Martha: The good doctor, Luke, does not write much about me, or my sister Mary, or my brother, Lazarus. In fact, you have to read the *Gospel of John* to learn the story of Jesus raising my brother from the dead. But Luke did see fit to tell one story about me.

The Bible doesn't give you a lot of details about our family, but here are some things you might infer. We had a home in Bethany. Not Bethlehem where Jesus was born, but the Bethany that was on the east side of the Mount of Olives. If you entered Jerusalem from the southeast, you probably came right by our house, climbed the Mount of Olives, and then descended by Gethsemane, down into Kidron Valley and then climbed up the steep ravine into Jerusalem. This is the path that Jesus took on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was about two miles from our house to the Temple.

We were a fairly wealthy family. We had a house big enough to entertain Jesus and his companions, and we were well known and loved in Jerusalem. Lazarus was the head of our house, and neither Mary nor I were married during the time we knew Jesus. Jesus knew the three of us, and loved the three of us.

One of the times Jesus was traveling through our village, he stopped at our house to rest. While he rested, Mary sat at his feet and listened to every word he said. In my own way, I welcomed the Lord by making all the preparations needed to host him and his apostles. It was no small task, and you can imagine that I quickly got irked at Mary for not helping me.

As I walked by them, I sent a little jab her way. "Lord, don't you care that my sister is sitting there like a lazy woman while I do all the work. Tell her to help me!" He looked up at me with those deep, dark eyes and smiled gently. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."

I was right, and everybody else was wrong. It's important to be a good hostess, and I wouldn't let anybody take my hard work away from me. I spun on my heels with indignation, and stomped out of the room. I was so angry and embarrassed that I was shaking. I wanted to throw all the ingredients …for the fresh bread… I was about to make… for everyone else to eat on the floor and get out of the house. And then I broke down in tears.

All my life being the good, hard-working girl, trying to earn love… The harder I worked, the more compliments I got from my parents and friends, and the more it felt like they loved me. My worldview was clear: hard work equals love; more hard work equals more love.

It never occurred to me that all I had to do was let people love me for who I am. Jesus was offering to do that, and I wouldn't let him. I would…not…let him. I walked back into the room. Trembling from head to toe, and sat down by my sister. She took my hand, and we both sat at the feet of our Lord. She knew that my life had changed. Forever. Because I let Jesus love me.

We did not go hungry that night after all. One of our servants began bringing platters out of the kitchen, and it seemed there would be no end of food for our banquet. I knew I didn't make that bread, and I wasn't about to ask who did. Jesus just winked at me… when Mary wasn't looking.

MIRIAM, THE CRIPPLED WOMAN:
I'm not beautiful or rich or clothed well like Martha. She even smells good, I stink like the other poor people in my village. You see, Jesus chose to heal me from my physical problems, but he did not choose to remove me from my financial situation.

Many years ago, Jesus visited my village and was teaching in our synagogue. He saw me from a distance and called me to be with him at the front of the synagogue. I was reticent, for several reasons. Men and women stay separated in our synagogue, as in most synagogues. I was a poor person… I felt intimidated by the wealthy people there. Lastly, I was crippled, bent over for eighteen years. I was ashamed and embarrassed to be in front of those people.

Jesus said, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity," and he touched me. I straightened up…immediately! Praises to God came rushing out of my mouth.

Through my tears, I could see my women friends in the back of the room rejoicing with me. They had watched my life spiral out of control when my back condition got worse. Now they welcomed me to a healthy life. However, I was stunned to see the looks of anger and fury on the faces of the men in the room. My life was of no value to them, but they were furious with Jesus for doing "work" on the Sabbath.

This is when we all learned about righteous anger. Jesus, he…he was angry, and called them out for being hypocrites and not understanding the meaning of the laws of Moses. His opponents were immediately humiliated, but the people rejoiced at all the wonderful things he was doing. For the first time in our lives, we common people had a religious leader who was on our side.

More than that, Jesus showed that we women had equal value to men. We were worth healing, we were worth teaching, we had value in his eyes and in the eyes of God. The Pharisees were not mad at Jesus just because of religious arguments, but because he threatened to turn upside down the structure of their society! Jesus was one of the first women's rights activists.

The Gardener: Wondering why I am here with seemingly nothing in common with these two lovely women? Luke chose me to join them for that very reason. The crowds that followed Jesus seemingly had nothing in common. We were of all ages, occupations, and hometowns. The only thing we had in common was a desire to learn about a God who loved us even though we were sinners. That was the exact topic Jesus addressed the first time I heard him… and I remember it so well.

