

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Passion Sunday
March 21, 2021

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The account of the raising of Lazarus is a gospel at Mass just prior to the Lord's Passion. St John gives us the reason. This was the event which triggered the Pharisees' final determination to put Jesus to death. But neither the death sentence nor the miracle raising from the dead is the major breakthrough here.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life" are words familiar to anyone who attends Catholic 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 today's Gospel reminds us these words were *once spoken for the first time*. They were spoken by Our Lord Jesus to Martha of Bethany at the Lord's arrival after her brother Lazarus had died.

While Lazarus was ill and growing weaker, his sisters Mary and Martha 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 the Lord arrived. We are not told what else Mary was doing in the house. But Martha put the prayer into *actively waiting* for the Lord, not only staying at her post while Lazarus was still alive but also even after he had died. Then when she saw the Lord approaching, Martha's greeting was not a complaint. How easy it would be in sorrow and disappointment to say: "What took you so long Jesus? It's too late now." But there is none of that. Rather, Martha repeated once more the prayer that had been constantly 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 either unkindness or disregard for her desperate need. More than likely Martha did not think of His delay at all, but was totally focused on the fact *Jesus is now here*.

That is when the major breakthrough unfolds. Martha of Bethany was already Christ's disciple. This is seen in her fervent and constant prayer and in her reverent reception of the Lord. But blessed Jesus used the occasion to draw Martha further into Christian faith. A knowledge of Christian doctrine will not help us in our afflictions unless we have made right belief our own. That is how Jesus helped Martha. He got her thinking about the resurrection. Martha already believed the doctrine. But the fact of it was doing nothing for her comfort at the death of her brother Lazarus. So Jesus said "I am the Resurrection and the Life." The Lord

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made the resurrection of *personal value* by identifying it with Himself. For Martha it was no longer something she knew about as a teaching, but because she *knew Him Who teaches it*. It is from Our Resurrected Lord Jesus Christ that we who are His receive this life principle which death cannot hold.

The Blessed Saviour brought Martha of Bethany 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 that happened at Bethany. Lazarus and the Pharisees are not center stage! Lazarus did indeed rise, but still wearing grave clothes because someday he would need them again. And the Pharisees would have found some other pretext for arresting Jesus. But Martha had found eternal life through personal faith in Jesus Christ. That is a faith the Lord said death can never touch.