

### iii. *Jesus meets Martha (11:17–27)*

17. After telling his disciples Lazarus was dead, Jesus made his way back to Judea. *On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.* Lazarus was still alive when news reached Jesus of his sickness (4), though he must have died very shortly afterwards. Jesus waited two days before heading back to Judea, a journey of two days, arriving when ‘Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days’.

18–19. The evangelist explains, *Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.* Bethany lay to the east of Jerusalem on the other side of the Mount of Olives, less than 2 miles (lit. 15 stadia) away.

In the Mishnah we read, ‘Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman’ (*Ketubot 4:4*). Martha and Mary must have been well off and well known for ‘many Jews’ to come from Jerusalem to comfort them. It is important to note that here ‘the Jews’ are presented in a positive light, coming to comfort those who were followers of Jesus in their loss. It is a reminder that the Fourth Gospel is not anti-Semitic, as is sometimes suggested, and that its presentation of ‘the Jews’ is not monochrome.

20–22. News that Jesus was coming reached Bethany before he did. *When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.* Why the sisters’ response to the news of Jesus’ approach was so varied is not explained. ‘Lord,’ *Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’* Martha’s words carried some reproach: Jesus had failed to appear before her brother died. Despite her disappointment, Martha continued, *But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.* Whatever Martha’s expression of faith in Jesus meant, she was not expecting him to restore her brother to life straightaway, as her subsequent response to Jesus makes clear (24). She seems to have been expressing a general belief in Jesus’ relationship to God and that God listens to his prayers.

23–24. In response Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ These words could be taken to mean either ‘your brother will rise again in the general resurrection on the last day’ or ‘your brother will be restored to life immediately’. Martha did not realize that Jesus was speaking of an immediate restoration to life, so *Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’* This was orthodox Pharisaic (but not

Sadducean) belief (Matt. 22:23/Mark 12:18/Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8), a belief shared by Jesus (5:21, 29; Luke 14:14; 20:35–36). For Martha to make this statement showed no understanding of what Jesus meant. He was about to restore her brother to life, a symbol of the resurrection on the last day.

25–26. To move her beyond the orthodoxy of the Pharisees, Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’<sup>59</sup> He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.’ This statement contains the fifth of seven different ‘I am’ sayings with predicates in the Fourth Gospel (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). It involves three claims: (1) Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life, i.e. the Father has given him to have life in himself and to bestow resurrection life upon whomever he will (5:21, 26). (2) People who believe in him, even if they die (as Lazarus had done) will live—Jesus will raise them from death on the last day. What he would soon do for Lazarus would foreshadow the resurrection of the last day. (3) People who live and believe in him will never die. This will be literally true of the last generation of believers. Of other believers it is true in the sense that not even death can break their relationship with God. With these claims Jesus made himself central to the Jewish hope of the resurrection and eternal life, and by asking Martha, *Do you believe this?*, he encouraged her to recognize this.

27. Martha’s response took the form of a confession: ‘Yes, Lord,’ she told him, ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.’ She had moved beyond her previous beliefs (22: ‘I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask’) and Pharisaic beliefs (24: ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day’). She was affirming Jesus’ central role in bringing about the resurrection on the last day, adding that she believed he was the Christ, the Son of God, the one whom the Father had sent into the world. The title ‘the Son of God’ is now known to have been used as a messianic title among first-century Jews (see commentary on 1:34). Martha’s confession echoes Nathanael’s confession (1:49), and is an example of the faith the evangelist hopes will be evoked by his Gospel in the hearts and minds of his readers (20:31).

<sup>59</sup> A few ancient manuscripts omit the words ‘and the life’, though many more include them. The important place the idea of life plays in the whole passage supports their inclusion.