

# After the Complaint

By  
The Reverend Dr. John M. Willingham  
From the Pulpit of  
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## **John 11:17-23**

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

One day, while leading a Bible study in my first pastorate, a man's name popped up in the conversation. I don't remember the passage being discussed, but someone in the group, in commenting on our text, said, "That sounds just like Bill Jones to me." Everyone in the room nodded in agreement. The church is located in a small town. I had never lived in a community with fewer than 25,000 people before and thus learned early on how different life can be in such a place. As the only Presbyterian pastor in town, for instance, I quickly discovered that people knew who I was even if we had not met. I also learned that when someone's name came up in conversation, if others present didn't know the person, the speaker would add something like "Oh, you know them, they live in the Smith house," referencing a previous owner.

I was still learning such connections when that class member referenced Bill Jones. "I don't know Bill," I said, and the woman told me how he complained about everything. As she explained the pattern, it became clear that he was one who viewed the proverbial glass as half-empty; perhaps even seeing it as dirty and cracked, too. The woman continued. "I had a friend who decided to make a game of trying to force Bill to say something positive. One day, the weather was just perfect; blue sky without any clouds [just like the gift we all experienced yesterday]. Bill was walking down the sidewalk toward her, and the woman said, "Hi, Bill, isn't today just gorgeous?" He looked up and replied, "I suppose, but

Some human patterns are deeply rooted. We all know people who seem to look upon life as Bill Jones did, seeing only what is missing or wrong. We also know others who always look for the good in any situation, perpetually unfazed by the challenges of life. Yet, then there are people like Martha, the only one to speak in our New Testament reading today,

who, in my estimation, showed a different approach; one that I believe to be a good model for faith.

During this season of Lent, we are reflecting upon events in the eleventh chapter of John's gospel. We began with a day Jesus received word that his beloved friend Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, was gravely ill. Even with that message, Jesus delayed setting out for two days. The text we just heard tells of his arrival in Bethany, as John notes that Lazarus' body had been in the tomb for four days. That detail draws from two pieces of information known to the first audience. Given the custom then for burial to occur within 24 hours of death, it seems likely Lazarus had died before Jesus got word. In addition, there was an opinion among rabbis in the era that the soul hovered above the body for three days following death, but after that point, there was no hope of revival. Thus, to hear the body had been in the tomb for four days was a way of saying Lazarus was truly dead and thus seemingly beyond the scope of anything Jesus could do.

When Martha gets word that Jesus is drawing near, she rushes out to meet him and begins to speak. What follows is the second of only two times her words are recorded in the Bible. In an earlier moment, one mentioned only by Luke, Jesus comes for a meal in the home of those three siblings. Martha is busy getting things ready while Mary sits at Jesus' feet listening. Martha watches as long as she can before she goes to Jesus and cries out: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." In that moment, Jesus praises Mary for focusing on the more important things, a response that is hard to hear for the many Martha-like followers of Jesus I've known over the years who appropriately point out that without persons to help get meals ready, no one eats!

In today's text, recalling events months or years later, Martha speaks just as candidly to Jesus, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Certainly, none of us was present for that moment and thus cannot know her tone of voice, but most scholars raise two possibilities. Some believe Martha was voicing a lament, not blaming Jesus for his absence, but speaking of how things could have turned out differently had he arrived sooner. Others hear her words as a criticism of Jesus and believe that her opening words of "if you had been here," have an implied conclusion, "but you weren't," or even a tone of "what took you so long?"

We don't know, but I hear her words as ones of complaint, intensified by grief to be sure, but critical of Jesus nonetheless. Certainly, you are free to interpret it differently and could be right. Yet the reason I imagine it to have been offered with an audible sense of dissatisfaction is not only because it matches her tone from that day of wanting Jesus to make Mary help with a meal, but because occasions of complaint have always been a sign of a healthy bond with God.

