

July 29, 2020 – The Commemoration of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany

*Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world* (John 11:27)

Dearest Saints in Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). Amen.

Over the centuries, the Church has set aside days to commemorate saints in Christ who have left us with powerful and enduring examples of faithfulness to their Lord. Oftentimes, the day of commemoration will fall on the day of the saint's death (for example, July 28 is set aside for the commemoration of Johann Sebastian Bach, the German Kantor who is extremely important to both the history of music and to the Western Church, because he departed to be with the Lord on July 28, 1750). It may seem strange to commemorate someone on the day of their death instead of, for instance, the day of their birth, but as Christians we recognize that those who depart this life in the faith are now resting with their Lord, awaiting the day when Jesus returns in glory to reunite heaven and earth in a glorious new creation. Thus, the day of death, as tragic and painful as it is, becomes a final statement of faithfulness 'to the end', as it were, and a day to be commemorated, because as Jesus himself said, *Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life* (Revelation 2:10).

There are those saints, though, whose dates of death we do not know. For them, a certain commemoration date was chosen regardless. This is true usually of those we know from Scripture, like Abraham, or Noah, or Paul. So it is with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany, whose date of commemoration is July 29.

You probably know the story, or stories, of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. In fact, there are at least four stories that make up the 'story' of these three siblings in the Scripture. The familiar story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) involves Jesus finding hospitality at the house of the siblings. Martha welcomed Jesus into the house, where he began to teach. Instead of helping her sister with preparations, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus while he taught those who were present. Martha became annoyed – *Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me!* (Luke 10:40). Jesus' response was both direct and loving – *Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her* (10:41-42).

The most well-known story is almost certainly the account in John 11 of Jesus raising Lazarus. Lazarus became gravely ill, so his sisters Mary and Martha sent for Jesus to come to them before Lazarus died. But, in a surprise to his disciples, Jesus remained *two days longer* where he was instead of traveling immediately to Bethany. It was a surprise to the disciples because, as John wrote, *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus* (John 11:5). But, as Jesus said, the whole ordeal happened *so that you may believe* (11:15).

This is exactly what we see in the rest of the chapter. When Jesus comes near to Bethany, Mary runs out to him and makes a confession of faith in Jesus' power. *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you* (John 11:21-22). Not only that, she confesses – as we do in the Creed – her belief in the resurrection of the body. *I know that [my brother] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day* (11:24). But, when Jesus claims to be the *resurrection and the life* himself (11:25) and asks her whether or not she believes it, Mary makes her ultimate confession of faith in him. *Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world* (11:27). Martha echoes her sister's faith in the next section (John 11:28-37). And the whole scene overwhelms Jesus, so much so that he weeps (11:35). Lazarus, of course, can do nothing during this whole ordeal. *He's dead!* Yet, at the word of Jesus – the *resurrection and the life* – Lazarus comes out of the tomb alive!

What is probably much lesser known to most people are the two short stories that come immediately after the raising of Lazarus. As John 12 begins, we find Jesus again in Bethany, this time six days before the Passover and just hours before his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem for the week of his Passion and death. At Bethany, Martha serves (of course!), while Lazarus reclines with Jesus during dinner. Mary appears with expensive ointment and begins anointing Jesus' feet, so that the whole house is filled with the fragrance. Judas Iscariot objects to this 'wasteful' gesture – *Why was this ointment not sold [and the money] given to the poor?* (John 12:5). But Jesus responded, *Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me* (12:7-8).

Then, in a dark and terrible twist, the chief priests become greatly offended and threatened at the size of the crowds following Jesus. Though they have already been plotting to capture, and even kill, Jesus, they then *made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus* (John 12:10-11). Can you imagine such hatred in their hearts?!

The commemoration of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus might be a relatively minor observance in the Church year, one that we do not even know about unless it falls on a Sunday and we go out of our way (i.e. change the readings, etc.) to point out. But, as with all the commemorations of the saints, we have much to learn from the lives, confessions of faith, and faithfulness of those whom we remember.

In the final story, we recognize that those who follow Jesus will face hardship and persecution. Followers of Christ might even face death because of their allegiance to him over and above the powers of this world. We see this even today. Christians in China are being forced by the government to choose between ease of life and government support, on the one hand, and their lives of faith in Christ and worship of him, on the other hand. In Western Africa, governments and militias are committing ever more terrible atrocities against Christians, simply because of their faith in Jesus. In places like Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea, even being identified as a Christian can oftentimes mean prison – or death.

In the stories of Mary at Jesus' feet (the first when she listens to him teach, the second when she anoints his feet), we have wonderful pictures of what it means to worship Jesus. In the first story, Luke tells us that Martha was *distracted with much serving* (Luke 10:40). Jesus adds that she was *anxious and troubled about many things* (10:41). This is not a story about who should do the dishes or serve the food, then. Instead, it is an account of what we should be doing in the presence of Jesus – and what is done for us in his presence. Where does Jesus come to meet us? Wherever his Word is proclaimed in truth and his good gifts given to those who believe. We as God's people gather together to listen to his Word and to receive forgiveness, life, and salvation in his body and blood. The things of this world, then, should neither prevent us from coming together for worship (cf. Hebrews 10:25), nor should they distract us once we have come together. The time of worship is not a time for fear, for anxiety, for trouble, or for distraction. It is a time to be free from those experiences, when we *come to Jesus to find rest* (cf. Matthew 11:28) by sitting at his feet to listen to his Word. It is a time when we may beautifully respond to Jesus' love and mercy by giving of what we have in prayer, praise, and thanks, just as Mary used her expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet.

Most of all, the story of Jesus' raising Lazarus reminds us of what faith looks like in the midst of trouble, sadness, and even death. Those closest to us might become ill. They might die. We might be tempted to cry out in anger, *Lord, if you had been here... Why weren't you here!* Even in the midst of death and tragedy, Jesus comes to us and comforts us with his word of promise. *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?* Today, and every day, our response will be that of Mary and all the saints who have gone before us. *Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.*

Your brother in Christ,  
Pastor Squire