

## **A Curious Day In Bethany**

*I acknowledge, and thank heartily, Dr. Randy Roberts for triggering my thinking in two concepts related to this story. Good sir, I pray I do justice to the "track" that you've sent me down...*

"My sister and I wish to express our thanks for each of you joining with us today," Mary spoke as she put her hand down on Martha's shoulder. "It was so kind of you to make the journey up here to our home and we're certainly encouraged in the Lord because so many of you have come to remind us of the promise of our Lord that we will soon see our dear brother again."

Martha nodded and waved her left hand for that was all she was able to do since the stroke that she'd suffered more than a year before. Mary brushed back the graying strand of hair that had fallen across her sister's forehead and looked around the room at the guests. It was such a different group from a similar day fourteen years before. Oh, it's not that the makeup of the crowd was so radically different, but, rather, the spirit of the occasion was completely opposite from the brutal anguish that had filled the house the first time around. For a moment Mary was lost in reverie as she began to reminisce out loud for her older sister, "Oh sister, don't you remember the first time we went through this?"

You could see by the recognition in Martha's eyes that she did remember, the feelings and experience of that most memorable day were still vivid inside of her, even if her ability to express those memories was frozen, locked in her soul. "A few of you also remember, don't you?", Mary continued as she looked around the room.

Surely some did. Tirzeh, their cousin and Eliahu, their neighbor both nodded ascent. They had been there. They had seen the events of the day, as had Jacov and Cleopas and Crispus and Hannah.

James and Jude also, men of the twelve. They had witnessed the miracle that day and remembered it well, as did sweet little Rhoda, although she was so very small at the time that her memories of the day were exceedingly dim. All the young woman could recall was the fearful sense of incredible anguish in Bethany that suddenly was dispelled by the sight of a man who was wrapped as a ghost, standing in front of a hillside cave. She faintly remembered how the sorrowful dirge of the mourning flutes and weeping women were changed to laughter and tears of joy after Jesus raised His arm and shouted a command at the grave.

There were others who could have remembered, but they were too far spread throughout the land, telling village after village and town after town of the Man who had power over death and pain and guilt. Peter was in the western highlands and Matthew was still up in Syria with Nathaniel. Some said that Thomas had headed toward the western Galilee with John following after. Most of the apostles who had witnessed that miracle fourteen years before were too far away to have received words of Lazarus' death or they surely would have come to share in this occasion.

There were certainly others of the village and region who remembered the first funeral and many of them were gathered in the courtyard of the gracious old home to be with two aging sisters who had to bury their brother again.

Nattan, their faithful house steward remembered. He'd been with the little family since Mary was a young girl. It was Nattan who had run up to the Galilee to find Jesus for the two sisters had known that if Jesus was aware that his dear friend was so very sick He certainly would come immediately. Mary remembered the horror and disillusionment that she felt when Nattan returned sharing that the Master seemed unconcerned and just turned to go about His work there at the south end of the Lake.

Martha had, at that time, sought to rationalize why Jesus would not immediately respond, "Well, it must be, Nattan, that you were not firm enough with him," she scolded. "He must have misunderstood you," and then she snapped, "How could you allow Him to remain? If you had been more clear with Him He surely would have dropped all and come with you!"

"No, good lady," the servant pleaded. "I stressed to Him that our master was gravely ill and that if He did not come immediately I feared that Lazarus would die. He just turned and said something about 'the glory of God' and walked off up the path.

"I chased Him until He turned and raised His hand as though He would hear no more of it and it was as though He was brushing me aside. I knew, at that time, that I could better serve my master by returning to see if there might be one more physician that you might wish me to call or more water for me to draw or something. I knew I was serving no purpose chasing a Man who seemed disinterested in this matter."

"I can't believe that," Mary had cut in. That was completely out of character from the Man that she owed so much to. How could the only One who seemed to understand her plight and her guilt and her shame, (and her value in spite of it all!) turn away from their brutal anguish? That was not the Jesus she thought she knew. That was not at all the expected response from the One who took her from a life that she hated and gave

her hope and acceptance. On that painful day she could not justify how the One man who had given her a sense of innocence and clarity would not come to deliver her from some of the greatest anguish she would ever know?

Still, Nattan was adamant that day. He had implored Jesus to come and the Master had just turned aside.

The sisters remembered how it was this faithful servant who had helped them prepare the body for burial after their brother shook his last and expired. It was this good servant who had made arrangements for the wailing women and the mourning flutes. It was Nattan who bore the majority of the weight of their brother's body as it was carried to the caves on the edge of the village. Yes, faithful Nattan had been there, he had honorably carried out these duties fourteen years before.

But this time it was so very different. This time as Nattan bore his master Lazarus' body to the gravesite there were no flutes, no wailing women. Rather, there were people embracing and singing gentle psalms of praise. This day they had stood in front of the tomb with hope.

Mary suddenly broke her reverie and spoke to the assembled friends in the courtyard. "As I said, my sister and I are so thankful for you having joined to support us this day," and for a moment she began to laugh. Biting her lip she smiled, fought back a tear of joy and memory, and said, "Some of you remember, but for those of you who don't I wish to tell you why today we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

"Fourteen years ago, when our good brother fell so very ill, we called for Jesus to come to restore him as He had so many, many others." Mary looked around the assembly and continued, "Some of you remember the horror and anger and that we felt when He

just turned aside in spite of our pleadings.” Nattan nodded, for the memory was more clearly his than anyone else’s in the group.

