**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**JOHN-045**. **THE OPEN GRAVE AT BETHANY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met Him. The Jews then which were with her in the house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there. Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying unto Him, Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, He groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, And said, Where have ye laid him? They say unto Him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold how He loved him! And some of them said. Could not this Man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died! Jesus therefore again groaning in Himself, cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto Him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God? Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up His eyes, and said, Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me. And I know that Thou hearest Me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me. And when He thus had spoken, He cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go. Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on Him."*

*John 11:30-45*

Why did Jesus stay outside Bethany and summon Martha and Mary to come to Him? Apparently that He might keep Himself apart from the noisy crowd of conventional mourners whose presence affronted the majesty and sanctity of sorrow, and that He might speak to the hearts of the two real mourners. A divine decorum forbade Him to go to the house. The Life-bringer keeps apart. His comforts are spoken in solitude. He reverenced grief. How beautifully His sympathetic delicacy contrasts with the heartless rush of those who were comfortingMary when they thought that she was driven to go suddenly to the grave by a fresh burst of sorrow! If they had had any real sympathy or perception, they would have stayed where they were, and let the poor burdened heart find ease in lonely weeping. But, like all vulgar souls, they had one idea--never to leave mourners alone or let them weep.

Three stages seem discernible in the self-revelation of Jesus in this crowning miracle: His agitation and tears, His majestic confidence in His life-giving power now to be manifested, and His actual exercise of that power.

**I. The repetition by Mary of Martha's words, as her first salutation, tells a pathetic story of the one thought that had filled both sisters hearts in these four dreary days.**

Why had He not come? How easily He could have come! How surely He could have prevented all this misery! Confidence in His power blends strangely with doubt as to His care. A hint of reproach is in the words, but more than a hint of faith in His might. He does not rebuke the rash judgment implied, for He knew the true love underlying it; but He does not directly answer Mary, as He had done Martha, for the two sisters needed different treatment.

We note that Mary has no such hope as Martha had expressed. Her more passive, meditative disposition had bowed itself, and let the grief overwhelm her. So in her we see a specimen of the excess of sorrow which indulges in the monotonous repetition of what would have happened if something else that did not happen had happened, and which is too deeply dark to let a gleam of hope shine in. Words will do little to comfort such grief. Silent sharing of its weeping and helpful deeds will do most.

So a great wave of emotion swept across the usually calm soul of Jesus, which John bids us trace to its cause by therefore(ver. 33). The sight of Mary's real, and the mournershalf-real, tears, and the sound of their loud keening, shook His spirit, and He yielded to, and even encouraged, the rush of feeling (troubled Himself) . But not only sympathy and sorrow ruffled the clear mirror of His spirit; another disturbing element was present. He was moved with indignation(Rev. Ver. marg.). Anger at Providence often mingles with our grief, but that was not Christ's indignation. The only worthy explanation of that strange ingredient in Christ's agitation is that it was directed against the source of death,--namely, sin. He saw the cause manifested in the effects. He wept for the one, He was wroth at the other. The tears witnessed to the perfect love of the man, and of the God revealed in the man; the indignation witnessed to the recoil and aversion from sin of the perfectly righteous Man, and of the holy God manifested in Him. We get one glimpse into His heart, as on to some ocean heaving and mist-covered. The momentary sight proclaims the union in Him, as the Incarnate Word, of pity for our woes and of aversion from our sins.

His question as to the place of the tomb is not what we should have expected; but its very abruptness indicates effort to suppress emotion, and resolve to lose no time in redressing the grief. Most sweetly human are the tears that start afresh after the moment's repression, as the little company begin to move towards the grave. And most sadly human are the unsympathetic criticisms of His sacred sorrow. Even the best affected of the bystanders are cool enough to note them as tokens of His love, at which perhaps there is a trace of wonder; while others snarl out a sarcasm which is double-barrelled, as casting doubt on the reality either of the love or of the power. It is easy to weep, but if He had cared for him, and could work miracles, He might surely have kept him alive. How blind men are! Jesus wept, and all that the lookers-on felt was astonishment that He should have cared so much for a dead man of no importance, or carping doubt as to the genuineness of His grief and the reality of His power. He shows us His pity and sorrow still--to no more effect with many.

**II. The passage to the tomb was marked by his continued agitation.**

But his arrival there brought calm and majesty. Now the time has come which He had in view when He left his refuge beyond Jordan; and, as is often the case with ourselves, suddenly tremor and tumult leave the spirit when face to face with a moment of crisis. There is nothing more remarkable in this narrative than the contrast between Jesus weeping and indignant, and Jesus serene and authoritative as He stands fronting the cave-sepulchre. The sudden transformation must have awed the gazers.

He points to the stone, which, probably like that of many a grave discovered in Palestine, rolled in a groove cut in the rocky floor in front of the tomb. The command accords with His continual habit of confining the miraculous within the narrowest limits. He will do nothing by miracle which can be done without it. Lazarus could have heard and emerged, though the stone had remained. If the story had been a myth, he very likely would have done so. Like loose him, and let him go, this is a little touch that cannot have been invented, and helps to confirm the simple, historical character of the account.

Not less natural, though certainly as unlikely to have been told unless it had happened, is Martha's interruption. She must have heard what was going on, and, with her usual activity, have joined the procession, though we left her in the house. She thinks that Jesus is going into the grave; and a certain reverence for the poor remains, as well as for Him, makes her shrink from the thought of even His loving eyes seeing them now. Clearly she has forgotten the dim hopes which had begun in her when she talked with Jesus. Therefore He gently reminds her of these; for His words (ver. 40) can scarcely refer to anything but that interview, though the precise form of expression now used is not found in the report of it (vers. 25-27).

We mark Christ's calm confidence in His own power. His identification of its effect with the outflashing of the glory of God, and His encouragement to her to exercise faith by suspending her sight of that glory upon her faith. Does that mean that He would not raise her brother unless she believed? No; for He had determined to awake him out of sleepbefore He left Peraea. But Martha's faith was the condition of her seeing the glory of God in the miracle. We may see a thousand emanations of that glory, and see none of it. We shall see it if we exercise faith. In the natural world, seeing is believing; in the spiritual, believing is seeing.

Equally remarkable, as breathing serenest confidence, is the wonderful filial prayer. Our Lord speaks as if the miracle were already accomplished, so sure is He: Thou heardest Me. Does this thanksgiving bring Him down to the level of other servants of God who have wrought miracles by divine power granted them? Certainly not; for it is in full accord with the teaching of all this Gospel, according to which the Son can do nothing of Himself, but yet, whatsoever things the Father doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. Both sides of the truth must be kept in view. The Son is not independent of the Father, but the Son is so constantly and perfectly one with the Father that He is conscious of unbroken communion, of continual wielding of the whole divine power.

But the practical purpose of the thanksgiving is to be specially noted. It suspends His whole claims on the single issue about to be decided. It summons the people to mark the event. Never before had He thus heralded a miracle. Never had He deigned to say thus solemnly, If God does not work through Me now, reject Me as an impostor; if He does, yield to Me as Messiah. The moment stands alone in His life. What a scene! There is the open tomb, with its dead occupant; there are the eager, sceptical crowd, the sisters pausing in their weeping to gaze, with some strange hopes beginning to creep into their hearts, the silent disciples, and, in front of them all, Jesus, with the radiance of power in the eyes that had just been swimming in tears, and a new elevation in His tones. How all would be hushed in expectance of the next moment's act!

**III. The miracle itself is told in the fewest words.**

What more was there to tell? The two ends, as it were, of a buried chain, appear above ground. Cause and effect were brought together. Rather, here was no chain of many links, as in physical phenomena, but here was the life-giving word, and there was the dead man living again. The loud voicewas as needless as the rolling away of the stone. It was but the sign of Christ's will acting. And the acting of His will, without any other cause, produces physical effects.

Lazarus was far away from that rock cave. But, wherever he was, he could hear, and he must obey. So, with graveclothes entangling his feet, and a napkin about his livid face, he came stumbling out into the light that dazed his eyes, closed for four dark days, and stood silent and motionless in that awestruck crowd. One Person there was not awestruck. Christ's calm voice, that had just reverberated through the regions of the dead, spoke the simple command, Loose him, and let him go. To Him it was no wonder that He should give back a life. For the Christ who wept is the Christ whose voice all that are in the graves shall hear, and shall come forth.