

**Sunday, March 22, 2026**  
**Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year A)**  
John 11.1-45  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“Awaiting the Glory of God”**

Throughout the last four weeks of our Lenten quest, we have met and been guided by four very different individuals who have themselves been on their own quests—on their own journeys of discovery—whether they knew it or not. Beginning with Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, where Jesus himself served as our guide as we explored what it means to be tried and tempted in our own lives. On to the encounter with Nicodemus, a high-ranking temple official who was a secret follower of Jesus, who overcame his fears and associated need to compartmentalize his faith to “go public” in the demonstration of that faith. Then to Photini, a Samaritan woman of questionable repute, who through Jesus’ compassion was able to break down the barriers that inhibited her ability to see herself, and for others to see her, as a beloved child of God. And then last week to the man born blind, who not only gained his physical sight, but also gained spiritual sight, demonstrating that God’s work can indeed be revealed even in and through seemingly unfortunate, even tragic, circumstances. We express our gratitude to each of these guides for leading us to this point, and for the lessons that they have taught us about ourselves and our relationship with God and with one another.

On this fifth Sunday in Lent, we are nearing the end of our Lenten quest. Today, we find ourselves in Bethany, a mere two miles from Jerusalem, and a week away from Jesus’ triumphal entry into that holy city on what we variously call Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. This close to our destination and the end of our Lenten journey, the role and purpose of our Lenten guide changes somewhat. Today’s guide will help prepare us for the final leg of our journey: the emotional and spiritual rollercoaster that is Holy Week, where Jesus himself will again take over as guide, as we follow him from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to his last meal with his disciples on Maundy Thursday, to his arrest, trial, and execution on Good Friday.

So, who will serve as our guide for this trek to the gates of Jerusalem? A trek that itself will begin in Bethphage, a neighboring village to Bethany. Looking at today’s Gospel reading, we have a number of potential candidates. There is Lazarus, who has died and is now four days in the tomb. There is his sister Martha, who at once chastises Jesus for not being there to save her brother while also expressing profound faith in him as the Messiah. There is Mary, Martha’s sister, who similarly chastises Jesus. And there is even Thomas, one of Jesus’ disciples, who fearlessly proclaims his willingness to go with Jesus back to Judea and into the waiting hands of Jewish authorities who are seeking to kill Jesus, “that we may die with him.”

All four of these guides have something to offer us. Lazarus is the center of today’s story surrounding the circumstances of his being raised from the dead. You could make a case that he should be our guide as he is the center of the action, that he is a symbol for how we are all given new life through Jesus. While all true, for us Christians, we don’t need someone else as a guide into new life in Christ. Jesus fulfills that role himself through his Passion and Resurrection. So we don’t really need Lazarus for that lesson.

You could make a case for Mary being our guide, as elsewhere in the Gospels she is shown as the one who has previously sat at the feet of Jesus, absorbing all that he has to teach her. And in the next chapter of John's Gospel, she anoints Jesus' feet with oil, an image of preparing Jesus for his burial. But that is still in the future from our scriptural perspective. And in the current Gospel story, Mary really only has a bit part. She has a short conversation with Jesus, but merely reiterates what her sister has already said.

Thomas, while an option as guide because of his bold statement of support for Jesus and his willingness to go to the mat for his Lord, really does not contribute much more to the current story line or to the central theme of the day. Best to save him for something else, perhaps post-resurrection.

Which leaves Martha. Of all our choices, Martha really does stand out as the logical guide. The longest and most substantive conversation in today's Gospel reading is that between Jesus and Martha. The remainder of the story, what follows after, serves to illustrate the central point of this conversation between the two. This theological conversation between Jesus and Martha, as illustrated by the following events, serving as a guide to us as we prepare for Holy Week. And for what follows. Because even though we know what happens, as we make that journey through Palm Sunday, to Maundy Thursday, to Good Friday, and into the three days of waiting while Jesus lays in a tomb, Martha, of all people knows what that feels like. Martha, of all people, is uniquely qualified to prepare us by reminding us who Jesus is.

"Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.'" Here is a very human response from Martha. In her grief at the loss of her brother, she is frustrated that if things had gone a little differently, if Jesus had come as soon as they notified him that Lazarus was sick, Jesus could have saved Lazarus. But even in the midst of the frustration, even as she gently chastises Jesus for not coming right away, Martha also demonstrates her faith: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." We know from other Gospel accounts that there was a close bond between Jesus and Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. They had obviously spent a lot of time together, forging a close, almost familial relationship. Martha had seen firsthand who Jesus is and what he is capable of. Even in the midst of her loss, in the midst of her grief, she holds on to what she knows about Jesus. She holds on to hope. She holds on to the possibility of new life for her brother, recognizing if anyone can facilitate that, it is Jesus.

Jesus provides the hope she needs. The assurance she needs. "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'" At this point, the only hope Martha sees is that Lazarus will be resurrected at the end of the ages, along with the rest of us. She has given up any hope of resuscitation at this point. If Jesus had gotten there sooner, maybe. But Lazarus has been dead for four days. The Jewish belief was that after death, the soul remains with the body for three days. As long as the soul is still around, resurrection is theoretically possible. By the fourth day, however, the soul is gone for good. Once the soul is gone, no one can revive the dead. Only God could bring a soul back to a body after that amount of time.

As if in answer to Martha's deflated hopes for immediate resuscitation of her brother, "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die,

will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Using language that says in no uncertain terms who he is as the Son of God. As God Incarnate. Up to this point, Martha would have known, based on their relationship, that Jesus indeed had a special relationship with God. That God works through him. But here, he has confirmed what she could only have hoped in her wildest imaginings. "She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'" Martha's confession of faith in who Jesus is as the Messiah, the Son of God. The strongest such profession of faith thus far in John's Gospel.

It is this confession of faith that serves as a turning point in the present saga surrounding the death of Lazarus. But even more so, Martha's confession of faith is a turning point in the ongoing narrative of Jesus' own journey to Jerusalem. This journey itself being foreshadowed by the events that immediately follow Jesus' conversation with Martha.

After a similar although much briefer and less theologically charged encounter with Mary, Jesus goes to the tomb where Lazarus has been buried. When Jesus orders the stone to be taken away, Martha protests because of the length of time Lazarus has been in the tomb. To which Jesus responds, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" And then, after praying to God, "he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" God's glory was indeed revealed as Lazarus emerged from the tomb.

Of course, this side of the resurrection, we recognize that the raising of Lazarus prefigures Jesus' own death and resurrection. He had already foretold to his disciples what would happen to him. The fulfillment of which was already in the works, as the Jewish authorities had tried to arrest him and even tried to stone him. With the raising of Lazarus being the final straw. Jesus was rapidly gaining in popularity, causing concern among the temple authorities. Before long, the Roman authorities would begin to notice, as well. To protect the uneasy peace with Rome, to protect the temple, Jesus had to be eliminated.

While the raising of Lazarus prefigures Jesus' own resurrection, there are striking differences. Lazarus emerged from the tomb, "his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth." Symbolic of the reality that, at least at this point, death continues to cast a pall, continues to enshroud humanity. Not until Jesus' own resurrection would death no longer have a hold on humanity. Only through Jesus' own resurrection, when the burial cloths are left behind in the tomb, will humanity truly be free from the bonds of death.

Before calling Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus says to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" She, and all those present, certainly saw the glory to God in Lazarus being raised from the dead. But that glory pales in comparison to the glory of God that will be revealed with Jesus' own resurrection in just a few weeks' time. Recalling her earlier profession of her faith that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world," did she see the raising of her dear brother as the glory to God Jesus spoke of? Or perhaps, was she able to see this as a foreshadowing of a greater glory that Jesus would accomplish? Was she able to see this miraculous event as but a sign of Jesus' true identity and mission?

If Martha really does believe what Jesus told her about being “the resurrection and the life,” if she really does believe that he is “the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world,” she just might be able to see the raising of her brother as a glimpse into the greater glory that will be revealed through Jesus. If she is not able to right now, in this moment, surely, in a few weeks’ time, following the tragic death of her beloved friend and teacher, when she hears news of his own resurrection, then all the pieces will fall into place. Then, she will be able to fully realize and understand who Jesus is as the one who is the resurrection and the life for her brother, for her, and for all of us.

As we prepare for our final journey to Jerusalem, as we witness the tragic events of the Passion, may we be strengthened by Martha’s profound insight, that when we receive news of the resurrection, we too will see the glory of God in all its fullness.