

### Exegesis

**Vs. 17-19** – John relays nothing of the journey between Galilee and Judea. Instead, he jumps right to Jesus’ arrival and what awaited them: “Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already. Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off: and many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.”

Our writer relays that Lazarus "had lain in the grave four days already." This serves to heighten the tension in this scene. He hadn't just died. He had been *four days* dead *and* buried. During the first century, it was believed that a person's soul would hover over their body for the first three days.<sup>1</sup> Afterward, death would be final and irreversible. Beasley-Murray recounts this teaching from a Rabbi named Bar Qappara:

“The whole strength of the mourning is not till the third day; for three days long the soul returns to the grave, thinking that it will return (into the body); when however it sees that the color of its face has changed then it goes away and leaves it.”<sup>2</sup>

The earliest written account of this belief comes in 220 A.D., but a consensus believes it has roots much earlier and, thus, would likely coincide with what the Jews in the first century believed.<sup>3</sup> A person lying in the grave for four days would establish that they were well and truly gone. How ironic, then, that Jesus shows up on the fourth day, a day when there was no hope left. This shines a light on Jesus' delay in vs. 6 and illustrates that even his enigmatic waiting had a purpose. Jesus was never late. He arrived precisely when he meant to; that is to say, he showed up when the need was greatest, and God would be glorified the most (cf. vs. 4, 15).

It was customary for Jews to bury their dead on the same day on which they died (cf. Ac. 5:6, 10).<sup>4</sup> Given that they lacked the embalming techniques of the modern age and that the climate in the Mediterranean was hot and humid, this was more out of necessity than anything else, as a corpse would decay rapidly. However, while they did not postpone the burial proceedings, Israelites were known to prolong their mourning for no less than thirty days.<sup>5</sup> And of those

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<sup>1</sup> Carson (1991), p. 411.

<sup>2</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 189-190.

<sup>3</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 333.

<sup>4</sup> Morris (1995), p. 485.

<sup>5</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 333.

thirty days, the first seven, called "shiva," were among the most concentrated and extreme.<sup>6</sup> For the days after shiva, the bereaved would stay home, and others would bring them food, often staying with them and expressing their condolences. Consequently, a Jew would not grieve privately but openly, surrounded by their family, friends and neighbors. The fact that John tells us that "*many* of the Jews" came to comfort Mary and Martha implies that their family was not only well-known but well-liked in the community. And it is worth noting that this puts the "Jews," who are often characterized as hostile to Jesus, in a positive light.<sup>7</sup> It shows that, whatever their feelings were about Jesus, they were sympathetic to one of their own.<sup>8</sup> Thus, what greeted Jesus and his disciples upon their arrival in Bethany was a family four days into the most grief-stricken part of their mourning, a process that was not expected to end for another twenty-six days, and the entire neighborhood (not just Martha and Mary) was in the throes of sadness.

John tells us that Jerusalem was "fifteen furlongs" from Bethany. A single furlong, also known as a "stadion," is two hundred and two yards nine inches.<sup>9</sup> This means that Bethany was, by John's reckoning, 1.72 miles to the west. It is not unusual for John to be so exact (cf. 6:19), but anytime he is so precise, he does so for a reason. Thus, like the number of days Lazarus had been in the grave, this distance heightens the drama of this moment.<sup>10</sup> The Lord might not be in Jerusalem, but he was in danger's backyard. Less than a thirty-minute walk from Bethany was the nucleus of those most antagonistic towards Jesus. Should he say or do something that causes a stir, it would not take long for the Sanhedrin to hear about it.

**Vs. 20-23** – Apparently, a nameless messenger was sent ahead who told at least Martha that Jesus was close to Bethany. And rather than wait for him to arrive, John tells us that she went out and met him while Mary "sat still in the house." Considering Martha goes alone, it seems she failed to tell her sister that Jesus was so close, or we might rightly assume that Mary would've gone as well (cf. vs. 28-29). Although, this falls in line with Luke's portrayal of the two sisters, with Martha being one for activity and Mary being one for inactivity (cf. Lu. 10:38-42).<sup>11</sup> So, it is hard to know precisely why Martha went, and Mary stayed behind.

Upon meeting Jesus, Martha says, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Her sister will say the exact same words when she meets Jesus in vs. 32. Some commentators

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<sup>6</sup> Keener (2003), 2:842.

