

“Come for To Die”

The Rev. Martha ter Kuile
Minister of Worship and Pastoral Care
Bloor Street United Church
Palm Passion Sunday – April 17, 2011

Reading: John 11.1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ But when Jesus heard it, he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’ Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’ After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.’ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 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.’ 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.’ 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?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

When I was a little girl in Sunday school, Palm Sunday was my favourite – we didn't have a Palm parade, and only the Catholics used real palms fronds. But we sang the lovely hymns and imagined throwing our cloaks down on the ground in front of a donkey. Sing hosanna to the king! From this happy celebration it was more or less a straight shoot to Easter, with all its springtime themes of new life, flowers, and eggs, and bunny rabbits. The story of Jesus' death was known but not emphasized – I'm not sure there was a Good Friday service, and certainly children didn't attend it. And the hymn we sang to mark the passion? *There is a green hill far away*. Catholic friends did the stations of the cross (which we considered morbid), and you might catch a glimpse of Richard Burton in *The Robe* on TV, but within the spiritual practice of that era, the crucifixion really was quite far away.

In the intervening half century this has changed very profoundly. As part of what is called the liturgical convergence, our Protestant practice has embraced the liturgical year, adopted vestments and seasonal colours, the reading cycle of the lectionary, and more frequent communion. (From the other side of that convergence, Roman Catholic practice has tended toward longer sermons and more singing.) Nowadays, this church begins the season of Lent with the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, and as Emily has explained to the children we intentionally undertake various practices of devotion. Lenten Reflections prepared by the congregation. On Palm Sunday, we deliberately take the story through Holy Week to the cross. We strip the Sanctuary to mark our sorrow. There is sometimes a slight undertone of reproof in this for those who only attend on Sunday – we have all probably heard sermons about, you can't have Easter Sunday without Good Friday. And that is perhaps a helpful correction to the simple march of the happy children that I remember.

But it might be good to stop and ask – not just as a matter of liturgical practice – why *does* he go to the cross? In terms of the story – he is on a roll at the beginning of a wonderful ministry of healing and teaching, kindness and good advice, this wonderful prophetic man whose presence brought hope, who looked at you and saw you into new consciousness. Why not just keep preaching and healing and loving until he was 60, like Mohammed, or 70, like Confucius, or 80, like the Buddha. We take our

Christian story for granted, but we ought to ask what it is about his death, this death, that places it at the centre of our faith?

Some say he had to die because people who cry out for justice inevitably raise the hackles of the powerful. His goodness was a threat to the authorities. Or maybe he goes to the cross in solidarity, because that is where humanity is, his suffering a sign of God's absolute commitment to be with us. If you grew up with substitutionary atonement, you will have been taught that he is sacrificed on our behalf, to pay something like a debt. Christian theologians have wrestled with the question ever since the day of his death. Our answers change with changing perspective, change over time.

As we share in the reading of this drama, and as we go through this holy week, we open that question and let it hover. Try to keep it in your mind all week. Try to look at the sky and wonder.

[how we will do this reading] Liturgy means the work of the people.

So let us begin then. We look at the sky and wonder.