

Sunday Sidebar: April 7, 2019

Jesus' Friends in Bethany

In the 11th chapter of John, we see Jesus in a unique setting. He comes to the home of some of his dearest friends: Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly how or when they met, but we do know that Jesus became very close with these siblings and visited them on a number of occasions. They probably worshiped together, and then went home to have a meal together. They definitely loved Jesus and supported his ministry, and may have, on occasion, even traveled around with Jesus, listening to him preach and teach, and seeing him heal the sick.

In the 10th chapter of Luke, we see Jesus and all his disciples over at Mary and Martha and Lazarus' home for a dinner. And while Martha works away in the kitchen getting the meal ready, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus (with all the men) and listens eagerly to his teachings. Martha comes out all indignant and tells Jesus to send Mary into the kitchen to help her! Jesus replies: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed - or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Jesus may have been suggesting that Martha didn't need to prepare a feast, only a small meal was necessary. Or he may have been suggesting that she was welcome to forego the meal altogether and just sit and listen, too. However Jesus' response is interpreted, he definitely defended Mary's right to learn and grow in her discipleship and he told Martha to "chill." The most important thing to Jesus, was helping people get right with God.

Lazarus' Tomb

Then Lazarus gets sick and dies. The sisters send word to Jesus to come quickly so he can heal their brother. But Jesus is some distance from Bethany, preaching and teaching out in the region of the Jordan where John the Baptist ministered. So although he receives the message, he doesn't return to them immediately. After two more days, Jesus and his disciples head back toward Bethany. When they arrive, Lazarus has been dead and buried, four days...

We know that Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were fairly well off, because Lazarus is buried in a tomb, rather than a common cemetery. To be buried in a tomb indicated one's social status. Not just the rich, but also the middle to upper class of Jesus' time, had their own tombs. Tombs were privately purchased caves, bought long before the need, and prepared by stone workers who would fashion the burial chambers and slabs to custom fit the body sizes of the owner and his family members. Lazarus was laid to rest in his family's tomb. There may have been other bodies already interred there, or it may have been a fresh tomb, already prepared for Lazarus and his sisters. At any rate, Lazarus has been dead four days....

This number is significant according to Sigmund Brouwer in his book, *The Carpenter's Cloth*, because many of the Jews of the day believed that the soul stayed near the body, for three days, waiting in hope to be able to reenter the body. It was thought the physical body did not begin to decay until the fourth day, when the angel of death let a drop of gall fall from his sword onto the dead person's face. At that point the soul left the body and the body began to decay. Thus, on the fourth day, Mary and Martha and their friends would know that Lazarus was dead, beyond all hope.

Well, except for Jesus!