

Lent 5

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Lazarus was dead. Mary and Martha's brother and Jesus' good friend Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. People gathered around to mourn with Mary and Martha. Finally Jesus arrives on the scene. Martha goes out to meet him. Her first words to him are: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." As she searched for meaning and hope in her brother's death, Martha released a natural tangle of emotions - anger, frustration, confusion and sadness. She had seen Jesus heal others and just knew that had he been there with his healing touch Lazarus would not be dead.

The seemingly endless string of tomorrows had come to an abrupt halt for Martha. It was not that Martha was ungrateful for the blessings of all the yesterdays she shared with her brother. The stream of friends now shared some wonderful stories of Lazarus and the good times they experienced. But Martha was on the edge of town confronting Jesus with an honesty we rarely feel comfortable sharing with God. We hear her telling Jesus what she really wanted. She wanted time to do and say all that she felt was not said or done. When there is a tomorrow, there is time and the opportunity to experience more that we will cherish with those we love.

"Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Martha dares to ask for more time with her brother. While others are urging her to accept his death and get on with life, Martha dares to speak to Jesus what is really on her mind. Jesus hears what Martha is saying. John tells us that Jesus feels the power of that moment and the grief that fills the air in Bethany. Jesus is angry at the power of death all around him and grieved that his friend is with him no more.

I recall growing up in Sunday School. We had to memorize the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and the twenty third Psalm. I remember Bible trivia games. Right here in the eleventh chapter of John is the answer to one of the questions in the trivia game. What is the shortest verse in the Bible? Two words in the King James Version, "Jesus wept."

Jesus wept. When we read the whole story we understand Martha's feelings

and yet her boldness asking for more tomorrows. That is what we all want and know we cannot have. Just a little more time to say what is left unsaid, just a little more time to do that which we intended to do. Just a little more time not to give in to the sting of death.

In our culture we tend to hide death in hopes it will go away. We take our dying and place them some place apart where we convince ourselves they can be comfortable. We talk of dying as passing or going on. We blame the doctor, the nurse, the care giver when someone we love dies. We refuse to plan for a time when our life will be changed drastically by the death of a parent, a spouse, a child or a dear friend. Death is life altering as it was for Mary and Martha when the silence around them affirms that the one they love is no longer there.

A friend of mine shared a story about someone in the parish struggling with cancer. She was young with a family and three children when she was diagnosed. She had several surgeries and chemo treatments. She would rebound and then the cancer would appear again. She went in and out of the hospital many times. Finally her body could no longer fight the disease and she died.

My friend was standing with his clergy mentor at the front of the church as the funeral was about to start. He said, "She put up a good fight." "Yes, she did," he agreed. "The cancer finally won," my friend said. "What do you mean?" It seemed pretty obvious to my friend that if she were dead the cancer had won the battle. "The cancer killed her." he said. "Where is the cancer now?" If the cancer won, if it is victorious, where is it now?" "Well," my friend replied, "I suppose it is there in the casket." "Dead or alive?" "Dead I would suppose." "So, in killing her it killed itself?" "Well, yes," he replied. "Well then where is she?" "She is with God," my friend answered. "Dead or alive?" "Alive." "So, who won?" "Oh, I guess she did." "Yes, she did because Christ did."

Jesus came to Bethany not to grieve for the dead but to speak a new message of life. He said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Immediately she responds with what she has been taught in the synagogue, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." She had been taught there was hope on the horizon. When she can finally get through the grief there is the promise of a new day.

Jesus responds to Martha and to us about all our days. Days when we arise to go to work, to play, to love, to laugh, to cry, to remember and to hope. Jesus said, "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." More than a promise about some day, or the last day or some day beyond the last day Jesus is describing now. Jesus knows that God offers us new life every day not bound by the limitations that keep us fearful about tomorrows we may never have.

Jesus offers life in the face of every doubt Mary and Martha can throw at him. He offers life in the midst of the disciples fear and the towns folks misunderstanding. Jesus offers new life even to a smelly corpse. No one can imagine life coming out of death. No one is able to see life as more than the tomorrows we have. Jesus raises Lazarus not as a preview of what will happen to the dead, but as a contradiction of our sense of life today. As long as we see life as something that happens until we die, as something that can be taken from us, then we fail to see the life Jesus is offering.

Marcus Borg writes about believing in Jesus. He writes that he was taught to believe what the Bible and the church said about Jesus. As he grew older he came to realize that "believing in" was about something very different. To believe did not mean to accept a set of doctrines or teachings but in the Greek translation to "give one's heart to." Marcus writes, "Believing in Jesus means to give one's heart, one's self at the deepest level to the living Jesus who comes to us even now."

Jesus was calling Mary and Martha and even us today to a new life, a new relationship, a giving of one's life, and opening of ourselves to allow God's grace to flow through us to others. That kind of life is not about grasping for tomorrows but offering ourselves today. It does not free us from weeping with those who need us to stand with them today. But, Jesus has given us more to offer a hurting world. Our very lives are about sharing the good news we know and have given our lives to.

The promise is this new life cannot be overcome by death. The witness of the early disciples all the way down to us today is that God is at work in the world bringing life where no one thought it was possible.

"Do you believe this?" Jesus asked Martha. Today the question remains - Do you believe this? Do you believe God brings life from death? Then live expecting God's life giving power to work through you to give new life to the world.