

**Weekend of Sunday, March 29, 2020**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A**  
**First Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14**  
**Second Reading: Romans 8:6-11**  
**Gospel Reading: John 11:1-45**  
**Sermon Title: “Moving from Knowing to Believing”**

## **Theme**

*In this passage, Jesus is moved to sorrow when his friend Lazarus falls ill and dies. Then, in a dramatic scene, he calls his friend out of the tomb and restores him to life. But what is of interest to us today is the dialogue that Jesus has with Martha. She moves from what she knows to what she believes in faith. We need to do the same.*

## **Text**

<sup>1</sup>Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” <sup>4</sup>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.” <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. <sup>7</sup>Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” <sup>16</sup>Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” <sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that

Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup>She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

<sup>28</sup>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.” <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>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.” <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>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 four days.” <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>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.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>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.”

<sup>45</sup>Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

## Sermon

Welcome to the sermon time for this last weekend of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday. What will that be like without all of us in a joyous Palm Sunday procession?

This Lent I have been preaching and teaching on the theme of "Journey with Jesus through John" and throughout this series, I have been unpacking a couple of themes. One of those themes is *knowing*, or *knowledge* and some questions you can expect us to explore are:

- What do we, or can we know for sure?
- Does God revealed in Jesus Christ want to be known?
- How is it that God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to know us so well?

And then as I have mentioned throughout this sermon series, it is my opinion that Lent is supposed to be a season of *observation*. You see, it appears to me that the Gospel Readings this Lent are stories of Jesus doing something and all we can do is observe him. He does not teach a particular lesson and then asks us to "go and do likewise." It would appear that what we are to do during Lent is simply observe him, although there are certainly lessons we can learn and actions we can take which I will bring out at the conclusion.

This weekend's Gospel Reading and the sermon entitled, "Moving from Knowing to Believing" is no exception. It is, of course, the famous story of the raising of Lazarus. It comes from John 11, and for context, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, what we call Palm Sunday which we will celebrate next weekend, is in the next chapter, John 12. So contextually, we are almost at our journey's end, our "Journey with Jesus through John." By this time in his public ministry, Jesus was well-known for his preaching and teaching and his performing of signs and miracles. And in part, that is why he was about to be in big trouble.

Many of us are probably familiar with the family of the siblings, Lazarus, Mary and Martha. But the interesting thing we need to be aware of today is that according to John's Gospel, this passage is the first place they appear.

Oh, I know you know the other story of the dinner party the trio hosted for Jesus where Mary sat at Jesus' feet while Martha busied herself with the preparations. That story is only recorded in Luke's Gospel, and not at all in John's Gospel. So it is odd that John began the story by writing, <sup>1</sup>"Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, ..." and then added the sister's message, <sup>3</sup>"Lord, he whom you love is ill." According to John, we don't know that Jesus loved Lazarus yet.

Well, no one ever said that the disciples, and more specifically, John, were great writers. They were just common peasants who recorded their experiences with Jesus as best they remembered them. But I digress. Back to the Gospel story.

Lazarus, whom Jesus apparently loved according to his sisters, was deathly ill, and so they did what they knew – they called upon Jesus. In a day when there was no CDC, no NIH, no Dr. Anthony Fauci, no medical establishment, they called upon the only person they knew that could help, and that was Jesus.

They turned to what they knew, and what they knew was that they had seen and heard of Jesus doing some pretty amazing things. So they sent for Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill. Come quickly." Calling out to Jesus was all they knew.

So Jesus was made aware of an urgent situation. Did he get up immediately and walk the two miles from Bethany to Jerusalem? No! He dilly-dallied around for two more days before he went! By the time Jesus got to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days! And when he finally did arrive, Martha gave him what for.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now *I know* that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

To answer our first question, "What do we, or can we know for sure?" is that Martha was not the busy-body sister who made poor decisions, but the one who recalled her knowledge of Jesus and knew he could do something. She relied on what she knew from her own experience of Jesus, but I argue, she did not yet *believe*.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

You see, even in this passage, Martha was operating out of her knowledge of Jesus. From her own experience of him, she knew that he had the ability and power to change a situation, and she wanted him to change hers.

But what is happening in this story is that Jesus wanted to move Martha from knowing to believing. Jesus didn't need to resuscitate Lazarus. Jesus knew Lazarus' outcome was going to be great – eternal life! That is the hoped-for outcome of all who believe – but we cannot *know* it this side of death.

Jesus knew that when he resuscitated Lazarus, Lazarus was still going to die again some other day. It is the destiny of all who are mortal. What Jesus wanted Martha to do is *believe* in him, because that belief will reassure her that

- Lazarus rests in God, and that cannot be a bad thing;
- and she will be fine in the rest of her mortal life;
- and then, come what may, she will have faith that she too will have eternal life when her days are done.

The conversation went on,

<sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who *believe* in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and *believes* in me will never die. Do you *believe* this?”

