In this morning’s Gospel passage, we came into the remarkable story of the raising of Lazarus about half way through. Briefly, the story so far is:

Two sisters – Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus lived in Bethany which is on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

All three were close friends of Jesus.

Lazarus became sick and died and Jesus, after a bit of a delay and opposition from his disciples who didn’t want him to go into Judea, arrives on the scene.

And it must have seemed like he was coming in to a completely hopeless situation. Hopeless because of the fact that Lazarus had died and dangerous because he was in the heart of Judea, an area full of leaders who wanted him dead.

We learn in v18 that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Four days after death was a significant period of time in Jewish culture. This is because there was a commonly-held belief that the soul stays near the grave for three days hoping to return but on the fourth day, it sees decomposition setting in and finally leaves.¹

So, the mourners would have accepted that any hope had gone and there was nothing more that could be done.

But look at how Jesus reacts to this seemingly hopeless situation.

Perhaps the most notable thing he does is that rather than rushing off to do anything, he chooses to spend time with those people most closely affected by the tragedy. He speaks first with Martha (verses 21 – 27) and gently starts to prepare her for the miracle ahead. Did you notice the mixture of faith and disappointment and grief in Martha’s words?

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask.

No pretence there with Jesus, just honest expression of what is going on inside. Is that how we always are with Jesus?

Our first instinct when tragedy comes to someone else can be to put a flashing blue light on our heads and rush around trying to do things for them, trying to fix the situation. And, to some extent, that is necessary.

¹ NICNT - The Gospel according to John (Revised Edition)  L Morris Eerdmans 1995 p 485
But in all our doing, we mustn’t forget that people are people. Deep hurts don’t get salved by frenetic action but by someone taking the time to listen, to engage in conversation, to help the person move on by processing what has happened to them, to help them see where God is in the middle of tragic circumstances.

But it wasn’t just Martha who Jesus spent time with. She was the one who was upfront; making herself obviously present to Jesus, there was Mary as well. Mary chose not to go out to meet Jesus on the road (v20) but to stay at home.

When we are busy with all the activities of life, it is really easy to forget the Marys.

But Jesus didn’t.

In verse 28, Martha says two things to Mary. The teacher is here (which she probably knew already) and he is asking for you (which she didn’t). Mary had a choice. To push Jesus away in the midst of her grief or to go quickly to him. When hard times come to us, we have the same choice. To run to Jesus with all our doubts and questions and anger and fear, or to reject him. And it is not only big things. As life happens to us, we face an almost daily choice. To run towards God or to run away.

Life for lots of people is busy, really busy. The amount of information we are bombarded with every day is staggering. Life can really easily become a blur of electronic communication driven by the myth that the next gadget will make it all so much easier.

And in all of this, it is so easy to forget our Marys. To forget the people who quietly serve, who carry hurts which are not always obvious. People whose need for restoration is just as great as those who are more prominent.

So Mary comes to Jesus, weeping and, like lots of people who are hurting, full of ‘if only’ thoughts and feelings

V32 Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

And what does Jesus do? Start to justify himself?

Have you seen my diary?

Do you know how dangerous it is for me to be here?

Do you not know just how many people are trying to get hold of me?

No – he was deeply moved and, (v35) wept with her.

But then, after the time spent with people, the miracle comes.

Out of this place of seeming hopelessness, the wholly unexpected springs forth at the command of Christ. Lazarus comes out – restored to life.

Our Old Testament reading is also the story of unexpected life springing from the seemingly hopeless.

When my son was little, we lived in a small village in a house surrounded by fields. As small boys do, he had a habit of coming back from walks carrying a stick he had found along the way.

We had a large collection of special sticks in our back garden.
But one day, he made a major find while out on a walk. It was this.

It was, of course, in his eyes, a Dinosaur bone.

It is not a lot to look at is it – pretty dry, beginning to rot, completely devoid of life.

But it was into a valley of such bones that Ezekiel was taken in his vision.

Listen again to verse 11

*Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’*

It is really easy to feel like that when we consider the challenges that face us as the people of God in Britain in 2011.

The TV screens full of natural disasters – so many that we can just get both overwhelmed and accustomed to them

Stories of war and revolution with our country actively involved in the fighting

A nation getting to grips with the huge debt we have built up and the measures needed to pay it off – paying off the country’s credit card bill as the Chancellor puts it. Unemployment on the rise in the city of Coventry.

A nation seeming determined to turn its back on God – we see some breakthrough but it’s tough.

Given all those circumstances, why don’t we just give up? Join with everyone else having a Sunday morning lie in?

The reason is that we know the end of the story. We know that however bad circumstances look, we serve a God who, through the cross, has won the victory.

If you stand on top of a hill on a clear and sunny day, you can see for miles and enjoy the wonderful view.

If you climb the same hill on a foggy day, all you will see is fog and perhaps enough of the path to take the next step. The view is still there, it is just obscured by circumstances.

And so it is for us. We keep on walking with Christ, perhaps only being able to see the next step in tough circumstances, perhaps with the fog around us so thick that we can only take really small steps forward.

And it may be that fog will lift quickly but sometimes fog lingers for quite a while – sometimes getting thinner, sometimes unexpectedly thickening again.

The message of both our passages this morning is that God is there for us.

We worship a God who cares deeply for us. Walking with us through the pain and pleasures of this troubled world. There to celebrate with us in the good times, there to weep with us in the tough times.

A God, who through Jesus sat with both Mary and Martha as they experienced the sharp pain of loss.

So which of these people do you identify with?
Are you like Martha, good at seeking out Jesus when things get tough but needing to remember to look out for Mary too?

Are you like Mary, sitting quietly with your pain and disappointment but in need of a word of encouragement to run to Jesus.

Or are you like Ezekiel? When he saw the valley of dry bones, he must have wondered what God was upto? Are you in a place where you need God’s transformative intervention? Are you prepared for the change that might bring?

Or are you with Lazarus? Needing the touch of Jesus to restore you? Maybe your faith in Jesus has gone cold and needs to be reignited. Maybe today is the day when you know that it is time to acknowledge Jesus as your Lord and Saviour for the first time.

If praying with someone else would help, there are people here who would love to pray with you.

The God we serve cares deeply about us and the detail of our lives.

Are you open to allowing Him to minister to you this morning?

Amen