Some of the people there asked Jesus about a group of Galileans that Pilate had killed during a time of sacrifice. They implied that their deaths and suffering were due to some sins they must have committed. That was a very common assumption promulgated by the religious leaders who, not coincidentally, led very pleasant lives. Jesus pointed to another incident where others had died through no fault of their own, a tower fell on them. He said that their suffering was not caused because they were either more or less righteous than anybody else. His main point? All people need to repent and change their lives or they will spiritually perish. This was a major challenge to the worldview taught by our religious leaders.

Their teachings were often self-serving, and self-righteous. They led us to believe that righteous people received financial rewards. If you were rich, you were righteous. If you were poor, you were not righteous. They led us to believe that knowledge of the Law of Moses was righteousness. If you were a teacher, you were righteous. If you were ignorant of the Scriptures or of their rules, you were not righteous. They led us to believe that you were following God if you followed their man-made rules. They knew the rules and followed them…at least the ones they wanted to follow…so they appeared to be righteous, while we were not righteous…we were unclean.

Their rules were designed to keep them in power, and everyone else out of power. After all, how would an unrighteous person ever have the right, let alone the ability, to go against an establishment of God's appointed representatives? Jesus was showing us that the way to overcome our unrighteous leaders was simply to quit acknowledging them as righteous, and ourselves as unrighteous. A spiritual rebellion was in the making, and the Jewish religious leaders could sense it.

Then, as he often did, Jesus looked intently at one person in the crowd and began to tell a story. I remember it because I was that person!

"A rich man went to his vineyard to get figs from a tree, but could find none. The man called the gardener and said, "I've looked for figs on that tree for three years and never found any. Cut that useless tree down so it doesn't use up the soil." The gardener replied, "Give me one more year. If it doesn't bear figs then, I will gladly cut it down." I was stunned to hear the story, because that very thing had happened to me in the past.

I looked around, everybody else had the same look of bewilderment. What did a bad fig tree have to do with Pilate killing Galileans or towers falling on people? How was a simple man like me to understand something like that? And then it dawned on me, it was *only* simple people

like me who could understand his stories. The religious leaders were unable to hear what Jesus said.

God was the vineyard owner, and he had been watching John and Jesus preach for three years, but the people had not been responding. Jesus was asking his Father for just a little more time in the hope that more people would come to repentance. We didn't know it at the time, but the time was running short for Jesus' time on earth. Fortunately, many of us simple people repented that very day and began to follow Jesus. We didn't know enough to have complex religious arguments about the law of Moses. But we did know enough to repent when Jesus told us to.

Over the next few days, we got to hear more parables and stories that confounded the religious leaders, but made perfect sense to us common people. A tiny mustard seed growing into a tree. We had all seen it happen and could see how that related to the kingdom of God. Or, yeast in dough that works itself all through the dough. We couldn't argue theology with the Pharisees, but we certainly understood yeast in dough.

My favorite story was about the narrow door. Jesus warned that many people think they are behaving in such a way as to be saved, but in reality they are not saved. But there are many others who are doing what God truly wants, and they will be saved even though they are not following the rules of the religious hierarchy. Now that was good news to those of us who wanted to do what God really wanted, but were incapable of following the many nitpicking rules of the religious leaders. We were going to get to be with God, but they would be kept out.

Those of us who listened closely to that story believed that Jesus taught something else, too. Jesus said that many would come from the east and west and north and south to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Some of us interpreted that to mean that Gentiles would also be included in the kingdom. If Jesus had come out and said that, it would have driven the Jewish leaders absolutely crazy. However, some of us interpreted those words to mean that every Jew was invited, no matter where they came from, no matter what their occupation, no matter what their heritage. That was good news to those of us who were faithful to God, but not capable of meeting the standards of our religious leaders.

I am just a common gardener. I'm not schooled in the intricacies of the Laws of Moses. But maybe that was for the best. Without those distractions, I was capable of hearing what our Lord had to say. I listened, and I became a disciple of Jesus. You and I, we probably have nothing in common, the span of two thousand years… look at how things have changed. And despite all our differences, I still hope we at least have this one thing in common - the willingness to hear our Lord. Remember, the gardener only had a short period of time before he had to cut down the tree.