

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon peached by Father Bradford on Passion Sunday
March 22, 2015

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Anyone who attends funeral Masses from time to time recognizes the words, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” The Church appropriates this teaching of Our Lord Jesus for the comfort of the bereaved. But on Passion Sunday this Gospel is given to us outside the context of a funeral. The reason for this choice is the raising of Lazarus led to the Jewish council determining to put Jesus to death. This incident sets up the events of Holy Week. But the importance of the account lies outside of the context of its use at funerals and in Lent. The death and raising of Lazarus gives us Saints Martha and Mary of Bethany as wonderful examples of faith in the midst of trouble.

The death of Lazarus was not sudden. While he was ill and evidently growing weaker, his sisters kept repeating a fervent prayer. “If Jesus were here, our brother would not die.” The sisters kept saying this prayer over and over. They were still using their prayer when they met Jesus. First there is Martha, down to road, waiting for the Master to arrive. Then there is Mary, waiting in the house itself. Both were praying, “If Jesus were here, our brother would not die.”

We are not told what else Mary was doing in the house. But her sister Martha put prayer into action. She was actively waiting for the Lord. Not only did Martha stay at her post while hope lasted for her brother’s recovery. Even after Lazarus had died, she did what she prayed. She went to meet the Lord. And when she saw her Great Friend approaching, Martha’s greeting was not one of complaint. “What took you so long? It’s too late now.” None of that! Rather, Martha repeated once more the prayer that had constantly been on her lips and in her heart. “If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died.”

Martha did not assume the Lord’s absence showed unkindness or disregard for her desperate situation. If she had thought about His delay she would have assumed necessity was the explanation. It is more likely Martha did not think of any of that at all. *Christ’s presence now in Bethany trumped everything!*

Jesus did not come so much to console Martha and Mary about the death of their brother as to encourage their personal response of faith in Him as Lord. All through the Scriptures Almighty God shows “He does not desire the death of a

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sinner but that he turn from his sin and be saved.” Salvation, not death, is the desire of the Lord Jesus. The raising of Lazarus is not even the major development or breakthrough in the incident in Bethany! Rather, Our Lord used the death of a loved one to draw souls closer to Him.

Jesus drew Martha along this way and *we get to listen in*. Martha was already Christ’s disciple. We noticed her fervent and constant prayer and her devout reception of the Lord. But Jesus used the occasion to bring Martha further. Christian doctrine is not comforting *in itself*. Its purpose is to bring us to the Lord. Without it we will more than likely go somewhere else! Doctrine will not help us in our affliction unless we have made right belief our own. And that is how Our Lord helped Martha. Jesus got Martha thinking about the resurrection. She already believed in the doctrine. But the fact of it did not have such personal assent and individual appropriation so as to provide comfort and sooth the anxiety caused by her brother’s death. So what did Jesus do? He said, “I am the Resurrection and the life.” Jesus made the Resurrection of personal value by identifying it with Himself. It was no longer something Martha knew about as a teaching but because *she knew Him Who taught it*. It is from Jesus the Risen Lord that those who are His receive this life principle which death cannot hold.

All this means it is imperative for us to learn the truth of our religion by personal experience of it, before we subject it to the test and stress of dire need in affliction or tragedy. We are to learn the lesson of today’s gospel. Martha prayed repeatedly, lifted up her brother’s condition in prayer, never complained at the delayed arrival of her Lord, and never told Jesus what to do. She had not lost faith in Him even when Lazarus had died. In all of this Martha showed she was already Christ’s disciple.

But when Jesus came, He brought her further along the way. Martha began by saying “I *know* that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (which is true enough). But Martha’s final answer was “Yes, Lord, I *believe* that you are the Christ.” That is the miracle at Bethany. Yes, Lazarus would rise. Pointedly we are told he rose in his grave clothes. He would wear them again. But Martha had found eternal life through a personal faith in Jesus Christ: *a life death can never touch*.

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