

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jul 29th 2014

Today, the Church offers us two options for a Gospel reading. One has Martha and Jesus at the Tomb of Lazarus – Martha's brother and Jesus's friend. The other is the image of Martha asking Jesus to put her sister Mary to work. Both are well known stories of today's saint. Both also contain very well-known sayings of Jesus – "I am the Resurrection and the Life" and "Mary has chosen the better part." And both remind Martha – and us! – that the encounter with Jesus is a real encounter with a loving God who calls us to new life.

We can see this quite clearly, of course, in the account of Jesus at Lazarus's tomb. His friend has died and now Jesus approaches the family. Martha expresses here her deep and abiding faith in Jesus, and, moreover, her trust in God's loving providence. Jesus affirms her faith by telling her that Lazarus shall live. More than that, though, he deepens her faith for, when she would focus only upon the final resurrection at the end of days, he pulls her back into the present moment. Yes, Lazarus would live with saints at the final resurrection – but here and now Jesus is Life. He is the Resurrection. The encounter with Jesus is one that brings life not only on the last day, but every day.

This is the same thing that Jesus does when he visits Martha and Mary in seemingly happier times, during the passage offered from Luke. Martha is burdened by much serving. It is unclear who exactly has burdened her. Has she perhaps burdened herself? Those of us who want to be perfect hosts know this burden. Or we have seen friends and family struggle to have the perfect dinner miss the actual dinner. Jesus calls Martha to this understanding. Be present – this is his invitation to her. Certainly, details will need to be addressed, but do these details trump the people coming to visit?

Again and again, Jesus's invitation is to true presence in a real moment of life. Resurrection is not (only) some far-off experience, something that we will get to eventually, if only we believe hard enough. Rather, new life is the gift Jesus offers to us simply by his very presence. Jesus is Resurrection; Jesus is Life. And when we encounter him, we encounter life, we are raised.

Too often the burdens of our daily life keep us from that moment. We need things to be perfect, so we miss out on the joys found in the imperfections. Or, we focus so much on getting the details just right, that we miss the reason the details matter at all. In dark days, too, we can place all our hopes and dreams on some far-off vindication, or some abstract ideal, that we miss out on the gifts of life offered even amid apparent desolation.

In neither of these stories is Martha a bad person. Nor has she chosen bad things, let alone sinful

things. Attending to the details and hoping in the final resurrection of God's People – these are good things! Jesus, though, invites her to not let those good things stand between her and a better thing.

For, Jesus invites her to an immediate encounter with new life. Jesus extends that invitation to you and me, too. Can we let go of our burdens and far-off dreams, good as they may be, to encounter the Resurrection and Life of Jesus today? Can we too choose “the better part”?

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