

LENT V – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

We know very little of Jesus' personal relationships with people from the same family. He called James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and he called Andrew, and through him, he also called his brother Peter. From the number of times they are mentioned, and the stories about them, we know that they were among the closest to him of all his disciples.

There are a few times when Jesus cured/healed/cast out demons from or raised the child of someone from the dead. But those stories are reported as an event during his ministry and I cannot readily recall them being mentioned again, indicating an on-going relationship.

This is very different in the story we have today which involves the family made up of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, whose parents are not mentioned. The three siblings are mentioned a few times, first when Jesus goes to their house for dinner one day. During that visit Martha rebukes Mary for not helping with the preparation of the meal. Jesus calls her up short and says that Mary has chosen the better part, listening to him. Many of us have wondered how and what they were going to eat if *somebody* didn't take responsibility for the meal. After all, they had invited him to eat, not just to sit there and preach to them. Given Martha's attitude toward Mary's absence in the kitchen, I rather expected her to hang on to her anger and get rather snarky with Mary from time to time. Yet the next time we see them, which is a few days after Lazarus has died, Martha ran out to see and greet him and bring him into the house. She says something that we can take at least two ways, as a reprimand or as a statement of faith: "If you had been here,

he would not have died.” Given the rest of that story, I am inclined to think she was just stating what she believed: “You would have known how to keep him alive.” It is interesting to note that that is precisely why Jesus delayed his journey to see them once he heard how gravely ill Lazarus was. The purpose was to raise—not to save him from death.

After being embraced and grounded by Jesus’ loving presence, Martha went off to her sister and said, “The Master is here, and he is asking for you.” That is such a poignant moment, revealing that Martha has been healed of whatever jealousy and resentment she was carrying around toward Mary. Martha is gracious, full of grace, the grace of knowing that Jesus loves her sister, too.

There is a second part to that day, Jesus’ encounter with Mary, and it is there that we learn how much Jesus loved Lazarus, enough to weep over his loss, to weep with the family and other friends and share their grief.

In the third part of that day’s events, Jesus goes with them to the tomb where Lazarus was washed, embalmed, wrapped in burial cloths, and laid to rest. Despite their protestations that Lazarus must stink terribly by now, Jesus cries loudly, “Lazarus, come forth!” and he does, trailing the burial cloths behind him. Jesus again cries out, “Unbind him and let him go!”

Today we have the third story involving this family, revealing just how much Jesus loved them. The house is referred to as the home of Lazarus, who is also at the table, but no more is said about him. Martha is named as the one serving the dinner with no further comment about her. Again, Mary takes center stage in the story, bringing out a jar of costly ointment, scented to be a perfume, and washes Jesus’ feet with it, drying them with her hair.

No one seems to take any real note of this except Judas, who criticizes the action as wasteful, since the money could have been used to feed poor people in the village. The author takes this opportunity to paint his version of Judas' soul, as a liar and a cheat who was only upset because he could not get his hands on any of that money.

This set of stories brings Jesus alive to us in the most down-to-earth and homespun way. This is no casual relationship, but rather a multi-faceted one, with distinct interchanges between all of them. Historians look for scenes like this when studying history, seeing them as giving a picture of the true character of a person, something to help us go from the big picture of the life of a famous person to the small details which help us to see relationships, motivation and attitudes. Here we see Jesus the friend, the friend who had a larger life, in fact who had a life that many would say was larger than life; yet here we more than see the man who spoke about love; we see the man who loves.

Many times I have stopped here to make the point that when Mary anoints Jesus' feet, this is one of the few times when Jesus allows himself to be celebrated, where he very obviously takes in the gift and the kindness that someone else offers to him. Our faith is the faith of receiving, of knowing how blessed we are and learning gratitude from that and turning that gratitude into generosity for those around us. Like us, Jesus had to learn how to receive, how to notice and take in the love that God was offering him day by day through the love of faithful friends.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks of this, naming his gratitude for what he calls "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." This goes both ways, being known by him, having one's soul open, bare, exposed to the deep gaze of Jesus. There is a purpose to this; for Paul is not talking merely about a deep friendship.

Paul believes that when we know Jesus, we know the power of his resurrection. We take his resurrection into our own beings, we let it become so much a part of us that it transforms our fears, strengthens our wills, encourages our hope, and triumphs over our doubts and misgiving. We see and live differently.

I want to take this in a particular direction, considering this in the shadow of the war in Ukraine that is engulfing much of the world right now. I am not sure whether that word “engulfing” quite fits, but I am trying to describe the reality that so many of us in every country that hears at all about events outside of itself, is caught up in the many dimensions of this. First, there is the cruelty, the wanton destruction of other human beings, including women, children, old-timers, patients in hospitals, those who have no possibility of fighting back. Underlying this is the unbridled hatred that is self-justifying of every destructive measure and means one people can take against another. Second, there is the lying and propagandizing to seduce others into hating as strongly and dangerously as the leader. There is not one noble motive in any of this, for it is all based in greed, self-serving and vengefulness.

The world is bound up in the terrible drama of this nightly on the news, delivered not just in descriptions of battles and troop movements, but more critically in gruesome photos and heart-wrenching stories from the victims.

The other day I heard a man in my town name his frustration and his lack of faith, asking where God is in all of this; how can there even be a God when there is so much suffering? I think all of us have wrestled with that question at some point or points in our lives.

My answer is that we may often glimpse the presence of God and the power of resurrection in the response of the Ukrainian people.

As Desmond Tutu said in The Book of Joy, “Our hearts are breaking but we are not broken.” *Our hearts are breaking, but we are not broken.* They name the reality of the pain and the fear, and they acknowledge the suffering they are undergoing. But their souls are not destroyed. Day after day we hear testimony from Ukrainians of all ages that speak of their hope for survival, speak even of the possibility or likelihood of victory, but rarely do we hear them spewing out hatred and venom in return. They are not losing their souls. Isn’t that what we pray for every time we ask, “Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil?” Evil here is to become as malevolent as one’s enemy, willing only evil in return. But we are not hearing that; we hear their longings for peace, their longings to live in peace with each other.

I am sure there are those who have lost their faith, their hope, even their goodness, but the overwhelming witness in interview after interview is for a good and healthy solution to this conflict with no further retribution. The Ukrainians are Christians, Muslims, Jews, and, I am sure, agnostics and atheists as well. They may or may not have ever heard of Jesus, but they are living what he lived, even among their deadly enemies. They are living out the power of resurrection.

Resurrection happened to Lazarus, to others, and later to Jesus. Through those who loved and love them, resurrection happens to countless many more. Let us look daily for these stories of “resurrection living” and take them into our hearts for the gift that God shares through them with all of us who watch and listen. Easter is happening day by day in the midst of unimaginable suffering. *Amen.*

+JLJ