

**Sermon: Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**Theme: Jesus' Love Bringing Life**  
**Text: Luke 10:38-42; John 11: 1-7, 17-45**

**Luke 10:38-42 Mary and Martha**

<sup>38</sup> As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' <sup>41</sup> 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, <sup>42</sup> but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'

**John 11:1-7, 17-45 Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead**

Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is ill.' <sup>4</sup> When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' <sup>5</sup> Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days, <sup>7</sup> and then he said to his disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.'

<sup>17</sup> On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, <sup>19</sup> and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

<sup>21</sup> 'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.'

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'

<sup>24</sup> Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

<sup>27</sup> 'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.'

<sup>28</sup> After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. 'The Teacher is here,' she said, 'and is asking for you.' <sup>29</sup> When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

<sup>32</sup> When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. <sup>34</sup> 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied.

<sup>35</sup> Jesus wept.

<sup>36</sup> Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

<sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. <sup>39</sup> 'Take away the stone,' he said.

'But, Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.'

<sup>40</sup> Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?'

<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.'

<sup>43</sup> When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face.

Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.'

<sup>45</sup> Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

God's word is many things. At the heart it's the story of God's loving interaction with a hurting world, and it's centred around the good news that comes in the form of his Son, Jesus Christ. But while God may be the main character, the Bible also tells the story of many people who've been caught up in God's loving purposes.

Today the Scriptures speak of three women whose lives had been transformed by their encounter with Jesus. Mary and Martha are well known to us, Dorcas (or Tabitha) less so. As we read their stories, we get a window into the lives of women in the ancient world. We also see how they use the gifts God has given them to serve him and bless others, just like our own Women's Fellowship, who today celebrates their 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Eighty years is a long time in anyone's language, and there's much we can thank God for, in the way this love has shone through the woman who've been part of Women's Fellowship over these years. It's also true that much of their work has been carried out behind the scenes, and many of us haven't fully realised the contribution these wonderful women have made.

Today let's start the story of Dorcas. Why does Luke single her out? Surely her story was like many other faithful women, who used their time, their talents, their treasures. Luke tells us that "**she was always doing good and helping the poor.**" One expression of her love for her Lord was making clothes for others. The words of Jesus resonated strongly in her life: "**I was naked, and you clothed me.**" Luke also called her a disciple, the only time in the New Testament that this title is used of a woman.



We hear about her because she has died, and because the church is heartbroken. They call Peter to come to Joppa **“All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing, that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.”** Peter understands their loss, but instead of being helpless in the face of death, he confronts death by drawing on the power of Jesus, the Risen One.

**“Tabitha, get up,”** he says, echoing Jesus’ words when he raised Jairus’ daughter. She is called back to life, and Peter presents her to a shocked and grateful community. Her life continues, and her story results in many people coming to faith. In life, in death, and in life again, she bears witness to God’s love. An ordinary life, in a small town, but meaningful and impactful because of her sacrificial love.

We know the sister Mary and Martha much better. John tells us **“Mary was the one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.”** Martha was her sister, and we meet them together for the first time when Jesus passes through their home village of Bethany. Martha does something quite bold for a woman: she exercises hospitality independently of her brother, Lazarus, who’s not even mentioned. Perhaps he wasn’t home that day. She busies herself getting the meal ready, whereas Mary sits at Jesus’ feet, listening to what he is saying. We know how this ends. Martha complains about Mary sitting there doing nothing. She shouldn’t have drawn an honoured guest into a family dispute. Jesus sees that Martha is frazzled; perhaps that explains her injudicious question. He’s straight with her: **“Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”**