<sup>7</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 288.

<sup>8</sup> See 'Summary 2:13-22' on the discussion about how some erroneously believe that John's account is antisemitic.

<sup>9</sup> Carson (1991), p. 411.

<sup>10</sup> Keener (2003), 2:842.

<sup>11</sup> Morris (1995), p. 486.

see Martha's response as a critique, as in, "Lord, you *should've* been here! And since *you* weren't, *my* brother died."<sup>12</sup> Other commentators feel that it is better to understand her words as an expression of faith framed as a regret rather than a rebuke.<sup>13</sup> As in, Martha was bemoaning her poor circumstances rather than Jesus' absence. This view is appealing. But personally, I tend to lean toward viewing Martha's response as a thinly veiled criticism. After all, their problem wasn't that they thought Jesus' couldn't have healed Lazarus. Their problem was that the Lord wasn't present when they needed him the most. Thus, as today, so it was true back then, the Lord's delaying is not without some pain; it always hurts.<sup>14</sup> What is remarkable is that Jesus does not rebuke Martha for her impertinence but weathers her reproach in loving solemnity. It is encouraging to know that even when we are distraught and possibly even upset with God, we can still come to him without fear of rejection.

Though Martha was hurt by Jesus' absence, she immediately follows up her frustration with an expression of faith. She says, "But I know that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee." Was Martha asking Jesus' to raise her brother from the dead? If not for what she says later in verses 24 and 39, we might be correct in thinking so.<sup>15</sup> Sadly, all hope that her brother might be resurrected in her lifetime died the morning of the fourth day.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Martha says that even though she is hurt by Jesus' absence, she has not wavered in her faith of him.<sup>17</sup> She still believes the Lord to be the sort of man who can ask anything of God, and God will give it to him (cf. 9:31).<sup>18</sup> And, as we'll soon see, Martha spoke better than she knew; for, before Jesus calls Lazarus from the grave, he will pray to thank his heavenly Father for hearing him (cf. vs. 41-42).<sup>19</sup>

**Vs. 23-27** – In the wake of Martha's expression of faith, Jesus says to her, "Thy brother shall rise again." Because most people know how this story will go, they know that Jesus means that Lazarus will rise again that very day. But from Martha's perspective, she did not think of the resurrection as being in her immediate future but as something that would come much later.

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<sup>12</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 334, believes the grammar leans in favor of this interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 190; Morris (1995), p. 487; Carson (1991), p. 412; Kruse (2017), p. 288.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson (2015), p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 190, "Martha's horrified reaction in v 39 shows that she does not expect Jesus to recall her brother from his tomb." Contra., Keener (2003), 2:843-844, who believe it is an implied request.

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion about the implication of the fourth day in vs. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Morris (1995), p. 487.

<sup>18</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 288-289.

<sup>19</sup> Carson (1991), p. 412, "Verse 22 must be taken more generally: Martha is not only persuaded that her brother would not have died had Jesus been present, but even now, in her bereavement, she has not lost her confidence in Jesus, and still recognizes the peculiar intimacy he enjoys with his Father, an intimacy that ensures unprecedented fruitfulness to his prayers."

This is why she says, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps she had heard this very thing from those who came to mourn in an attempt to soothe the pain of her loss.<sup>21</sup> After all, as far as we know, only the Sadducees denied the possibility of a resurrection (cf. Ma. 12:18-27). Thus, her sentiment is not unlike how believers will encourage one another at the death of a saint today by saying, "We will see them again." Always, when these sorts of things are said, a future day is in mind. But that was not the case when Jesus said those words to Martha. Lazarus' resurrection was imminent; it would occur not only on the last day but on *this* day.

To show that the Lord meant a present resurrection, as opposed to a future one, he says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life...." This is the fifth "I am" statement in John's account (cf. 6:35; 8:12; 10:9, 11), and with it, the Lord is showing Martha that the resurrection is not exclusively forthcoming but has already come. In fact, the resurrection is the one who stands before her! Jesus is not correcting Martha's understanding of a future resurrection. Indeed, there will be a great resurrection on that last day (cf. 5:21, 25-29; 6:39-40). Instead, the concept of the resurrection is conceptualized and materialized in Jesus (cf. 1:4). Revival, be it spiritual or physical, is a present possibility wherever Jesus is present (cf. 1 Jn. 1:2; 5:11-12, 20). The Lord would not have Martha's faith rooted in some eschatological principle; she would be no better than a Pharisee (cf. Ac. 23:8). Jesus wanted her understanding of the resurrection to be fixed in a genuine and tangible relationship with *him*.<sup>22</sup> The resurrection and the life stood before her in bodily form, and they were not some theological theory but a physical being. Carson sums up the thrust of Jesus' point nicely when he says,

