

We're in the fourth and final week of our series of Gospel lessons from John.

The first week, in John 3, we met Nicodemus, a Jewish teacher who sought Jesus out because of the signs Jesus was doing.

The next week, in John 4, we met the Samaritan woman, a non-Jew who just happened by when Jesus was taking a load off his feet.

Last week, in John 9, we met a blind man who was healed by Jesus, not because he asked to be healed, but simply because Jesus wanted to do it.

One of the common threads the past 3 weeks in these people's encounters with Jesus is that they were all strangers to him in one way or another.

But this week, Jesus has an encounter with people he already knows. In fact they're his friends: Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha.

At the beginning of Jn ch11, we're told that Lazarus is ill. Mary and Martha send a message informing Jesus. They probably expect Jesus to drop everything and come running. If you had the power to heal the sick and one of your good friends was sick, then you'd want to get to them and heal them ASAP.

But after getting the message Jesus stays put, and does nothing for 2 days.

Now this is something that happens to us all the time. We want God to do something. And usually we want him to do it NOW! We want action. We want God to do what we think is right. And we want him to do it according to our timetable. But God's timing is often very different from our timing.

That's how it is John 11. The sisters expect Jesus to get moving. Jesus has other motives. His timing is different. And so he delays in setting out for Bethany. And when he finally gets there, he finds that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days.

To us, 4 days means nothing. To first century Jews it was a very important detail. They believed that after death, the soul would hang around its body for 3 days. The Jews mourned intensely for 3 days, so the souls of their loved ones would know how much they missed them. But after 3 days, the soul supposedly would look at its former body and see that decomposition was setting in. In their graphic words, the soul would "see the color of its face had changed." In other words, the soul of the departed would see that their face and body were getting rotten. And the soul would then depart.

So if Lazarus had been dead for 4 days, that meant to these Jews that there was no hope. His soul would have been long gone. His body would be decaying. Thus, Jesus was too late. They would think that even if Jesus had the power to pull off some sort of miracle, even HE wouldn't have been able to get an absent soul back into a rotting body.

So Jesus rolls into town, and he's too late. And Martha goes out to meet him. And there is a real edge to what she says. She says flat out, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her sister, Mary, makes the same accusation a few verses later. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The subtext is clear. What they're basically saying is "Where have you been? Why didn't you get here sooner? Why didn't you do something to prevent this?"

That's a wonderfully human reaction. We do the same thing. 'Why? Why, Lord? You have the power to do something about every problem in the world. And yet you didn't step in and fix things. Why? Why don't you stop children being born with birth defects? Why do you allow tornados and earthquakes and hurricanes? Why can't you keep terrorists from flying airplanes into skyscrapers or driving through a crowd or shooting people? Why did you let my friend die? Why is there destruction and disease and death in the world? Why? Why? Why?'

Martha speaks honestly for all of us. As such, she's a wonderful model of prayer. In our prayer life, one of the most important things is being honest. Being honest with God. Being honest enough to be angry with God and let him know it.

Yes, we know intellectually that to God all hearts are open, all desires known, and from him no secrets are hid. And yet, we often play a misguided game in our prayer life. We often pretend that things are fine.

We often hide our true feelings from God. We try to put a nice face or a formal face to our prayers.

Yet over and over again in scripture we see other models of prayer. Abraham, and Moses, and Jeremiah, and David, and Ezekiel, and Job, and countless others standing toe to toe with God, confronting him very directly with their pain, frustration, and anger.

In confronting Jesus directly, Martha is in a long line of God's faithful people who bring their hurts openly before him.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And yet, she also speaks with faith. She says, "Why?" But she also says, "But." And that's a very important word. "But... But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." She's angry with Jesus. But she still values her relationship with Jesus. She still trusts him.

"I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

What does she want from Jesus? Her brother back? I don't think so. As great as her faith is, she doesn't really believe that's possible. After all if you jump ahead in the story she tries to wave Jesus off when he tells some guys to open up the tomb. For Martha, it's too late to bring Lazarus back. His soul is gone. His body has already started to rot. The smell from his

decomposing body is overpowering. Even the spices they buried him with would no longer be able to mask the stench.

So what does Martha want? I suspect that what she really wants is comfort in her grief. I think she's saying, 'You're too late to save my brother, but now that you're here you can save my sister and me from our terrible grief.' "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

But Jesus offers something more than just help with their grief. He offers assurance: "Your brother will rise again."

Martha responds, 'Of course. I know that. God's power will bring him back at the resurrection on the last day.' Most good Jews in Jesus' day believed in the resurrection of the dead on the last day.

But Jesus says something amazing: "I am the resurrection and the life." God's power of life is not just something that will come at the end of time. Jesus is saying, 'It's present in me now. I am the resurrection. I have God's power over death. And not only that, everyone who believes in me will be beneficiaries of that power.' "Those who believe in me (those who trust in me), even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

And then Jesus asks Martha a crucial question: "Do you believe this?" 'Do you believe that I have the power of life? Do you have faith in me? Do you trust that my power is greater than the power of death?' "Do you believe this?"

And that's Jesus' response to us as well. We ask him, "Why? Why do these terrible things happen?" We ask him, "How long? How long do we have to wait for you to act?" And he replies, "Do you believe?" 'Do you believe in me? Do you trust in me? Do you have faith in me?'

Jesus knows that life can be difficult. We are squeezed from all sides, from within and from without. Sin. Loneliness. Disease. Emptiness. Addiction. Faulty neuro-chemistry. Despair. Fear. Sorrow. Death. But in the face of all of these things Jesus asks, "Do you believe? Do you trust in me? Because nothing is beyond my power." "I am the resurrection and the life."

And as if to underscore this reality, he walks up to the tomb. He stands face to face with the putrid, nauseating stench of death and decay. And he cries in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus comes out.

Martha and Mary don't get what they initially want. But they end up getting more than they could ever imagine.

They're mad at Jesus because he didn't intervene as their brother was dying. Yet they hang in there with Jesus. They express their anger at him honestly. But they stick with him. They trust him. And he brings an outcome far more wonderful than they could ever anticipate.

God wants a real relationship with us. Not a distant, formal, artificially polite relationship. But a relationship where we share our real selves with him. A relationship where we can honestly express our anger, our doubts, our frustrations when God doesn't act as we'd like.

And God calls us to a relationship of trust. A relationship where we can say, "God, I don't like it. Yet, even now, I put my trust in you."

Lord, you are resurrection and life. Help us to approach you honestly. Help us to come to you in faith. Bring us the new life you offer. And in the easy and difficult times in our lives, help us to trust in you.