

Lent 5, Year A  
John 11:1-45  
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We are at the climax of John's gospel. Up to this point Jesus has made the powers that be nervous and fearful, but until now they have been divided about him. The raising of Lazarus unifies them. This man has too much power, and its origin is entirely uncertain to them. They are convinced that if he is allowed to live he will create such strife and controversy that the Romans will come and destroy the nation. Clearly from their point of view it is "better than one man die than the whole people perish."

Nearly every Christian I have ever known can't understand how such a decision could have been reached. Isn't it obvious who Jesus is? I suppose it is obvious, especially when Jesus is presented by St. John, but after many years of struggling with Jesus, and mostly losing I must say, I am not at all sure I would not have at least tacitly, through silence, supported the decision of the Roman government and the Jewish authorities. His startling assertions and denials, his strange interpretation of the tradition, his remarkable powers scare me to this day, especially this moment here before us. I am naturally skeptical, naturally uncertain about the inherent goodness of people, and therefore tend not to trust those whose power has no check or balance on it. What would I have done with such a man as Jesus? I don't know, but I do know this, I would have been as

fearful as the Jewish authorities were. During my lifetime and the years just preceding it, this world has seen the appearance of numerous messianic figures. All of them have brought destruction – sometimes apocalyptic destruction – in their wake. Would I have been able to tell the difference between Jesus and all the others? I don't know, but I fear not. After all, almost no one did at the time, I don't know why I would have been different from them.

This is why in this story Martha is my hero, my guide, and my hope; it is through her exchange with Jesus that I glimpse how one day I might come to the same faith she shows here, so notice what happens. She greets Jesus, who arrives four days too late, by telling him that if he had bothered to show up in a timely manner her brother would not have died. Mary says the same thing, by the way. She also acknowledges his power to get whatever he wants from God, which has to be a pretty big hint as to what she wants from him.

When Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again she does what everyone does at that point. She retreats into the consolation of her religious tradition, a consolation enshrined in our own rite of burial for the dead. Yes, we know the dead will rise, it is a tenet of our religion, a concept, a dogma, an opinion nearly all Christians share about what happens to people after they die. Perhaps it is just me, and my own unresolved grief over so much and so many things, but I hear in her retreat into that consolation a great big “So what? What does my religion have to do with my grief right now?” What does the dogma of the Church have to do with the deep and abiding loss I feel in this moment? For

Martha, her brother is dead, and although it is nice to know that good things are in store for him, she is still alone in a universe in which God did not hear her prayer and was not present to her in the one crucial moment of her life. All she has now is her tradition to console her until such time as she too dies. That consolation is valuable, it helps, it will get her through the day, but it changes nothing in this moment of grief right now. With Emmy Lou Harris, Martha can say right now "The hardest part is knowing I'll survive."

But then something happens. The scene is so stylized that it would have been scarcely credible, were this scene historical. Martha comes to see that in and through Jesus she has a present and living connection to God that the death of Lazarus cannot in any way interrupt. She goes in this moment from being a person dominated and determined by death to being a person dominated and determined by life, and thus, everything is flipped. Instead of death being the ultimate power over human existence, a power that interrupts, even ends, human connection with God, it is God that is the ultimate power over human existence that interrupts, and even ends, death's connection to humanity. Martha has, to use John's term, "passed from death to life." Martha now sees her tradition as far more than a consolation for loss through death; through Jesus her tradition is now a connection to life through God.

Thus, this story is about two miracles, two resurrections. The first resurrection is the resurrection of Martha. Indeed, notice this, Martha's faith has nothing to do with the resurrection of Lazarus, because it happens before Jesus

raises Lazarus, before he gives any indication whatsoever that he intends to do just that. As I see this story the resurrection of Lazarus is sign and symbol of the resurrection of Martha; it confirms what we see in Martha. And thus, of the two resurrection stories in this one episode, from my point of view the more significant one is hers.

For I, we let me say, live in a world that is dominated by death. So dominated as a matter of fact that in desperation we try to deny it. The consolation of religion isn't even our first line of defense any more. Medical science, exercise, vitamins and minerals, emollients, cosmetics, all come before religion in the ceaseless battle against death.

That is a completely natural reaction. I realize there aren't any Freudians any more, but I do recall that Freud believed we can't truly imagine our own death, so we fantasize that it is something we choose. Maybe so, maybe not. But certainly it is at least terribly difficult to imagine our own death, and first imagining and then living through the death of those we love most is among the hardest things anyone ever does. Grief is a profound experience, and deep grief is, well, deeply profound. It is no wonder that humanity in general and each of us specifically, lives in a certain fear of it and tries to overcome it.

There is tragedy in that, because we can't overcome death, not on our own. On our own we live in a universe where death rules. It isn't just the physical death of people, it is the death of hopes and dreams, relationships, even businesses and empires, and I should add, careers. In this world death marks

everything, and the struggle to avoid or deny it makes life hard. Martha discovers in this story that what people cannot do, God can. In the face of death Martha discovers that her connection to God is not interrupted, and that transforms her. Death no longer controls her, it no longer dominates or determines her. Henceforth she will live as one whose life is marked not by death, but by God, and life with God. And that will be true - we do not often notice this - whether Jesus raises Lazarus or not, because, as I suggested earlier, she came to this before Lazarus was raised.

Grief is still real, grief is still powerful, but as a wise person recently pointed out, the wellspring of grief is deep, deep love, and therefore to face grief is to find the love beneath it. Perhaps as a practical matter that is exactly how we today who don't see Jesus, don't know him as a person, can discover what Martha discovered. For just as her love for him opened her up to his transforming presence, a presence that led her to a whole new life of resurrection, so too for us, can love be the means by which we find life in the midst of this world where death seems so prevalent.

I don't know much about that. But I do know this, Martha's story is, or at least can be, our story. By ourselves, on our own, we live in a world where the end of everything, sooner or later, is death. It is God, and God alone who transforms that, not by making sure that no one and nothing ever dies. God transforms it by transcending the consolation of religion through an eternal presence that abides with us and in us regardless of whatever is happening, a

presence that death, no matter how it comes, cannot control or even interrupt. That presence is not the denial of grief and a sense of loss. That presence grants us the freedom to grieve completely, the freedom to feel the loss fully, knowing that the moment that brings them is not what defines either us or those we have lost, but rather, we are defined by the presence and the power of the life of God, shown to us in Jesus Christ.

Martha got there, I haven't quite, I am still fearful and lack the sort of trust she showed. Because she did, I know that I can, and I know as well that everyone, everywhere can, for the love and presence of God turns out to be the only power that is everywhere, from all time, and forever.