

“WERE YOU THERE? V – MARY AND MARTHA”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

April 2, 2017

Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 11:1-45

Way back in 1993, I was serving as an Associate Pastor at Aldersgate Church in Wilmington, and one of my pastoral responsibilities was to oversee the Christian Education program. One day I got a brochure in the mail from the General Board of Discipleship telling me about this brand new thing they had come up with called *Disciple Bible Study*. It was to be an intensive study of the scriptures – a 34 week study, which included participants spending at least a half hour a day in personal study, and then a two and a half hour group meeting each week. I wondered if people would be willing to make that kind of commitment, but I needn't have worried because for the next seven years while I was at that church, hundreds of people took part in it – and it was life transforming! I'm not kidding. There's something about that study that really makes scripture come alive and that makes participants really consider what that scripture means for their lives. But above all else, they realized over and over again that the Bible is the living, breathing word of God that speaks to life today.

Well, in much the same way, I think we've come to realize that very clearly in this sermon series for Lent, because each and every week, through these Biblical characters and their stories, we have seen ourselves, haven't we? We saw ourselves in Nicodemus, and realized that, like him, we sometimes know Jesus more in our heads than we do in our hearts. We saw ourselves in the woman at the well, and remembered again the joy of knowing that Jesus loves us despite our sins and shortcomings. Last week, we saw ourselves in the story of the blind man whom Jesus healed, and we realized, like all the people around that man, we often miss signs of God's glory. And today, friends, well, today it continues because there is no doubt that we'll see ourselves in the story as well.

It's the story of sisters Mary and Martha. If you remember, Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus are among Jesus' closest friends. Scripture tells us that he spent time often at their home and enjoyed their company. As we encounter the sisters today, they are going through a really, really painful time – for Lazarus is extremely ill and nearing the point of death. So naturally what Mary and Martha want is for Jesus to be with them and care for him, but he's not around, and not even close to being around. They're desperate, they're panicky, and yes, even angry. They're filled with questions – mostly why?

“Why, Jesus, aren’t you here when Lazarus needs you?”

Why aren’t you here when we need you, dear friend?

Why, Lord? Lazarus is dying and he’s dying right in front of our eyes, and we desperately need him, and there’s nothing we can do for him? Why, Lord?”

Ever ask those questions of God? Why, Lord? I daresay there’s probably not a person in this room who hasn’t asked it at one time or another in their life. Why, Lord? Why are you not here? Where are you when I need you?

“Why did I lose my job, Lord? Why now, when my family needs my income so desperately?”

“Why did my loved one get cancer, or Alzheimers, or a stroke, or well, you fill in the blank . . .”

“Why didn’t I get into the school I’ve dreamed of going to all my life? I did everything I was supposed to do, so why Lord, why?”

“When will things get better in my life, Lord? Everywhere I turn, my life is a mess. Where are you God?”

We understand this story so well today, this story of Mary and Martha, because we’ve been there. They love their brother, and they love Jesus, and they just don’t understand – and they’re angry with Jesus. You hear that as they confront him when he finally arrives – “Lord, if you had been here, none of this would have happened. Lazarus wouldn’t have died.”

But did you hear how Jesus responded to both of them? He didn’t yell back. He didn’t get defensive. No, he felt their pain. He empathized with them. He let them get their feelings out, and then he cried with them as well – because he too, in Lazarus, had lost someone he dearly loved, one of his closest friends.

Jesus didn’t gloss over their sadness and frustration or get angry or defensive about it, instead he embraced them through it. He let them feel what they were feeling and say what they needed to say. You know, whenever I read this story, I think about a pastoral visit I made early in my ministry with a woman whose five year old daughter had died. This was a long time after she had lost her daughter and she still was really struggling. When I sat down with her, and asked her what she was thinking and feeling, after many attempts to get her to really be honest, she finally said that she was angry with God, and was feeling really guilty about that.

So you know what I did? I turned to the Bible to show her that it was okay. It was okay for her to be angry and to question “why, God?” I showed her some of the psalms, where the psalmist really lashes out at God in deep anger. And then I showed her this story, where not only was it okay for people to be angry with God, but that Jesus was right there with them, letting them pour it out, and weeping right along with them. I have to tell you, that young mother was almost stunned to see that, and then, blessedly, relieved and unburdened by it. She let go of the guilt over the feelings she was having, and embraced the knowledge that Jesus was weeping with her, and walking with her through it all.

And that’s part of the beauty of this gospel story – not only that Mary and Martha could be honest and open with their feelings, but that Jesus was right there with them feeling those feelings too – letting them know it was okay and he knew what they were going through. He knew their pain, and friends, he knows ours.

But the story didn’t end there, and our stories don’t end there either. God made a way out of what looked like a hopeless ending. God made a way, for Jesus called Lazarus out of the grave and brought him to life again.

And that is what God does for us as well – God brings us through the experiences that feel like death for us, and brings us into new life as well. Always, if we’ll let him. Always. With God, sadness, sorrow and struggle never need have the final word. God will always make a way.

I’m sure you’ve probably heard this quote which puts it so beautifully: “Where the world places a period, God introduces a comma, suffering does not have the last word.”

God always makes a way. And in the meantime, through all of our journey, Jesus is there, just like he was with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Just like he was with Nicodemus and the woman at the well. Just like he was with the healed blind man. Jesus was there, and Jesus is here with us – always. When times are hard, and our hearts our breaking, he hears our cries, he bears our anger, and he weeps when we weep. And then, every time, out of death, he brings new life - he walks with us into a new future – every time. Oh, what a friend we have in Jesus.

So if you feel like Mary and Martha today, if you’re going through a tough time right now – struggling with a relationship, worried about a loved one; if you’ve lost your job or lost your way; if you’re worried about your health or money and paying your bills; or whatever it might be . . . as the hymn says, “Do not be afraid, for he is with you.” He hears and he understands and he weeps with you. And best of all, out of your struggle he will make a way. It will be okay. There will be new life and hope and joy again.

So let me end with this beautiful poem I read this week that I think says it all. It's called "Love That Has No Limits."

"Lord, if you had been here
When the cancer became untreatable,
When the clot travelled the artery,
When the mudslide left the mountain,
When the airplane met the sea,
When the heart ceased its drumming
And the tired marcher rested from its long parade –

Lord, if you had been here
In the hospital room, the bedroom,
The shopping mall, the street –

If you had been here
When it happened
In the evening, in the morning, in the afternoon -

If you had been here
When it was too soon, when it was too quick,
When it was too late, when it took too long –

Lord, if you had been here
For our brother, sister, daughter, son,
The loved one who passed beyond our reach –

Would death have won?

But you *have* been here
Here by the bedside, by the roadside, by the graveside,
By our side in the confining caves of grief.

You are here
Where tears remain wet on hurt faces.
You are here where hearts remain shrouded by the pain you feel with us,
And for us as well.

You were there at the grave of Lazarus,
Irretrievably lost to his family and friends, *but not lost to you;*
Gone beyond their loving reach but not yours.

You were there, and the stone was removed from the tomb.
You were there with your shout and the air held its breath.

You were there and burial cloths were unbound
And lost Lazarus opened his eyes to the sun.

And you are here, Lord,
In the hospital room, in the bedroom, in the shopping mall, the street.
You are here, drying tears on hurt faces,
Setting free the bound ones from the shrouds of death,
Leading us out of whatever caves are confining us
And reminding us that in you death will not triumph:

Your love, that has no limits, has won.”

(On-line, “Love That Has No Limits,
Andrew King, “A Poetic Kind of
Place,” A Poem for Sunday Lectionary
(Lent 5)

That, my friends, is the Good News of the Gospel! Oh, what a friend we have
in Jesus! Thanks be to God!

Amen.