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The National Presbyterian Church

Two Sisters, Mary and Martha Were His Friends

John 11 and 12

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We're in the middle of a series of sermons that we've entitled "Meet Jesus of Nazareth." We've been meeting people throughout these wonderful texts in John's Gospel and the other Gospels to see people as they meet Christ and then to see the effect He has on their life and what we can learn from their encounters. Today, I want to tell you about two people. They are sisters. Their names are Mary and Martha. And there are two texts in the New Testament that tell us about these women. The first one is in Luke's Gospel.

In Luke's Gospel, we have our first meeting with Mary and Martha. Chapter 10. "Now, as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister named Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what He was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks so she came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha." I want you to know that in the Jewish tradition to repeat a person's name twice is a sign of affection. That's not a sign of scolding, and that's probably true in your families, too, when you say someone's name twice. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which shall not be taken from her."

Martha is a hardworking person in the kitchen, perhaps too focused on her own tight circle of awareness. Mary has chosen well and Jesus tells us that. He tells it to Martha, too. If we treat Martha's sentence as a prayer to the Lord then we have an example of Jesus hearing her prayer and theme answering her prayer too. In this case the answer is "no Martha." And so Martha then retreats back to the kitchen evidently and Mary stays, listening to Jesus. Today, I want us to think about these two women, and I want to think especially about Martha. If this Luke text was the only text we had in the Gospels about these two sisters, then basically, and I'm sure sermons have been preached on the preoccupation of Martha who has this restricted circle of personal and interpersonal concern that makes it impossible for her to see this larger picture. And our Lord does correct that preoccupation of Martha. He says, "Mary chose well," and that's the end of Luke's account. But I'm grateful there is one more account, this one in the Gospel of John that once again focuses on these two sisters and we learn something more about Martha in this second account. Chapter 11 of John's Gospel.

John narrates for us in Chapter 11 an event that occurs in Bethany which is 2 miles from Jerusalem, at the Mount of Olives and with this family in Bethany, we know that Jesus stays there when He is in Jerusalem. They're His very close friends. From there, He will make his descent down the mount of olives on Palm Sunday. This is the final event before Palm Sunday. Chapter 11, John's Gospel. "Now, a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped His feet with her hair." Now this account will be Chapter 12 of John though we are now in Chapter 11. Mary will take pure nard, we're told in chapter 12, and she will anoint Jesus' feet with nard. The value translated into U.S. dollars in the amount of \$9,000. That's a lot of money then, it's a lot of money now.

Whereupon Judas protested and he said, "This money could have been saved. It could've been used to help the poor." And so he scolds her. Jesus rejects that scolding and says, "No. Mary did a beautiful thing. She did it right," and he accepted it. So that event will occur at Chapter 12. John alerts you to that here in Chapter 11. "Mary was the one who anointed the Lord's feet with perfume and wiped His feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard, he said, "This illness does not lead to death rather it is for God's glory so the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus is ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was. We know they were in a place called Bethabara on the River Jordan which is a distance

from Bethany and so He stays two more days there and that intrigued John who writes this account. Then after this, He said to His disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" And Jesus answered, "Are there not 12 hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they have the light of the world. But those who walk in dark or in night stumble because the light is not in them." After saying this, He told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep but I'm going there to awaken him." The disciples said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about His death but they thought He was referring merely to sleep." By the way, this shows that our Lord ordinarily taught His disciples in the Greek language and not in the Aramaic language. In Greek, the word *coma* is used here and it is used interchangeably in Greek use sometimes to refer to "sleep" and sometimes to refer to "death." In fact, we use it medically in that way too when we talk about someone in a coma, especially if it's a very deep coma, that's almost like saying they're dead. They're almost dead. And so He used the word *coma* here. But they misunderstood it. They thought He was referring to sleep. He has fallen asleep "Lord, if he's fallen asleep, then he'll be all right."

Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus is dead and now he uses the word *thanatos* in Greek and there's no question about what that word means. It means "death." For your sake, I'm glad I was not there so that you may believe, but now let us go to him. Thomas who was called "Twin" said to the fellow disciples, "Let us go that we may die with him." Thomas comes across here as a bit melancholy as you'll notice in this sentence. When Jesus arrived, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem about two miles away, and many of the Jews that come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." She shares with Jesus her faith. She trusts in the future hope that we have in Christ of resurrection and she shares that.