Our first lesson, for instance, leaves no doubt as to the tone of one speaking. Those words are attributed to David, the beloved king of Israel's past, whose frustration with God is clear. Four times in the first two verses, David cries out and says, "How long?" We aren't told what is going on in David's life but can hear his growing agony. "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" David's words make Martha's response sound tame by comparison, and if that was all he had to say on that day, we could well wonder if such a tone continued throughout the Psalm.

There's an old story told of a monastery where the brothers took a vow of total silence. They were not to speak in their time of service with one exception: every five years, they could utter two words to the Abbot. A new monk arrived at the monastery to begin his service, and after five years of silent ministry, he went to the Abbot's office to speak. "Food bad!" he said and left the room. Five years later, he returned. This time his words were "Bed hard!" After five more years, he returned for the third time. In that moment, his only words were "Want out!" To which the Abbot replied, "I'm not surprised. All you've done since you've been here is complain." (Bauknight, Brian K. "Sustain Gratitude!" in *Pulpit Digest* Nov/Dec 1993, p. 77)

One might have wondered the same thing about David had that Psalm ended with those opening verses, but the tone soon changes. For after those four successive cries of "how long?" he names a fear that "my foes will rejoice because I am shaken," and then that servant concludes: "But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he had dealt bountifully with me." With those words, David offers a model for faithful complaint; one that includes an honest cry of lament, abandonment, or disappointment--whatever is in one's heart—coupled with naming of abiding trust in God.

We see that in Martha, too, for after speaking to Jesus in what I believe was a tone of complaint, she goes on to say, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." What did she mean? We don't know. The conversation between the two of them will continue as we listen in next Sunday, but the dialogue ahead doesn't reveal what she thought Jesus could do. It's possible she believed he had power over death, but her words to come will demonstrate that she does not have a full grasp of the one who stands before her. Yet even so, she was articulating faith in him; a confidence even without knowing what he could do. And

that is the kind of place where I believe God wants us to be, too.

For in every life, there are events that mystify and wound us. Every life has occasions when things occur that are directly opposite to what we sought, when prayers seem to go unanswered, and instead, what we fervently hoped would not occur takes place. In such moments, it is only natural if we find a complaint or lament arising from our lips, echoing Martha's words of "Lord, if you had been here" or David's cry of "How long?"

I'm personally grateful for such honesty in the pages of Scripture because I believe it is such a place that we humans often find ourselves trying to sort through what is happening in our lives or that of those whom we love. Yet I'm also appreciative that Martha did not stop there, but instead was able in the next breath to add "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him," and that David was able to affirm "my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." It's such confidence that God longs for each of us to possess.

In her book *Two-Part Invention*, Madeline L'Engle tells of her marriage to Hugh Franklin. Franklin was an actor who once had the role of Dr. Charles Tyler on the television soap opera *All My Children*. Her book describes many wonderful moments in their courtship and marriage and toward the end tells of the time her husband was critically ill.

"What happens to all those prayers," she wrote, "when not only are they not 'answered' but things get far worse than anyone ever anticipated? What about prayer? We do not know. We will not know in this life. Some prayers are magnificently answered. More than once this had been the case in my own life, glorious miracles of prayer. But this summer, the answers have all been negative. The doctors say, 'Everything has gone wrong.' One

thing after another.

"What about prayer? Surely the prayers have sustained me, are sustaining me. Perhaps there will be unexpected answers to these prayers, answers I may not even be aware of for years. But they are not wasted. They are not lost. I do not know where they have gone, but I believe that God holds them, hand outstretched to receive them like precious pearls." (L'Engle, *Two-Part Invention*, Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1988: pp. 186-187.)

Lament and praise. Complaint and confidence. Such responses are not antithetical but are signs of vibrant faith. They do not stand in contradiction but co-exist as part of an unshakeable bond with God. Which is why on this day I give thanks for two ancestors in the faith who invite us to voice all that is stirring in our heart—the hurtful and the joyful, the grief and the hope--knowing not only that God can take it, but we need to name it before our Maker, too.