“Then, when our brother died the first time, we were devastated. My dear sister and I were just shredded by the loss and also by the rejection of the One that we thought was our dear Friend.” Mary put her hand on Martha’s shoulder and continued, “Yes, we buried him without hope, and then spent several black days trying to understand why this had to come to pass in our lives. We could not understand why Heaven had turned her ear from us.

“Then, to our amazement, Jesus did come... of course it was too late to do any good (or so we thought).” At that moment Mary began to laugh at the memory of how she had underestimated the intervention of the Master. “Can you imagine how furious we were with Him? We both let Him know, in no uncertain terms, what we thought of a Friend who could come and take advantage of your hospitality, make your home His own whenever He chose, and yet would let us suffer such a terrible loss when He was running all over the land healing sick people that He didn’t even know! I was furious with Him.

“But, I guess He had a different plan.” Martha again lifted her left hand in agreement and her eyes twinkled as she reviewed the memories that her sister was triggering. “We’ll never forget that, will we dear sister?”, and Mary looked down at Martha who nodded in agreement.

“Excuse me, was it as we have heard?”, Simon ben-Emeth, a young lad of the village suddenly piped in. “Did you lash out in anger at the Master?”

Mary laughed for a moment and shook her head, “Yes, my young friend, it is exactly as you have heard although it was greater than just anger. I was so hurt, so frustrated, so

despondent over the thought that my brother did not mean enough for the Lord to leave dealing with strangers to come running that I have to admit that I did snap at Him." Mary then came very close to the boy and continued, "But do you know what?"

"What?", the boy's eyes grew very large.

"I should have known He wouldn't come running for I never saw Him in a hurry, never once. He always seemed to understand His Father's timing and there was never any need for Him to rush. Besides," she continued as she went back to hold her sister's hand, "It really was a bit selfish of me to expect Him to give me exactly what I thought I wanted. I should have known Him well enough to know that He would only do good and would never bring any harm to anyone. After all, through the years of His ministry there were many, many funerals that He didn't stop so I suppose I should have allowed Him to determine His course of action without my determination as to what was appropriate for Him and what wasn't."

Mary then sat down beside Martha and looked at the group. It was astounding to all that this should have been an occasion of sorrow and it was, rather, a gathering of good memory and hope. "Look at us," Mary said, "we're gathered here today because of the death of my dear brother and your good friend and we have no reason to grieve. And do you know why that is? It's because Jesus took us through this valley once before and we know that He can bring us out the other side.

"Simon," she said, gesturing toward the boy, "please come here, and bring little Sara with you." When the children settled in near the two old sisters she said, "I want to tell you something that very few people know." The children were intensely attentive for they felt they were going to get some privileged information that others did not have.

“That day, when I was in such anguish and so angry I saw something that we’ve not told many people through the years. Do you know what it is?”

The children both chimed immediately, “What?”

“As I stood near the Lord when we approached the tomb I saw Him tremble. He looked, to me, like a strong mustang who guarded His herd, sensing danger. It was as though He was flaring His nostrils and prancing, rippling the muscles in His neck as He wanted to confront the evil for the good of His herd. You know,” she began to speak very softly, “It was as though He was saying, ‘Come death, I will challenge you here this day and you will be defeated!’”

“But,” young Simon disputed, “I had been told that the Lord actually cried at that time.”

“Oh, yes,” the gracious lady replied, “He did that indeed.”

“But ma’m, how could that be? If He knew He was going to raise your brother from the dead than what reason does He have to cry?”

“Oh, my inquisitive young man, I think that there might be several.” Mary quickly enumerated three to the boy, “I think He cried because He was hurting for what my dear sister and I had gone through for four days.” Martha again nodded in agreement as Mary continued, “I also think He wept for He knew that we would face these kinds of occasions again until He returns. And, lastly, I also feel He cried for He knew that there would be many, many graves where He will not be able to call the dead forth to life with joy. Does that make sense to you?”

“Oh, yes. I think I understand...”, the boy trailed off into thought.

“Well then,” Mary said to the rest of the group, “let us rise and sing a song of praise to the One who has defeated death.” And so it was that the second funeral congregation of Lazarus spent the last moments of the day rejoicing together as they left the home and walked past the grave where he lay for the second time.

Later that evening, as the quiet moon rose over the Jordan valley and began to illuminate the olive groves of the mountain the two old sisters, leaning upon each other, walked slowly out toward the limestone cliff where the family tomb was now, again, freshly sealed. The city twinkled in the valley to the west as Zion settled in for another night. The townsfolk were oblivious to the poignant moment when two elderly sisters sat outside the tomb, holding each other, smiling, and remembering the day when that grave had expelled its occupant.

The two old ladies knew that the day would come again, but until then they knew it would be all right.

*But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren,  
concerning them which are asleep,  
that ye sorrow not,  
even as others who have no hope.*

*- I Thessalonians 4:13*