"Just as he not only gives the bread from heaven (6:27) but is himself the bread of life (6:35), so also he not only raises the dead on the last day (5:21, 25) but is himself the resurrection and the life. There is neither resurrection nor eternal life outside of him."<sup>23</sup>

And so, the thing Martha needed to do at that very moment was "believe" in Jesus and not only in some future reality. The Lord drives this point home when he says to Martha, "...he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." Jesus' words here are reminiscent of those he said in 8:51, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man keep my saying, he shall never see death." Clearly, the death that Jesus

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<sup>20</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 190, "Our Evangelist alone among N.T. writers uses the expression "in the last day," as in 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 12:38. The more common formula, "in the last days," generally refers to the times preceding the end, as in Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Ja. 5:3."

<sup>21</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 289.

<sup>22</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 335.

<sup>23</sup> Carson (1991), p. 412.

refers to is something different than a person's bodily demise. Meaning, that those who believe in Jesus will, in some sense, "never die" nor "see death" even though they may have a funeral just like Lazarus.<sup>24</sup> And even if a believer dies physically, Jesus says, "yet will he live." A person in union with the one who is the very embodiment of life itself cannot be destroyed by death. Thus, our morality has no eternal significance. Or, as Morris puts it, "Death for them is but the gateway to further life and fellowship with God...Jesus is bringing Martha a present gift, not simply the promise of a future good."<sup>25</sup> The life the Christian will experience later is the life they already experience today.

Jesus now turns to Martha and asks, "Believest thou this?" Apparently, Lazarus believed this. It is hard not to read the "he" in verses 25 and 26 to refer not only to all believers generally but also to Martha's brother specifically. However, what was true for Lazarus had to be true for Martha. This was not a test for Lazarus but for his two sisters. Believing in Jesus has always been and will always be a personal decision. It is not enough for the family to believe. Each person must make a decision. Thus, if she answers in the affirmative, her brother's resurrection will become a prototype for her own resurrection.<sup>26</sup> What she will see the Lord do for Lazarus, Martha will know that Jesus will do for her as well.

Without apparent hesitation, Martha responds to Jesus' question by saying, "Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world." Her affirmation is what John hopes all readers of his gospel would likewise affirm (cf. 20:31).<sup>27</sup> Martha is one among a growing number in John's account who have come to realize Jesus' true identity (cf. 1:41; 3:28; 4:25, 29; 6:69; 9:22, 35-38).<sup>28</sup> Far from being confused by what Jesus is telling her, Martha is tracking to some extent with everything that the Lord has said. And these things have not pushed her away from him, as others have been prone to do (cf. 6:60, 66), but Jesus' words have drawn her closer and into a deeper perception of who he really is. Thus, Martha's confession that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world" is the most thorough and credal in John's account. Anyone affirming those things about a single individual could scarcely be anything else than a Christian.

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<sup>24</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 289, points out that in whatever generation the Lord comes back, those believers will be spared even physical death (cf. 1 Thess. 4:17).

<sup>25</sup> Morris (1995), p. 488-489.

<sup>26</sup> Carson (1991), p. 414.

<sup>27</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 336.

<sup>28</sup> Keener (2003), 2:844.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 24

Text: **John 11:17-27**

In our passage tonight, Jesus is face to face with a grieving sister named Martha, who says, "If only you would've been here then my brother wouldn't have died." Any average person would've been taken aback by such an accusation. But not Jesus. He weathers this woman's sorrow without rebuking her forwardness. And far from turning his back on her, the Lord uses her mourning as a teachable moment to reveal that he is not merely the hope of some future resurrection. No, he so much more. Jesus will show Martha that he is the conceptualization/materialization/incarnation of the resurrection itself. The resurrection is not only to come; it has already arrived, and Jesus is it! She need only believe. And believe she does. Notably, her confession is the most thorough and credal in all of John's account. A woman's faith such as Martha's is the sort of faith all believers should aspire to emulate.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: