Mary & Martha

John 11:1-27

Mary and Martha... all over Christ's Kingdom, the story of Mary and Martha is heard, preached and used as an object lesson. Not this story from John 11, it’s usually their story from Luke 10:38-42 that we hear. Martha’s in the kitchen working hard, Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet soaking in His message and when Martha gets frustrated because she’s doing all the work herself, Jesus says, “Mary has chosen what is better...” Mary is always portrayed as the faithful one who loves Jesus more and Martha as the hard working sister who’d rather serve. But I’m not sure it’s fair to only use this familiar story to form our impressions of these friends of Jesus.

And what about Thomas? The only reason we really know anything at all about the fellow is the fact he wanted proof that Jesus had risen. This one sentence that managed to get recorded in scripture gave him the nickname “Doubting Thomas” for all eternity. I wonder, though, did Thomas get a bad wrap, too.

I think Thomas and Martha are good examples of real people who loved Jesus. Let’s look closely at John 11 today. We are most familiar with these verses because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. When we read them, we focus on the miracle Jesus performed or the compassion He had for his good friend. However, if we look closely at a couple of the details of the story, we learn more about what it means to be a follower of Christ and a human at the same time.

Thomas... “Doubting Thomas”... I don’t think that Thomas really was a “doubter.” Thomas had a strong faith in Jesus. He knew that Jesus faced death if they returned to Jerusalem. He also realized that anyone who aligned himself with this man who called Himself the Christ would also be in danger of stoning. Yet, when other disciples were worried about going back to the area for fear of the crowds, Thomas was willing to follow Jesus, even if it meant death. Thomas’ faith was strong. He was courageous. Poor guy, all he wanted was a little proof before he stuck his neck out, and he’s forever labeled “the doubter.”

And Martha, look at Martha! When she hears that Jesus is coming she goes out to meet him. What happened to the sister that sat at His feet? She stayed behind to mourn. Martha, on the other hand, not only goes to Him, but it sounds as though she got to Him before He even had an opportunity to get to the house or the tomb. And when she finds Him, she confronts Him with the truth, “If you’d been here my brother wouldn’t have died.” That’s the hard truth! She had a strong faith! Martha believed that Jesus had the power to heal Lazarus. And more than that, she believed that Jesus could raise Him again. Martha didn’t understand why Jesus didn’t come earlier, but it didn’t matter. Regardless of her circumstances, Martha believed in the power of Jesus Christ, her friend.

I’m not sure why Martha and Thomas have reaped such a bad reputation over the centuries. Perhaps it’s because there’s a lot to learn from their doubting and overworking. However, I think that one lesson we neglect to take from those stories is the authenticity of these two friends of Jesus. In every circumstance, these two were real. It would have been easier for Thomas to just believe the other 10 guys. Going with the majority is more convenient. But Thomas didn’t do it even when it would have made life simpler. It would have been much safer to stay where they were and not go to Jerusalem when Lazarus needed them. That’s what the other disciples wanted to do. And believing that Jesus had risen would have been equally satisfying, but Thomas wanted to be sure before he offered to lay down his life again.

Martha believed. She had a strong faith. I wonder if her frustration in the kitchen grew from a desire to sit at Jesus’ feet herself, but someone had to feed all those people and Pizza Hut hadn’t been invented yet. Martha knew that her friend, Jesus, was mighty and powerful. She knew that Jesus could heal and
raise her brother. One of the most difficult things we do in life as Christians is hold onto the faith when we know that Christ has the power to keep evil at bay, yet it seems as if He's staying in a town far away. But much like Lazarus' death, if we believe and watch for it, God can be most glorified and people can come to know Him when He doesn't use His power to stop the evil. We don't understand it, and we don't have to. Martha made her statement of belief BEFORE Jesus raised Lazarus. Do you think her faith would have dwindled if Jesus would have only brought her comfort in her time of mourning?

I think that the greatest lesson we can learn from Thomas and Martha is that it's OK to be real. It is all right to doubt. We have permission to get frustrated when we feel like we're doing it all by ourselves. The key is to never quit trusting that Jesus is powerful, mighty and able in the midst of the doubt and frustration. I don't think Thomas doubted Jesus' ability to live again. He did doubt his friends. What if they were hallucinating in their time of great grief? What about the times that you doubt? Do you question the ability of God to do what you ask? Or are you just being real? Do you realize this might not be God's will or His timing? Are you convinced that God can do even more than we can imagine and you will believe and trust in Him regardless of the outcome?

There are times in our life when it's good to be more like Martha and Thomas than Peter and Paul. During these times we won't make great orations that cause people to flock to the faith. Instead we'll take opportunities to just be real. We can live our lives confronting Christ when He doesn't do what we know He can, trusting the Father even when it seems as though there is no way out and believing, much like Martha, that no matter how bad it gets, God can do the impossible.