Jesus then said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life." Of all the "I am" statements of our Lord, this is the most dramatic of all and he says it to Martha. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they died will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

And Martha said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." When she has said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The teacher is here. He's calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at a place where Martha had met Him. The Jews who were with Mary in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus was, she saw him. She knelt at his feet and said, "Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus saw her weeping. The Jews who came also were weeping, and He was greatly disturbed in spirit. He was deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" And they said, "Lord, come and see." And now the shortest verse in all of the English Bible, "Jesus wept." So the Jews said, "See how He loved him?" But some said, "Could not the man who opened the eyes of a blind, could he not have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus again was greatly disturbed. He came to the tomb. He saw it was a cave. A stone was lying against it, and Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he's been dead four days." She's very practical. We've noticed that before. Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you would see glory of God?" And so they took away the stone and Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you. You've heard me. I know that you always heard me, but I say this for the sake of the crowd standing here so they may know you have sent me." And when He said this, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus come out." The dead man came out. His hands and feet bound with strips of cloth. His face wrapped in a cloth. And Jesus said to them, "Unbind him and let him go."

We treasure both of these sisters. They each give us a gift, a gift to us for our own journeys of faith. Today, though, I want to hear it for Martha. I want you to notice Martha in this incident, notice that she's a woman of substantial faith. Jesus says, "Do you believe in the resurrection?" "I believe, Lord, in the resurrection." She gives a statement of faith. And then when our Lord then says, "I am the resurrection and the life," notice, "I am the resurrection and the life." That greatest of all the "I am's." And then he asked her again, "Martha, do you believe this?" She gives a great affirmation of her faith in Christ as the Messiah. "You are the messiah, the Son of God. I believe that," she says.

Martha is a woman of substantial faith. She's very tender, she goes back privately to get Mary, "Mary, the teacher is asking for you," and brings Mary to Jesus. She's also a woman of strong opinions. When she heard the command "take the stone away

from the tomb”, she says, “Hey, be careful. It’s going to be smelly now. It’s been four days.” She is practical. She is strong. She scolded Jesus when she first met Him. “Lord, if you’ve been here earlier and we did give you notice. We sent a message to you, and we hear from Thomas that you stayed around down there for a few days, but we did call for you Lord.” So she scolds Jesus. She talks back to him as well as talks to him. And this woman, not Mary, but Martha is the woman who hears the greatest of all the “I am’s.” Jesus says this not to Mary, who’s weeping, but to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me though he were dead yet shall he live. Do you believe that, Martha?” And Martha is the one who answers for us all: “I believe.”

One of the great confessions of faith, it doesn’t come from the dreamy Mary. It comes from the practical lady in the kitchen, Martha. I don’t want you to miss that. She’s that person you know who keeps things going. She’s the one who does the dishes. She’s the one who makes sure that food is ready and maybe is a little grouchy about that too. She’s the one who contributes money to make things happen that keep churches going. Yesterday I met with the friends of the library here at National Presbyterian Church. Do you realize this church has one of the great church libraries in America? I’ve seen it, and I like libraries too. We have a great one at University Presbyterian Church, but you have a great one here and a marvelous librarian. Jim Anderson who was there with his team at our luncheon yesterday. I met a lot of Marthas, male and female Marthas yesterday who keep your library going, who take care of the books and who contribute the money to support that library. They did it yesterday. I was so impressed to be with friends of this library. They’re like the people who show up for rehearsals so that choirs can actually sing. A lot of people love music and come to concerts to hear music and are dreamy about music and inspired when they hear songs, but who are the people that show up for rehearsal? They’re the Marthas. This woman is totally practical. She has strong faith, but she’s completely practical and that’s Martha. And I’m so grateful that it’s not just the Luke account that tells us about this woman, I’m thankful that we have John’s account that shows she’s a woman of great substance. That’s Martha.

I had a friend in Berkeley when I was a pastor at the Berkeley church. I was there for 21 years, and one of my friends for almost my entire period was there, Rev. Robert St. Clair, and he was a Parish Associate pastor. He was from Brooklyn and he had this decidedly strong Brooklyn accent, which sounded so good in Berkeley, California. We really needed it. As a Parish Associate he often shared prayers for us at the church. His prayers were marvelous. They were both realistic and tender, and I urged him before he died to write up his prayers and fortunately a little book was

published called *Prayers for People Like Me*. One of those prayers was his prayer he called “Celebrate Dependable People.” This is a prayer for the Marthas of our lives. Listen to this prayer.

Lord God, creator of heaven and earth, we celebrate the dependable people. We laugh and sing with those who rebel and do their thing, but we whisper a deep thank you for the people who work, rest, work again day after day. We share the excitement of liberation, but we also feel good about the mothers and fathers who work, raise children, cook meals, clean house, love their careers and grow mentally spiritually. We like to hear a blast of the trumpet for the young people who study, obey the rules, pitch in and help others. Lord God, three cheers in heaven for both the prodigal sons and daughters who return home at last but also for their elder brothers and sisters who, for all their complaints, do their duty to keep a home for the prodigals to return to. We are grateful for the exhilaration of adventure and the joys of discovery but thank you, God, for those who are there when we need them. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray, amen.¹

That’s Martha.

