

“Martha Speaks”
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Today’s Gospel reading is John 11:1-44 (NRSV), in which we read of Jesus in a particularly dangerous part of his ministry. People were talking loudly against him and threatening him. This story, like many in the gospel, is best read in its entirety, so that we can hear the scope of the political and personal drama. However, because this text has been used so much in the past to degrade and persecute the Jewish people, we have to remember as we read that when the Gospel refers simply to “the Jews,” it refers to certain religious leaders and other individuals, and not to an entire ethnic and religious group. Jesus is surrounded by many crowds of people, his disciples and his friends as well as those who doubt him. With this in mind, let us listen to the Word of God in this story.

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ 4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ 5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ 8 The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’ 9 Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10 But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’ 11 After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.’ 12 The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.’ 13 Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. 15 For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ 16 Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ 23 Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ 24 Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ 25 Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ 27 She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’ 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31 The Jews who were with her in the house,

consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' 35 Jesus began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' 37 But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' 40 Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

I was very sad when I heard recently about the death of Myrtle Talbott. Miss Talbott was my teacher in 5th grade at BC Charles Elementary School. She taught my brother Tim as well, three years before me. She taught many generations of kids in Newport News, and I'm sure that every one of them could tell you a story about their time in her class. I remember that year vividly. We learned French and Spanish; we had to do huge research projects; and we practiced brain teasers and puzzles to keep our minds sharp. We had spelling bees and handwriting competitions. Miss Talbott took a bunch of little kids and taught us how to think. As a matter of fact, when we went on to middle school, we were so well prepared that sixth grade was a breeze.

I had a chance to tell Miss Talbott all these things a few years ago. Unlike many of my classmates, I got to see a different side of her here at church. Instead of just a strict and exacting teacher of whom more than a few of us were a little scared, I got to see her as a kind, involved, caring and devoted member of this church family. She was very interested in me and my education, and occasionally we'd meet for lunch when I came home to visit. If you had told me when I was in 5th grade that someday I'd have lunch with Miss Talbott, I wouldn't have believed you! But I was blessed by her friendship as I had been by her teaching.

Miss Talbott is one of many women here at Denbigh who changed my life, and I'm glad that I can honor her, and all of you, from the pulpit here today. It's an appropriate day, given that yesterday was International Women's Day. This is a day when we draw attention to the unjust treatment of women around the world, but more immediately, we honor the important role that women play in our lives.

Here at Denbigh when I was growing up, the women in the church modeled Christ's love for me. In all the many ways you worked in the church and were my friend, you taught me that I am a child of God. You taught Sunday School and music, you watched us kids in the nursery, you worked with the youth, you gave art lessons, you sang in the choir, you rang handbells, you served on committees, you preached, you served us communion, and you mentored and supported me in ministry. I see many of you in the congregation today who influenced me through your teaching, your leadership and your friendship. Today and always, I give thanks to God for you.

We all know women who have played these roles in our lives. While we are fortunate to live in the United States in the 21st century, at a moment and place when the degree of sexism our ancestors endured is seldom seen anymore, it's crucial that we remember their stories and struggles so that the shame of the past isn't repeated with our children. Especially in the church, it's important that we honor the clear voices and inspired actions of the women who spoke the truth and witnessed to the good news of Jesus Christ.

We see one such woman in today's scripture. The gospel of John tells us several stories of Jesus' friendship with Martha and her family. We know that they were particular friends because of the attention the gospel pays to them, and the number of times their paths cross with Jesus' in his ministry. In an earlier story, Jesus had taught Martha about true discipleship when she was so caught up with serving that she forgot to listen. These stories are striking and dramatic. Few things are more spectacular than Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead! In the midst of all these resurrection fireworks, as week by week we draw closer to Easter, we tend to gloss over another part of today's scripture that has a huge impact on our faith.

In verse 21, we read that Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' In other words, Martha told Jesus that she believed that he had ultimate power over death. He not only could stop someone from dying if he chose, but, in God, Jesus could change the nature of death. Martha knew that, in Jesus, the world and all reality was already changing. God's reign was breaking in and turning everything upside down. Despite Jesus' delay in arriving on the scene, Martha was a faithful disciple.

Jesus told Martha, 'Your brother will rise again.' She thought that Jesus was trying to comfort her with an affirmation of faith, a creed of sorts of the Jewish faith in which they had both been raised. They believed that God would gather all the faithful into the kingdom at the end of time. However, this isn't precisely what Jesus meant. In a plot twist, Jesus tells Martha, '**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.'

If you were to diagram the gospel of John, you'd see that we'd been building to this point all along. This is the revelation people had been waiting for, about which rumors had been flying. This is the truth that is bigger than death.

It's difficult for us to put ourselves in Martha's shoes at this moment. Her beloved brother had just died. Her sister, Mary, could not even leave the house in her grief to greet her Lord, at whose feet she had listened earlier in worship and love, and whose feet she had washed with her hair. Martha, however, in the midst of grief, stands face to face with Jesus as he tells her the truth about God, himself, and all reality.

And then, Jesus asks Martha if she believes what he's telling her.

At this moment, this pinnacle of the gospel, all time seems to stop. Creation holds its breath. Death and life, grief and resurrection all merge into hope for humanity.

Martha opens her mouth and speaks. This woman, this friend, this sister, speaks God's truth. She tells Jesus, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, *the one coming into the world.*'

I love those words, that Jesus is "the one coming into the world." It's not the way we usually talk about Jesus: usually we say that he's already come, or that he will come again. But in Martha's words, Jesus has come to us, and is coming to us now, and continues to come to us, and will come to us forever. This is our new reality, our hope, and our covenant.

We know the rest of Martha's story. Jesus weeps with her family at Lazarus's tomb, and then brings him back to life. Out of the dry bones of death comes the joy of reunion and new life. Jesus forever changes the way we understand the world.

As a church, today and always, we repeat Martha's words. Throughout the centuries that since have passed, Christians have told the truth about Jesus Christ. Just as Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe," so we join our voices in confessing our faith. This practice of confession and affirmation binds us together with women, like Martha, like all our sisters, mothers, wives, teachers and friends, with all our brothers and husbands and fathers in the faith, who boldly spoke the truth.

As recently as 1983, when the Brief Statement of Faith was written and approved, the PC (USA) was formed out of two long-separated branches of the church, which came together and reaffirmed our shared faith. The writing of this creed cemented a

reunification of Christians who had been separated by war, by time, by geography, by polity, and by cultural differences. The Brief Statement of Faith was greeted with tears of joy at its adoption. Ever since then, we repeat and learn from this statement as it guides us in our faith. In words that seek to unite all the children of God's creation, in the first statement of faith to use gender-inclusive language, we speak together with all the faithful in every time and place that we believe in God the Father, in Jesus Christ our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit.

Like Martha, like all our mothers and fathers in the faith, we say, "Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord."