

“Coming to Trust”

John 11:1-44

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Prayer: God of generations past and generations to come, you have shown your faithfulness to all those who have called upon your name and put their trust in you. We call upon you today, Lord, and ask that you would speak once more for your servants are listening. Give us grace to hear you speaking and put our full trust in you. We ask in Christ’s name. Amen.

Today with Christians all over the world we observe the first Sunday in the season of Lent...the 40-day season of reflection, self-examination, and turning back to God in preparation for the remembrance of Jesus' death and the celebration of the resurrection at Easter.

Along the way during these 40 days, the St. Andrews faith community will continue to reflect on readings from John’s Gospel. As always, in each of the narratives we consider in John’s Gospel we will encounter people just like us...some who trust Jesus easily and fully...others who struggle to believe.

Our scripture passage for this morning contains an encounter between Jesus and one of his dear friends, Martha, following the death of her brother Lazarus. Through her palpable grief, disappointment with Jesus, and struggle to believe...to trust Jesus and take him at his word...we discover a model for our own faith...a model of how, like Martha, we might come to believe...how we might come to put our trust in the promises of Jesus before we fully experience the fulfillment of those promises.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is found in John 11:1-44. We’ll be reading from the Common English Bible translation. You can read along at Bible Gateway.com, in your pew Bibles, or your favorite translation. Whatever translation you choose, let’s all listen for God to speak as we read together.

11 A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2 This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, “Lord, the one whom you love is ill.” 4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This illness isn’t fatal. It’s for the glory of God so that God’s Son can be glorified through it.” 5 Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. 6

When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, 7 he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again." 8 The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?" 9 Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world. 10 But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them." 11 He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up." 12 The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well." 13 They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death. 14 Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. 15 For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him." 16 Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus." 17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. 19 Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. 22 Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." 23 Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. 26 Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world." 28 After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you." 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. 30 He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb. 32 When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." 33 When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. 34 He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus began to cry. 36 The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" 38 Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to

the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." 40 Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" 41 So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. 42 I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." 43 Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go."

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." This encounter between Jesus and Martha in John 11 represents one of the most painful and poignant moments in John's Gospel. You'll remember that Martha, her sister, Mary, and their brother, Lazarus, were among Jesus' closest and dearest earthly friends. They had extended hospitality to Jesus and his disciples on numerous occasions. Naturally, when Lazarus fell gravely ill, the sisters sent word to Jesus. Surely, their good friend Jesus who had healed so many others would come to the aid of his dear friend, Lazarus. After all, as our text emphasizes, Jesus loved Lazarus...surely, he would come without delay.

Only he didn't. Inexplicably, at least to Martha and Mary, Jesus waited two full days before he and his disciples began the roughly 17-mile journey to Lazarus' home in Bethany. By the time they arrived in Bethany, Lazarus was dead...sealed in a tomb for four days. And as Martha came out to meet Jesus as he entered Bethany, her words were direct and accusatory. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

Martha's words and accusatory tone are mirrored by Mary later in our text. "If you had been here..." Both of them are grieving and deeply hurt. No doubt, their hearts and minds are filled with understandable questions: "We sent word to you, Jesus. Why didn't you come? You could have prevented Lazarus' death. Why didn't you?"

So many questions, but they really all boil down to one question...the question that Christian author Philip Yancey rightly observes is "the question that never goes away." Why? "Why" is the enduring, "never goes away" question, of course, because human pain, suffering, and tragedy are constant. At some point,

no doubt each and every one of us here today has grappled with our own very personal expression of this question that never goes away. “Why?” “Why did God allow this to happen?” “Why didn't God protect us?” “Why doesn't God answer my prayers?” “If God is so good, why doesn't God stop this evil?” Why?

Once in a Bible study session focused on our passage for today, upon hearing Martha's words, one of my congregants said she was embarrassed and uncomfortable with the raw honesty of Martha's accusation. She said, “You might think those things, but you're not supposed to say them out loud to Jesus!”

With all due respect, I think my former congregant was dead wrong. I think the words that Martha spoke to Jesus were just right. And I'm not alone in my thinking. Christian scholar Gail O'Day makes the persuasive argument that Martha's words in her encounter with Jesus are comparable to a profound prayer of lament rather than an accusation or rebuke.

Gail O'Day rightly observes that that Martha's words to Jesus in verses 21–27 of our text mirror the traditional structure of biblical lament found in roughly 40% of the Psalms. Lament is a primary, if not the primary, accepted, and scripturally modeled language for processing pain, confusion, and grief in God's presence. It is the language of lament that Martha uses as she pours out her pain and grief to Jesus.

Lament. It is the language that the Hebrew people of old and, truth be told, people of faith through the ages have turned to when the pain is too deep...when the grief, anger, and confusion are too real for any other form of expression.

Some years ago, I stumbled onto a book written by the late Presbyterian poet, Ann Weems. When her son, Todd, was just 21 years of age, he was brutally murdered. Understandably, Ann struggled to make sense of this senseless tragedy. Friends tried to offer consolation. One friend, a seminary professor, urged Ann to turn to the psalms of lament in the Bible, believing that these psalms would give her earthy, unedited language to match the many overwhelming feelings she was experiencing. This same friend gently encouraged Ann to try her hand at writing some of her own psalms of lament as a way to process her grief. The result was a book Ann simply entitled, *Psalms of Lament*. Here is one of her hauntingly beautiful laments.

O God, find me!

I am lost

In the valley of grief,
and I cannot see my way out.
My friends leave baskets of balm
at my feet,
but I cannot bend to touch
the healing
to my heart.
They call me to leave
this valley,
but I cannot follow
the faint sound
of their voices.
They sing their songs
of love,
but the words fade
and vanish in the wind.
They knock,
but I cannot find the door.
They shout to me,
but I cannot find the voice
to answer.
O God, find me!
Come into this valley
and find me!
Bring me out of this land
of weeping.

O you to whom I belong,
find me!
I will wait here,
for you have never failed
to come to me.
I will wait here,
for you have always been faithful.
I will wait here,
for you are my God,
and you have promised
that you counted the hairs on my head.

Words of lament. Like Ann Weems, these are the words that involuntarily come from the depths of Martha's soul as she processes her grief with the only One she believes can help. Like Ann Weems, Martha's words perfectly follow the pattern of biblical lament: **turn, complain, ask, and trust**. Martha **turns** to Jesus, coming to him even as her heart is breaking with anger, grief, and hurt. She understands that she has nowhere else to turn...despite her deep disappointment with Jesus...only he has the power to help. As Martha turns to Jesus, she doesn't mince words...she bitterly **complains**, "If only you had been here, my brother would not have died." "Jesus, you loved Lazarus...why didn't you come?"

But Jesus is here now...standing right before her, so Martha **asks** for Jesus' help and intervention: "Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." "So, ask God to raise my brother back to life, Jesus!"

We must pause for a moment and consider Jesus' response to Martha's pain-soaked words of lament. Notice he does not rebuke Martha for her complaint. He doesn't seem to be put off or scandalized by her lament. In truth, he responds to her lament with nothing but welcome, compassion and a promise. "Your brother will rise again." Martha initially thinks Jesus is simply offering her some sort of Hallmark card promise of the afterlife for her brother...something akin to the "he's in a better place" sentiments we sometimes offer to others when

we have no words right-sized to fit the occasion of death. And so, Martha responds, "All well and good, Jesus, I know that my brother will rise at the resurrection on the last day. But what am I supposed to do with this cavernous loss that I'm feeling today...this day...right now? Please answer me, Jesus."

I imagine a long pause as Jesus fully attends to Martha...fully sees her and absorbs her words of lament. Friends, understand, Jesus is not impassive in these moments. Our text is clear. He loves Lazarus...he loves Martha and Mary...truly they are his friends. In these moments the One who is pure compassion enters fully and unflinchingly into Martha's grief and speaks personally and profoundly to her present pain and loss. "Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." "Martha, I am not just promising you life in some distant future...I am promising life now...life in the present tense...life that does not end with death."

Then Jesus asks Martha the million-dollar question...the question with which all of us will one day grapple. "Do you believe this? Not just with your head, Martha, but with your heart. Do you trust me? Do you trust that life, not death, will always be my promise to you now and forever?"

Martha completes her words of lament with one of the most beautiful and powerful confessions of trust contained in all the pages of Scripture. "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world." "Yes, Jesus, I trust you. I take you at your word. I trust your promise of life...for me and for Lazarus...today and forever."

Please don't let it be lost on you *when* Martha offers this heart-felt expression of trust. Remember, Jesus has not yet performed the last of his seven miraculous signs...the raising of his dear friend Lazarus from death back to life. Lazarus is still in the tomb. Martha trusts that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life *before* Lazarus is raised. She trusts the promise of Jesus. And trust hinges on the power of a promise, doesn't it?

The late Christian ethicist, Lewis Smedes, once wrote eloquently about the power of promises. He said, "What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, he reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: he will be there even when being there costs him more than he wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be

there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty."

This is what I understand Jesus to be doing as he promises Martha that he is now and always will be the Resurrection and the Life. With his eternal promise, Jesus creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty...no matter what lamentable circumstances Martha is experiencing now and in the future, Jesus will be there offering life that does not end.

Friends, this promise was not just for Martha. Our faith...our ability to trust...hinges on the promise of Jesus as well. None of us has witnessed a resurrection. We are all in Martha's position. We have been given a promise...a promise from Jesus...the One who is the Resurrection and the Life...and that's what we believe...that's what we trust before we see the fulfilment of the promise.

You may have come here today thinking that this sermon was going to be all about the technicalities of the raising of Lazarus from death to life again. While the miracle of the raising of Lazarus is certainly the climax of our passage, it is not its emotional center. The lament-laden conversation between Jesus and grief-stricken Martha is the heart of this story because it allows us to hear once again the promise of Jesus...who is the Resurrection and the Life.

With the unedited language of Martha and our ancestors in faith...the language of lament...Martha demonstrates a faith...a trust...that can simultaneously hold deep pain and absolute trust in Jesus. It's a model of faith for us as we journey with Jesus to the cross and beyond during this Lenten season.

Hear once again the promise of Jesus...to Martha and to you and me. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Friends, do you believe this?" May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, most blessed Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.