Are you a Martha? Are you a Mary? Thank God, we need Marthas. We need Marys. One of my favorite books of all time, perhaps my favorite, is the *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. A young man named Raskolnikov is a student, and he does a terrible thing. He commits murder, and he gets away with it. He gets away with this double murder because another man who is actually mentally ill confessed to the crime and was then sentenced to prison for the crime he didn’t do and Raskolnikov got off the hook except for Detective Petrovich who is, I believe, the model of Colombo in the Colombo series who is hunting him down and doesn’t, for a moment, believe the other guy is guilty and therefore he pursues Raskolnikov, throughout the novel. Petrovich hunting down Raskolnikov trying to trip him up with those “oh, just one more question by the way.” But finally what does him in is a wonderful young woman named Sonia who falls in love with Raskolnikov, and Raskolnikov falls in love with her though he treats her badly. This beautiful girl, dreamy, wondrous girl named Sonia loves him. And when she finds out that he’s a murderer, she’s the one who tells him, “Raskolnikov, you must kiss the Earth and confess to the north, south, east and west, I am a murderer. You must do that.”²

And so it is Sonia who loves him that gets him to confess so that he is sentenced to prison for the murder. But then as he goes to Siberia, the story is not over. Sonia, this dreamy, wonderful girl becomes a Martha. She follows him to Siberia. She almost loses her life. She becomes frailer and frailer, and she keeps him alive in

Siberia. Foraging for cabbages in the field and bringing them in to the prison to try keep this young man alive. Sonia is a Christian believer. He is an Atheist. She is trying so hard to win him to Christ, and she keeps giving him a New Testament and he spurns it. Finally, one day, she says to him, "I want you to read Chapter 11 of John's Gospel." And Chapter 11 is the text I just read to you about the raising of Lazarus. He takes that chapter, reads it, and it becomes the great conversion point for Raskolnikov so that decides to be a believer. And he says, "I wonder if her thoughts can become my thoughts." He discovers a resurrection experience. That's the word that Dostoyevsky uses.

And with that, the novel ends and the writer says, "But that's another story." I guess he is hoping to write a sequel to *Crime and Punishment*. Sonia is a Martha. I want you to notice about Martha is that she is the person that makes things happen. She's the person that hangs in there when everything else maybe is falling apart. Our country right now, and the world needs Marthas. We need Marys too. We need dreamy people for sure, but right now we need practical people. It's practical people that keep important things going when there's economic restraint. It is practical people that will keep libraries and ministries going. It's practical people that are going to keep schools going. It's practical people that will keep churches going because there's a great challenge now for people to actually pull together the kind of resources to make a one great hour of sharing work or to make a library work at this church. It takes volunteers. It takes people to make a choir work, to make things happen. In our culture today, we need the Marthas. If there ever was a time we need the Marthas, it's now. But be careful, Martha is not just the person in the kitchen.

I want you to realize this that Martha is a theologian, too. She is the one that comes to Jesus. She is the one that gives the great confession of faith. She is the one that first of all tells him of her faith, "Yes, I believe in the resurrection." She is the one who hears Jesus say, "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this, Martha?" She is the one that gives the great affirmation of faith in John 11, not Mary. I love Mary, but Mary isn't the one who does it. Mary's crying all the time. Martha is the one that does it. I'm not against crying either, C. S. Lewis has a great line, "Crying is all right in a way as long as it lasts, but sooner or later you have to stop and then you have to decide what to do." That's Martha, she is the decider.

And I have my own angle. I think that after the Luke account when she was scolded and Jesus said, "Martha, you're a little bit too preoccupied right now with the food and all. Mary chose well, leave her alone." You know what I think happened after Jesus left? I think Martha went to Mary and said "Mary, what did He say? What

did He teach?" And she found out. Martha becomes a theologian, this wonderful lady in the kitchen. This is the lady that becomes so dynamic, so powerful in John 11. I'm grateful for her. If you're a Martha, I'm grateful for you. If you're a Mary, I'm grateful for you. We need you both. Right now, decide and be practical, make a difference, do what needs to be done. Thank God for the dependable people. Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you for the dependable people who help things to happen. Lord, thank you for Martha and bless us as we seek to be who we're supposed to be and to do and to hear and to learn what we're supposed to learn. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

1 St. Clair, Robert James. *Prayers for People Like Me*. D. & F. Scott Publishing: N. Richland Hills, TX, 1989.

2 Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. 1866, The Russian Messenger. 1956, Random House. Translated from Russian to English by Constance Garnett.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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