

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Passion Sunday
March 18, 2018

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“I am the Resurrection and the Life.” You know those words. They are familiar to anyone who attends funeral Masses. Holy Church appropriates this teaching of Our Lord Jesus for our comfort and consolation at the time of the loss of a loved one. But once, these words were used for the first time. Thanks to St John’s Gospel we have an account of that first time. And we realize those same comforting words were used originally for a different purpose.

You and I are “in” on the Lord’s mindset, because St John tells us. The evangelist takes the part of the chorus in an ancient Greek tragedy or even the court jester in Italian *commedia dell’arte* comedy. St John keeps his readers “in the know.” At a funeral or wake you and I come to pay our respects to the departed and console the family in its grief. But Jesus did not come to console Martha and Mary of Bethany over the death of their brother Lazarus. And even the raising of Lazarus is not the major development or breakthrough in the incident, although it will lead to the Jewish council determining to put Jesus to death. (That, by the way, is the reason this gospel turns up at Mass near the end of Lent and not in Eastertide.) The heart of the matter is something different. The Lord Jesus used the death of a loved one to draw souls closer to Him as Lord and Saviour.

Thanks to St John, we watch as the Blessed Lord draws Martha out. She is already Christ’s disciple. We have noticed her fervent and constant prayer and her reverent and respectful reception of the Lord, even when He had apparently arrived too late to prevent the death of her brother. Even the Lord’s late arrival was part of His plan. So Jesus used the occasion to bring Martha further than she had gone before. Assent to Christian doctrine is not comforting in itself. It will not help us in our affliction unless we have made right belief our own. That is how Our Lord helped Martha. Jesus got Martha thinking about the resurrection. But while she believed in the doctrine, it did not have for her such personal assent and individual appropriation so as to provide solace and consolation in her pain at 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 to be something we know about as a teaching, but *because we know Him*

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Who teaches it. Jesus is the Resurrected Lord and from Him those who are His receive this life principle which death cannot hold.

When Jesus asked, “Do you believe this?” Martha and Mary said yes. It is easy for us to say they made the right choice! It is not so easy for us to make the right choice when we are the ones who are grief stricken. It takes courage of conviction to leave the self-centered realm of grief. People adjust to situations which seem intolerable at first, and then resist leaving them behind for something unknown. That includes changes which promise to take us to unknown joy and fulfillment. At best, people are interested only in what they already know. And when they are at loose ends they don’t know what to think.

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. Learn the lesson of today’s gospel. Martha prayed repeatedly, she never complained at the tardy arrival of the Lord and never told Jesus what to do, but lifted up her brother’s condition in prayer. She had not lost faith in Him, even when Lazarus had died. In all of this Martha showed she was already a Christian disciple.

But when the Lord was present, He brought her further, from “*I know* that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (which was true enough) to “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ.” That is the miracle which happens in this incident. Yes, Lazarus would rise. He would still be wearing his grave clothes. Eventually He would need them again. But Martha had found eternal life through personal faith in Jesus Christ, a faith death can never touch.