

**FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, March 29, 2020**  
**“FROM HOPE TO DESPAIR TO NEW HOPE” (John 11)**

Martha starts off with hope. Yes, her brother is ill, and it is much more than a little sniffle. It's serious. Lazarus needs all the help he can get. So Martha and her sister, Mary send for their friend, Jesus. Jesus will be able to restore Lazarus to health and wholeness. After all, Jesus has cleansed lepers; he has opened the eyes of the blind; he has unstopped the ears of the deaf; he has freed paralytics to stand on their own two feet, and the lame to leap for joy. He'll have no trouble curing whatever is ailing Lazarus. Martha's brother will soon be up and about. Things in their Bethany household will be back to normal.

Martha has hope. We know about that kind of hope. When we first heard that a new corona virus had emerged, our thoughts turned to SARS and the H1N1 virus that had scared us before. We comforted ourselves that we were better prepared. We had hope that with our modern medical science, people who contracted the virus could be successfully treated. We had hope that with our current ways of screening, COVID-19 would be confined to a few areas of the globe. It might never reach our shores. Even when we learned of the first case in Toronto - a returning traveller - it still seemed that it could be contained. March Break travel plans might need to be changed or cancelled, but surely our lives would carry on as usual with work and school, with recreational activities and church groups and Sunday worship. We had hope.

Martha has hope. Jesus will come. Lazarus will be made well, and life will be as if nothing had ever happened. Jesus is not that far away – an easy walk. Lazarus is a friend. The home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany has been a place of refuge, of relaxation, of renewal for Jesus. Jesus has dropped everything to go with complete strangers to heal their loved ones; he has even responded to the pleas of a Gentile outsider, a Roman officer to boot. How much more willingly will he heed the request of these sisters? And yet, Jesus does not show up. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. According to traditional thinking, for the first three days after death, the soul stays around trying to re-enter the body. By the fourth day, however, there is absolutely no doubt: the person is well and truly dead.

While the trend today may be to speak of someone as "passed", not even "passed away", the euphemism popular in my youth, Martha is under no illusions that Lazarus, her brother is dead. The professional mourners are outside her home to lend their voices to the wailing. Her friends and neighbours have gathered to condole with her - to listen and offer comfort. The woman who hurries out to meet Jesus has lost all hope that Jesus will heal her brother. Her first words are: "Sovereign, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." We have no way of knowing the tone of voice especially since unlike modern novelists, the gospel writers tend to provide no adverbs to give us a clue. I suspect, however, there is more than a little anger and hurt: Martha may not say it outright, but it is there between the lines – "where were you? Why didn't you come? How could you let down your friends in this way"

It's the anger we hear in the voices of Canadians who are stuck in far off places with no way of getting home. Why hasn't the Canadian government helped them by providing rescue flights like some other countries? It's the anger we see on the faces of people in Spain and Italy demanding to know why those in authority didn't take stronger

action sooner to stop the spread of the virus. It is the hurt we see on the faces of adult children with aged parents who cannot visit because their long term care facilities are in lockdown, and know that with their parents' dementia, they cannot keep in touch through phone or computer video. It is the hurt we hear in the voices of medical personnel who are struggling to cope with too few resources to care for those afflicted with COVID-19, and forced to make choices they never wanted to.

On the receiving end of that anger and hurt, Jesus does not turn away nor does he offer any explanation for his actions or inaction. Instead, he assures Martha: "your brother will rise again". This is not a statement that his ancestor King David would have made. In early Judaism, there was no understanding of resurrection. The one hope people had of living on was through their children who would carry on their bloodline, and preserve the story of their clan. It was only around the second century BCE, the time the apocrypha, the intertestamental books, were being written, that belief in resurrection gained ground. Jews were being persecuted by Hasmonean rulers who were trying to impose their Greek ways. Jews were being martyred for staying true to their beliefs. Unless they were raised from the dead, how would they ever be vindicated by a just God? Still, in Jesus' time, some like the Sadducees clung to the tradition that beyond the grave, there lay only Sheol, a sort of colourless underworld, the one place where God cannot be praised. But Martha has no problem wrapping her mind around this concept: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." It is just that this belief does not provide much comfort in the here and now as she faces this gaping hole in her life; as she misses her brother – the sight of his face, the sound of his voice, his presence; as she realizes that she and Mary have lost their male provider and protector – a potential disaster in this patriarchal society.

Jesus doesn't leave it here. The next words on his lips are one of those "I am" statements so typical of the gospel of John: "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." If you have attended funerals, it's a verse which may be all too familiar. We can hear in it the assurance of life beyond the grave. But there is more to Jesus' statement than your brother will rise again. Jesus mentions life – life in all its fullness in the here and now. Lazarus may not have been cured as Martha hoped. Life does not always turn out the way we think it should. We know that as we watch the spread of COVID-19, hear the statistics and wonder about the impact of this pandemic not only on the health of human beings, but also on the global economy. Our plans may be upset. This is not the season of Lent that the Worship Team had planned. Patients looking forward to surgeries deemed non-essential are learning their dates are postponed. Our dreams may not reach fruition. Students graduating from Public or High School are not enjoying the usual class trips, and the celebrations as they prepare for the transition to the next stage of their education. Brides and grooms are letting go of their desire for "the perfect day", and settling for virtual ceremonies or re-scheduled nuptials. But this does not mean that we need to abandon all hope and give way to despair. Whatever comes our way, whatever our circumstances, we can still have fullness of life.

This was brought home to me by my Uncle John who was married to my Mom's oldest sister, Marie. With his warm smile, and gentle manner, he was my favourite uncle. A photoengraver, he was in his early 60's when he began to lose his eyesight.

Still, with the help of his wife, he could manage. He started to pour his creativity into the tactile art of caning chairs. Then my Aunt Marie became ill and died. My uncle had to move out of their home into the residence at the CNIB. This was definitely not the retirement they had looked forward to; this had not been in their plans. And yet, Uncle John never lost his enthusiasm for life and interest in the world around him. Thanks to talking books and the radio, he remained an animated dinner table conversationalist. Despite the rules at the CNIB designed to keep the sexes apart, he always managed to have a girl friend. They would find places where the staff wouldn't notice them, holding hands and cuddling. When I decided to enter Emmanuel College, my colleagues in the Foreign Service were convinced I had taken leave of my senses; my friends, that I was just going through a turning 30 crisis; my brother, that I was taking yet another wrong turn on the path to becoming a vet – his idea of my perfect occupation. But my Uncle John listened to me patiently and attentively, and then declared: "Gosh sakes. Isn't this wonderful!" I determined then and there that he would be at my ordination. I was in my first year when standing on the steps of my parents' house, he quietly announced: "I am ready to go home now," and I knew he wasn't talking about returning to the CNIB. I protested – he was fine, and I was nowhere near ready to lose him. Uncle John just silently shook his head. His hope had always been in God and now he was ready to be with God.

As Martha discovers, as my Uncle John knew, there are at least two kinds of hope. There is hope that comes naturally to us human being that things will turn out the way we want. This kind can be dashed. Then there is the hope Jesus points to for fullness of life in the here and now and life that does not end with the grave. This kind founded in God cannot be shaken. Thanks be to God.

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