

“Martha’s Encounter”

John 11:1-27

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I want to preface this sermon by stating that John, the author of this fourth Gospel, is much more interested in theology than he is in history. He doesn’t write to get the story straight; he writes to establish a belief intended to strengthen the faith of the early church.

For me, there are at least three critical things going on in this Martha/Lazarus narrative worthy of our attention.

First, we see Martha is grieving. Her brother, Lazarus, has died. She had hoped Jesus would arrive in time with his healer hat on, in time to save her brother’s life. But Jesus is delayed and now her brother has died. One can detect some anger and disappointment in her voice. She is in the classic throes of grief. **For Martha, it is also a crisis of faith.** Her faith has been badly shaken. And so it often is whenever life deals any of us an unfair blow. ‘Where were you, Jesus, when I desperately needed you?’ Many of us here have walked in Martha’s sandals.

When Jesus finally does arrive on the scene, Martha gives him a piece of her mind. She rips into him with her raw grief. “If you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died!” Jesus then reveals a significant aspect of his identity. He weeps. He weeps with Martha. He weeps for her loss and for his own. His tears reveal his humanity and his love and his own vulnerability. In this scene, he does not have a big red Superman S on his chest; he wears a Vulnerable V instead. Nowhere else in the New Testament do we see God’s Messiah crying like this.

Thus, Martha sees a side of Jesus that others rarely do. Yes, he is the Messiah; but he is a suffering Messiah; one who weeps with us when we weep. **Whenever I am asked why I choose to be a Christian**, my answer points to this scene in John's Gospel; it makes all the difference to me that the God I worship knows how I feel when somebody I love dies; when the God I worship comes and weeps with me.

I am forever telling the Confirmation students to pay attention to their tears, that their tears arise from their core. If we follow our tears backward to their source, we find ourselves in that mysterious place we refer to as 'the soul.' We can not see the soul with our eyes, but our tears are evidence of the soul's existence. I sort of picture Martha wiping Jesus' tears, and then Jesus wiping Martha's. As they wipe the other's tears, there is a kind of healing, a kind of spiritual soothing, a shared humanity. Martha's anger and bitterness begin to melt. So the first thing we see here is Jesus' humanity.

The second thing we see in the narrative is that Jesus reveals his divinity. He tries to find the right words to say to Martha. It is like those awkward moments we experience at a wake when we have stood in line for some minutes waiting our turn to greet the mourners. What words can possibly make a difference? What can I say to this family that will allow them to step into their future?

Jesus says to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Though these words are meant to comfort her, she responds in a way that suggests she hasn't really been comforted. "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." I hear in her words a kind of resignation that her brother's love won't be available to her for a very long time, centuries maybe, eons! In the resurrection on the last day Whenever that is!

Then Jesus, seeing that his words haven't really comforted Martha, reveals his divinity. He says to her,

“I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

These profound words have been interpreted and re-interpreted in a thousand ways by a thousand preachers. What I hear Jesus saying to Martha is this: ‘Love transcends all things, even death; especially death!’ I hear Jesus saying, ‘I have come into the world to make this truth abundantly clear. The Kingdom of God has come! Your brother’s love is accessible to you even now. Life is eternal! God’s promise is fulfilled right here; right now, dwelling richly in your heart.’

In my pastoral imagination, I can now picture Martha somewhat comforted because she is no longer afraid of death, because she has a new awareness of love’s eternal nature. I see Martha alive now; still grieving, but alive to a brother’s love. Eternal life is no longer something she anticipates in the future; it is something she embraces in the present moment.

We are approaching the second anniversary of my older brother’s death. Like Lazarus, he died way too young. I wasn’t ready to let go of him. But what I have discovered is that my brother’s love is still available to me. He is gone, but he is not gone. On Fridays and Saturdays when the crossword puzzle is particularly difficult, he whispers answers into my ear. Thirty two down is ‘alarmingly.’ When I walk into the lower level of the Welles Turner Library, he pushes me upstairs to the non-fiction section, urging me to read a biography instead of a novel. And when I think I have prepared adequately for the Tuesday morning Bible class, he elbows me to do a little more research.

The other day I was playing tennis against a guy who was serving the ball mighty fast, faster than my usual opponents. Bob was there reminding me to choke up on the racket a few inches. And that made all the difference. His love is palpable! Accessible!!

Martha's encounter with Jesus set her free from her fear of death. She was able to live far more abundantly thereafter. When I encounter my brother's love, I feel the same assurance.

The third thing that happens in the narrative may be the most significant of all. **Jesus invites Martha to believe.** Do you believe in me, Martha? Yes, Lord, I believe.

It is this awesome exchange, Martha's profession of faith sets the stage for the climax of the drama. Jesus walks to the tomb where Lazarus is buried. He uses his commanding voice: "Lazarus, come out!!" And Lazarus, already in the tomb four days, comes out!

Now, remember what I said at the very beginning of this sermon. John is not so interested in getting the story straight as he is in establishing a theology, a grounding in belief.

What John wants us to see is that Martha first proclaims her faith; "Yes, Lord, I believe." THEN she witnesses the miracle. It is NOT the other way around. She does not witness a miracle, and THEN believe. This is critical to John's understanding of God. Faith comes first. Then, and only then, does one see the glory of God.

Like the other Gospel writers, John cares deeply about the vitality of the church. He knows the very existence of the church hinges on people having faith; thus, the invitation to believe.

In a way, this is how I have always understood my ministry, to extend over and over again the invitation to believe that Jesus is, indeed, God's Messiah, the One who has come into the world to set us free to live the abundant life. For it is in believing that our eyes are opened to see the holy harmony of God's Realm. I thank God for Martha's spiritual encounter. She is one of those who keeps me in the greatest of hope. Amen.