

A Bereavement in Bethany

Grief and loss are never routine or easy. We can learn the sympathetic words to speak, repeat the correct doctrines, but in the darkness of loss we all struggle. I was charged with my first funeral in a small country church in southeast Oklahoma on a bitter cold November day. I had only attended one funeral in my young lifetime and that was to observe how a pastor should handle such an occasion. The deacons had called to report the death of a year old little girl who had spent her brief life in a neonatal unit in an Oklahoma City hospital. Her parents were so young, impoverished and devastated. My deacons said, "You can do this!" I thought, "This is impossible." God said, "Read about Jesus."



Michael K. Olmsted

Each year, as we approach Easter, that traumatic funeral experience comes back to me. In spite of all the years since Jesus' death and resurrection, the clear hope I have in my Savior and the experiences I have shared with so many in their grief, I continue to find strength in Jesus' visit to his friends in Bethany. Beyond identifying with the grief of Mary and Martha, I find a powerful hope and promise in the tears of Jesus. If anyone knew and trusted God, it was the Son, yet his heart broke for two women whose loss seemed beyond recovery. The Apostle John is a master storyteller who frames his great theological ideas in the life experiences of people like us. Bethany was a small village a few miles from Jerusalem, but in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus Jesus found welcome and comfort when the world hounded him for another miracle and enemies sought his life. Jesus has given us so much even before he died on the cross. The miracle at Bethany is an introduction to the graphic truth of Jesus' own resurrection and the promise of ours!

The drama of this story is heightened by the fact that Jesus delays two days after receiving the news of Lazarus' illness before starting for Bethany. The comments of Jesus' disciples might explain Jesus' delay as they question him: "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition

wants to stone you, but you want to go back" (v. 8)? On the previous visit to Jerusalem Jewish leaders threatened to stone Jesus after he said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus clearly declares his purpose: "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up." (v. 11). Still, the disciples failed to understand and Jesus clarifies: "Lazarus has died. For your sakes I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him" (vv. 14-15). Their failure to understand Jesus' promise of resurrection from the dead will continue up to the point of Jesus' resurrection.

Arriving in Bethany after Lazarus' funeral, Jesus is met by the grieving Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you" (vv. 21-22). The Jewish idea of resurrection, or life after death, was vague at that time, so Martha is grasping. But she has heard Jesus teach and remembers: "I know that he (Lazarus) will rise in the resurrection at the last day" (v. 24). Even today, with our sense of time and common thinking that resurrection is a reality that refers to after the second coming or after death, we fail to understand that eternal (resurrection) life is a fact from the moment we receive Christ as Savior. Jesus states this clearly: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this" (vv. 25-26)?

Martha confesses her faith and seeks out Mary, who pours out her grief before Jesus as spontaneously as she poured costly perfume on Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair on another occasion (John 12:3). Other mourners accompany Mary and Jesus is "deeply disturbed and troubled" by their tears (v. 33). They all move to Lazarus' tomb, where Jesus weeps, even though he knows what he is about to do. This is particularly moving because we see that God is truly touched by our suffering and grief.

Then comes the miracle, the foreshadowing of that day when Jesus will cast off his own shroud of death and ours as he leaves his borrowed tomb empty. We should remember that the

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risen Lazarus of that day will die again, a temporary interlude before all God's people gather in God's eternal kingdom.

I have been privileged to be with so many people as they came to their final moments in this world. Even with my own parents the heartbreak of goodbye was marked by peacefulness and the knowledge life was not over. So many times I have looked back to a dying person's words and actions that blessed me and others. Their lives made mine better. Their friendship and words still encourage me. I remember a pastor friend's mother, in her final hour, asking each of her grandchildren gathered around her bed, "Have you asked Jesus to come into your life?" At the end she closed her eyes and smiled. All had said yes.

When Jesus came to Bethany he listened to Martha and Mary as they grieved openly. He wept with them because of their pain and his, because God truly loves all his children. We are never immune from life's suffering and fears. We are never alone. Study the daily ministry of Jesus, observe his relationships and how he helped those in need. He was always with them as he is always with us. We want resurrection, healing, problem resolution and blessings today. But God offers us so much more in the coming of Jesus to be one with us. You can be a help and comfort to those who grieve and suffer by simply being with them in the shadows and days that follow.

Always remember that Jesus wept with that grieving family. He did not pronounce happy words, offer easy phrases, or avoid the reality of loss. Jesus was with the sisters in their sadness and with Lazarus when he stumbled into the light of day after the darkness of death. At birth we emerge from the unknown. At death we arrive at the unknowable and see it all for the first time! Praise God!

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.