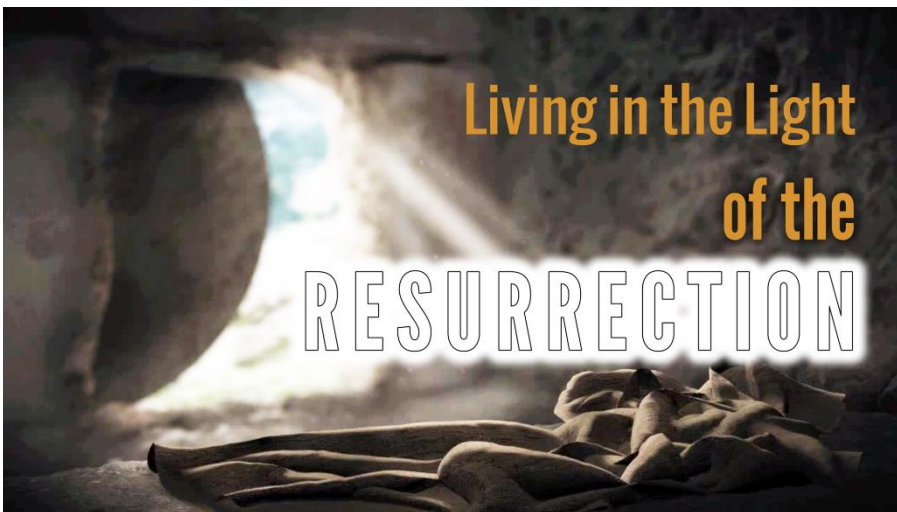


We don't know how Martha reacted to this, and perhaps that's just as well. But then we come to today's gospel reading. I don't know if you've read these two stories side to side, but it seems to me that Martha has changed. Or perhaps her natural personality, her extroversion, helps her, as she and her sister swim in the ocean of grief. What seems to make their situation worse is that they let Jesus know about this but he didn't or wouldn't get there in time.

Isn't it interesting that we meet these women today in the context of death. We have all experienced grief. We know the pain it causes. I read the names of those who founded St John's Women's Fellowship. They have died, as have a number of the pastors who led Bible Study over the year. Not to mention the many faithful women God has called home over these eighty years.

Jesus does arrive in Bethany. Too late to heal Lazarus, that is true, but not too late to bring glory to God. Effervescent Martha comes out to meet him. She says what is most likely on everyone's lips: **"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."** Was this word spoken in sorrow, or anger? You make your mind up.

It's the same statement that Mary makes a little later. She only comes to meet Jesus when he invites her. Perhaps she is taking Lazarus' death harder, internalising her grief. But the tables are turned. This time it's Martha who has chosen what is better. **"I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."** She confesses that she believes that her brother **"will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."** She then receives the most amazing promise of Jesus, that he **"is the resurrection and the life."** And she makes the greatest confession of all: she believes he is the Christ, the Son of God. And then she shares with her sister that Jesus has arrived, so that Mary doesn't miss out on his comfort that Jesus offers, and sees his tears, and witnesses Jesus' greatest sign so far in John's gospel: raising their brother Lazarus from the dead.



These three women's lives revolve around Jesus and have been profoundly impacted by meeting Jesus. Mary, quiet, introverted, sensitive, was blessed by hearing Jesus share the news of the kingdom. Martha had to be doing something, and her encounter with Jesus changed her, and gave her the confidence to approach Jesus boldly after

Lazarus died, confident that Jesus could do something about. Dorcas lives in the light of the resurrection. She was part of the post-Easter community, who lived by the hope of Jesus' death and resurrection and who saw the whole of their lives as an act of worship.

Like Dorcas, we live in the light of the resurrection. The resurrection is not a theory we hope to prove when we die. Rather, it empowers the life we live now. It enables us to serve God with all that he has given us, and also serve one another and our neighbours too. This is what Women's Fellowship has been doing for 80 years: raising money for the mission of the church, visiting the sick or the aged and frail, helping those in need, both locally and globally. The motivation behind each one of these things was the life of Jesus in each member, and the hope of life forever through his death and resurrection.

May this be the way that each of us lives our lives, in the love of God, for the sake of others. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook