

**<sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup>and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"**

We study God's Word. Everything we know about God is in the Bible, nowhere else. We seek to understand it, not to interpret it to make it fit our own ideas, not to make it say the opposite of what is written and not to shy away from its challenge through the Holy Spirit. We will not manipulate it so that it confirms our chosen lifestyle or theology nor dull the edge of God's sword but allow it to pierce through to our hearts. If we will not accept its challenge we have nothing but our own opinions, ambitions and desires, which Paul reckoned worthless: **<sup>8</sup>"I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him."**

We have been thinking about this chapter in three sections, the first "**coping with death**" is when Jesus gets the message about his dear friend Lazarus' terminal illness and sets his face to go to Jerusalem and his own certain death. The second is "**coping with grief**" as Jesus comes to Martha and Mary in their mourning and finds them asking difficult questions. The third tells of God's defeat of death in resurrection. I appreciate that this subject is not easy and will bring many painful thoughts and memories which we thought we had put behind us and which yet come unbidden into our hearts afresh. We immediately recognise and sympathise with the "Why" questions that both Martha and Mary put to Jesus in their pain.

**<sup>21</sup>"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."**

Mary could not even bring herself to come and meet him but stayed at home. When Martha had complained about her sister previously in the Gospels it was because Mary had taken the time to sit and listen to Jesus while she was trauchled with worries, cares and concerns that were really masking her need to receive God's Word. Now the situation is reversed it is Mary who is avoiding the truth while Martha comes to listen and learn. How many times have we been in a crisis or bereavement and been too upset to come to Jesus and pour out our deepest heart to Him? We make ourselves busy and stay away, like Mary, no doubt wrestling with the bitter question that she finally expresses to Jesus when she does come: **<sup>32</sup>When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."**

That question, "Why", carries within it all the anguish, hurt and bitterness which are familiar to anyone coping with grief; "why could you not come, why could you not save him?" We might go further and express doubt in the very existence of a loving God but both Martha and Mary are in the presence of Jesus, they know him and so the question stops at, "why". At this distance we cannot tell how bitter the words are, or the tone of voice but the pain is plain enough. It's too much for Mary to bear so it's left to Martha to come and meet Jesus while she stays away unable to talk to him.

She's wrong to do that of course and misses out on these great words of comfort and peace that still trumpet hope to us now. We should be the last to judge her because we know only too well what it is to be angry and disappointed with God in our shame and confusion but if, like her, we stay away and don't come to Him we miss out on His great word of Life to us. In

his mercy He understands our hurt and He doesn't condemn Mary, or us, when we doubt his love. He patiently waits until we are ready but in the meantime it is Martha who is given the hope and blessing and the joy of His word and his promise.

<sup>23</sup> **Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."**

If only we will come to him, if only we will be honest with Him and pour out our hearts to him, if only we will trust him but so often we miss the word of reassurance or hope because we are caught up in our own pain and stay away, putting distance between us and Him. You will notice that Jesus doesn't tell Martha that she is wrong to ask the question why, nor does he really give her an answer or even offer her an explanation He simply speaks this powerful word of assurance. He might have explained to her his reasons for staying on where he was for 2 days. He might have given her a full theological exposition of the mystery of the resurrection but that's not what she needs or wants. When we cry out in our pain and bewilderment not understanding what is happening to us it's very seldom an explanation we need, at least not at first, it is the reassurance of God's Love. "Just tell me it's OK".

Jesus gives her that word of comfort; **"Your brother will rise again."** When Martha goes on wondering whether Jesus is talking about some theoretical, emotional kind of resurrection in the distant future: <sup>24</sup> **"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day,"** his answer is an even greater affirmation of his love: <sup>25</sup> **Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"**

He is saying, quite simply, Martha, "I'm here". The answer to all our questions is not a theory or a doctrine but a person, the person of Jesus. This is no guru telling you what his great thoughts are, nor a scientist telling you some great discovery about the mystery of the universe, nor a teacher instilling a doctrine and certainly not a philosopher who has cracked the meaning of life intellectually. This is Jesus who, in Himself will meet death and in Himself conquer it to rise again and in Himself bring forgiveness and Eternal life to us. This is the Saviour and he is here offering himself to us. We see the signs of that death and resurrection before us on the table today and we are invited to share them, to take them to ourselves. The question put to Martha is asked of us, **Do you believe this?"** It's a crucial question not merely an intellectual one. This is a real person calling us to real commitment, inviting us into a real relationship. It is not the easy answer to all our questions but the living God who says **"Take and eat"**. The God who meets us in our pain and bewilderment, in our grief in the person of His Son who has borne on the Cross our broken-ness, our sin, our condemnation, our guilt, our death and has risen. He it is who stands with us and holds us close.

**"I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"**

I began this sermon with a declaration about the Bible, the Word of God. You may have thought I was just having a dig at the recent debate raging in the General Assembly but at the heart of the controversy expressed there lies our attitude to the Scriptures and this is no intellectual, theoretical dispute it has far reaching consequences not least for our Eternal future. Because there are many in the Church of Scotland who would say that we need to re-interpret the Bible in the light of current thinking not just in controversial issues but across the board in our understanding of God, much of current theological thinking, influenced by secular society and taught in our Theological Colleges as standard says that the Resurrection as we have it in our Bible is impossible and therefore it has to be re-interpreted as a myth.

The truth of it lies we are told not in the reality of what was seen by the witnesses but in what it means to our hearts something that can change and does change with every whim and fashion. They would make the scripture say the opposite of what is in the text in order to conform to the prevailing ideas of this secular and sceptical world.

I can't imagine for a moment that if Peter or Paul were standing before us right now they would agree with that assessment and say, no, you are quite right we didn't mean you to take what we said as being true. They believed what they saw and when it comes to the resurrection, as Paul points out, if it has not taken place in fact as the Bible tells us then we are of all people most to be pitied because we have put our faith in wishful thinking.

Jesus' question to Martha then, ***Do you believe this?*** is really important for, if his words are not true in the plain sense of them, then we are lost. We have nothing. There is no comfort, no peace, no joy, no promise and nothing to offer other than a nice thought that maybe, one day it will all work out.

As Jesus prepares for the Cross and his own death, his own sacrifice he tells her, ***"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup>and whoever lives and believes in me will never die*** and invites her to embrace the truth of it. Today, in the signs of broken bread and spilled blood here on the table we are invited to, take and eat to ourselves the truth of it and believe that Jesus who met the darkness of the Cross and rose in triumph over it will transform the ashes of mourning into the oil of gladness.

Martha does so gladly confessing Jesus as Saviour and Lord then immediately goes to help her sister and bring her to Jesus too. There is no greater service she could render. She couldn't make the pain go away. She can't fix it. She can only share it and for Mary Jesus also has no words, only His tears as he stands with her and shares in her grief. The living God stands with us. Coping with death, coping with grief He is the one who will gain the victory.

***<sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup>and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"***