This was the big moment for Martha. Will she make the move from knowing to believing?

<sup>27</sup>She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Yes, Yes! She nailed it! Martha nailed it!

What? The rest of the story? Oh, none of that matters. Yes, Lazarus gets raised. It's a great story, but Lazarus will die again. It's just the way God created life on earth, and it has to be that way if we ever hope to receive the greater gift that Jesus spoke of, the gift of eternal life.

Let's move on to our second question, "Does God revealed in Jesus Christ want to be known?"

The answer to this question comes to us in at least four places in this story.

- 1) The first place we know that God revealed in Jesus Christ wants to be known came in verse 25 where Jesus very clearly told Martha: <sup>25</sup>"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who *believe* in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and *believes* in me will never die.
- 2) The second place was when Martha confirmed it a verse later: <sup>27</sup>She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I *believe* that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."
- 3) The third place came after Jesus asked for the stone to be rolled away and Martha objected. Her objection was that Lazarus' body had already been in the grave four days and had already begun to decay, and in the King James Version Martha told Jesus, "He stinketh." I love that, "He stinketh." But Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you *believed*, you would see the glory of God?" Through this sign and miracle, he revealed himself and the glory of God.
- 4) And finally, the fourth place came when Jesus prayed his prayer out loud for all the mourners to hear so that they would know that God was his Heavenly Father, and that he had access to his Father to do this great sign and miracle. And sure enough, after Lazarus came out alive, John concluded this story by writing, <sup>45</sup>Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, *believed* in him.

Now about the third question, "How is it that God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to know us so well?" I have a confession to make. When I planned this series a couple of months ago, I thought this last question was going to be more interesting. But it seems that I have concluded that the answer is the same every week.

Jesus knows us so well because he is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus lost a friend in Lazarus, one whom he apparently loved. And he saw Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters heart-broken over their love for their brother and his dear friend.

Jesus, as it turns out, was a sympathetic crier – he and I have that in common. If we see someone crying, we cry too. He has human compassion in common with *all* humanity because he has a human nature as well as a divine nature.

Jesus knew that death is not the worst thing that can happen to a person. Dying without *belief* in God revealed through him is, and so he knew that Lazarus was going to be fine. But Jesus was moved by the emotions of Mary and Martha, and so he resuscitated their beloved brother. Isn't this just like our Jesus?

In his prayer to his Father that he said out loud so that all could hear, he said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>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."

Earlier in our "Journey with Jesus Through John" we weren't sure why Jesus would reveal his true identity. But if you remember what I told you several minutes ago about the context, the very next topic that John wrote about after today's passage was the gathering of the Sanhedrin to plot to kill him. And a chapter later Holy Week began, the final and irreversible leg of his journey.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Throughout this 2020 Lenten series "Journey with Jesus through John" we heard stories of Jesus doing something and all we can do is observe him. He does not teach a particular lesson and then ask us to "go and do likewise." It would appear that what we are to do during Lent is simply observe him. But that doesn't mean there is nothing for us to do.

In this story we observe our Lord Jesus making himself available to people, to serve their needs, and to be compassionate with them in all of life's moments.

We live in an interesting time. All our lives, and by *all*, I mean all the people of the world, all are affected by COVID-19, coronavirus. I know all of you, and I know all of you have been calling out to Jesus for the sake of yourselves, your families, and all the people of the world.

Medical science will probably come up with a solution to the problem soon. But I submit to you that the solution is the answer to the prayers of millions of Christians

from around the world who prayed a version of the prayer of Lazarus' sisters; "Lord Jesus, the world that you love is sick. Come quickly and heal us."

You see people of faith know that God uses all the resources at his disposal to do his work for those he loves. Another way of saying that is to paraphrase the ELCA's tagline, God uses *our hands to do God's work*. And so people are pitching in and doing what we can to alleviate the suffering of others.

Last weekend several of our members gathered to hand out food. That is doing God's work with our hands.

This week several of our members will gather to give blood. That is doing God's work with our hands.

We do these things because we *believe* in God revealed in Jesus Christ. And our *belief* in him compels us to try to be more like him.

As this pandemic ramps up, I will not be surprised if there are some of our fellowship who will need help. The "ask" will be made and some of us will respond. That will be putting our *belief* into action by doing God's work with our hands. Just to be clear, I'm not asking anyone to be careless and reckless. Be safe and careful to preserve your health.

But along the way, those who live in fear of this unseen danger, hunker down like they don't know what tomorrow brings. But we do, and maybe, just maybe, they will ask where we get our peace. Then maybe we can help them move toward belief in him who brings new life.

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, the world that you love is sick. Come quickly and heal us. As we pass through this wave of the pandemic, use this time to move us from trusting only in what we know, to believing in you, for you are the resurrection and the life, the Messiah, the Son of God, and the one who is coming into the world. We believe in you. Amen