

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Passion Sunday
April 2, 2017

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You know the words spoken by Our Lord to Martha of Bethany. “I am the Resurrection and the life: he who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.” These words are familiar to anyone who attends funeral Masses. Holy Church appropriates this teaching of Jesus for our comfort and consolation at the time of the loss of a loved one.

But the words of Jesus were spoken once for the first time. And the occasion shows us SS Martha and Mary as wonderful examples of faith in the midst of trouble. While their brother Lazarus was ill these sisters kept repeating a fervent prayer. “If Jesus were here, our brother would not die.” They kept saying this prayer over and over and were still using it when they met Jesus. We are not told what else Mary was doing in the house. But we do know that Martha put prayer into action. She went down the road to wait for Jesus. Martha had stayed at her brother’s bed side while hope lasted for recovery. And she remained there even after Lazarus had died. Then when she saw the Lord approaching, Martha’s greeting was not one of complaint. Martha did not say, “What took you so long, Jesus? It’s too late now.” Rather, she repeated once more the prayer that had been constantly on her lips. “If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died.” Martha did not conclude the Lord’s absence showed unkindness or disregard for her desperate situation. She probably didn’t think about it at all. *Jesus was now here.* There was not even a second-place thought. When Jesus is present there *is* no second place!

We are told about the Lord’s delay. It was to allow the grieving sisters to wait four days. In this way the miracle raising of Lazarus would be most helpful to the faith of the sisters. After four days no one could say Lazarus was only asleep! Everyone present got the point. They were horrified when the Lord instructed the stone be rolled away. The *King James Version* makes no mistake about it. “Lord, by this time he stinketh!” The delay is an indication of how loving are the Master’s works. *Even in His delays there is always some loving purpose.* That loving purpose is to use the occasion of the death of a loved one to draw souls closer to Him. He drew Martha out. She was already Christ’s disciple. We see that in her fervent prayers,

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and in her respectful reception of Jesus. But the Lord used the death of her brother to draw Martha further than she had gone before.

Christian doctrine gives us direction. But it will not help us much in our affliction unless it has revealed the Person and purpose of Jesus Christ. Jesus got Martha thinking about the resurrection. She believed in the doctrine. But the fact of her acceptance of it did not have such personal assent and individual appropriation to comfort and soothe her sorrow at her brother's death. So what did Jesus do? He said "I am the Resurrection and the Life." The Lord made the resurrection of personal value by identifying it with Himself. It was no longer something Martha knew about as teaching but *because she knew Him Who teaches it*. And it must be that way for you and me. We can know the facts of our faith. But ours is a religion of a *Person*. It is imperative for us to learn the truth of our religion by personal experience of it.

Martha of Bethany is our model, and the model is fully revealed in the gospel. Martha prayed repeatedly. She never told Jesus what to do. She lifted up her brother's condition in prayer. She never complained at the tardiness of her Lord. She had not lost faith in Him even when Lazarus had died. In all of this Martha showed she was a Christian disciple. But when He came, the Lord Jesus Christ brought Martha further: from "I believe that my brother will rise again in the Resurrection at the last day" (which was true enough) to "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ.*" The great miracle that happens in this gospel incident is not the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus will rise in his grave clothes because he will one day need them again. But Martha had found eternal life through a personal faith in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ brings victory over death.