. Their confidence, their boldness, their assertiveness is laudable.

But they do not stand alone. The processors, the tire-kickers, the more anxious decision-makers, the disciplined disciples, the timid seekers, are also, slowly-but-surely coming to see and believe, and their belief will also be lasting and profound. Resurrection has plenty of room for Nicodemus, and Peter, and Thomas, and Martha, and all the others, whose faith expressions aren't always normative, don't always fit neatly into compartmentalized boxes, don't always take shape in an instant.

It turns out that Jesus affirms the discipleship of Mary AND Martha. It turns out that God is breathing life into lifeless moments. And best of all, it turns out that the kin-dom is always but coming.

Jesus says, "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.

Different Parts  
Bob Stillerman  
Fifth Sunday of Lent, 3-22-2026  
John 11:1-45



In this moment. And any moment in the future.

So...sit at the feet of Jesus, or clean up dinner, or remind Jesus about scraps, or implement an expression of discipleship that works best for you. As It turns out, nobody's part is *better*, just *different*. And friends, there is life, good life, abundant life, resurrected life in the different parts we all play.

Thanks be to God!