

## **TOMBS, TEARS AND TRIUMPH**

Sermon preached by The Rev. Edee Chase Fenimore

March 29, 2009

Scripture: John 11: 1-45

Well, we're almost there. This is the fifth Sunday in Lent. Next week we will celebrate Palm Sunday. Around 9:45 or so, we will walk down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square, led by someone playing the bagpipes. When the 11:00 service begins here in the sanctuary, there will be children and adults waving branches and shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." At the close of the service we will hear the Passion narrative read, preparing us for Holy Week. So in some sense we are pointing already to the centerpiece of our faith; the trial of Jesus, his crucifixion, the burial of his body and then the discovery of the empty tomb.

We may want to skip many of the events that are remembered and celebrated during the week that we call Holy. We may want to rush through remembering the betrayal that occurred while Jesus and his friends were gathered in an upper room. We may want to forget the additional betrayal as he prayed in the garden. Many avoid listening to the story of his death on a cross. We want to jump right to that alleluia moment, when the women and some of the disciples discover that the tomb is empty. It is perfectly natural. We prefer "Alleluia, Christ is risen." to "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Our lesson from the gospel of John presents much the same conflict for us as hearers. We want to jump right to the happy ending. We even name this story by the concluding event: The Raising of Lazarus. It is a familiar story. Painters have immortalized it. Poets have referenced it. But the story has some intriguing details that we miss if we think to ourselves, "Yes, I know this story. Lazarus, a friend, of Jesus, dies. Mary and Martha flutter about and then Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb. Lazarus walks out, alive."

There is so much more to this story that perhaps we need to hear it again, from a slightly different perspective. The Belgian theologian, Henri Nouwen, says that a story invites the hearer to wander around in it and find the places where heart, mind or soul is touched. So for the next few minutes wander around in a story called Tombs, Tears and Triumph.

*Flutter about? Did she say that Mary and Martha flutter about? I never flutter about. I'm a serious woman, practical, realistic. Things are either right or wrong, important or trivial, true or false. I do not see or have any time for shades of gray. I am interested in things that we can see or hear or touch or taste or smell. I do not flutter. I try to set things right. People may say I am bossy, that I want to control everything. But to tell the truth, sometimes I think I am the only one who really understands what is going on.*

*Oh, please excuse my poor manners. I am Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus, friend of Jesus of Nazareth. At least I think we were all friends. Many times I seemed to be on the wrong side of Jesus. May I speak frankly? Sometimes I just didn't get what he was doing. He was always talking about the love of God. Now, that is something that cannot be touched or seen or heard and certainly not smelled or tasted. As I said I was the consummate realist. I had no use for dreams and visions. I saw the world as it was and thought that dreaming of how it could be was an exercise in futility.*

*In order to talk about that day, the day that is written about in your sacred scriptures and was read at your gathering this morning, I need to start back a bit. Jesus was a frequent visitor in our home in Bethany. One of those many visits was also recorded in your bible.*

*Frankly I don't come off very well in that story. You see, I asked Jesus to make Mary help me with all the household chores. Jesus had come to our home many times and always it seemed as if I got stuck preparing everything for the visit. I got the food ready and made sure the table was set and the pillows arranged and... well, you know what it is like to try to entertain. Well, I was bustling about, not fluttering mind you, just hurrying to make sure that everything was done correctly. It's that right and wrong business again, you see. Mary, on the other hand was just sitting by Jesus listening to him talk as if she was his student. I could think of nothing but getting everything done and I got more and more annoyed. Finally I asked Jesus... all right, I'll be honest, I kind of snapped at him.*

*I said, "Don't you even care that my sister is leaving me to do all the work myself?" I remember clearly his response. He said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing." I knew that the one thing was the love of God and that was such a nebulous concept and I am a realistic woman. I still thought of Jesus' lessons about the love of God as just a dream.*

*Now we come to that time when our dear brother Lazarus became ill. We knew that this illness was serious, the kind of illness that would lead to death. Fear gripped Mary and me. So we sent out messages to many of our brother's friends. Among those many friends was Jesus. By this time, many folk were following Jesus. He was not only preaching and teaching. We had heard that he had done many miracles, healing folk, giving sight to the blind, causing those who were lame to walk. So along with wanting Jesus to come because he was such a good friend, we also wanted him to heal Lazarus. Mary believed in the power of Jesus to heal. I was mostly just hoping. I could not attribute healing power to Jesus unless I saw that power for myself. But as you know I did not get to see Jesus' power to heal. My brother died before Jesus arrived. Those four days after my brother died and before Jesus arrived were the most difficult I had ever experienced. I busied myself with chores. I put the final stitches on the burial cloth. I planned and prepared the meal that followed the burial. I wanted everything to be just right. It was sort of as if I could control my grief by staying busy, even though I could not control the cause of that grief. I felt totally helpless but with that helplessness was real, raw anger. I could not understand how Jesus, who numbered himself among the best friends of Lazarus, would linger before coming to Bethany.*

*So when I saw Jesus arriving, after the burial I hurried to meet him. There was no fluttering here. I walked directly up to him and I accused him. I said, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." The words just burst out of me. Slowly I realized that those very words, angry as they were showed that I knew that Jesus was the bearer of wholeness and health and life. In fact I went on to say something that I thought would never pass these lips, because after all, I am a realist. I only trust what*

*is here in this world. But I said, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."*

*Then it happened. Jesus began to talk to me about the things of God. Jesus and I had a conversation about rising from the dead, about eternal life about God's love. And I got it. Me, Martha, the consummate realist, understood that eternal life is not just life after our bodily deaths. No. Eternal life begins and grows as we walk with God. Once we are connected to God's love, once we are in relationship with God, we are in life eternal. We live forever because we are with God.*

*You know what happened next. You know that Jesus called for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. You know that the realist in me could not help but mention the practical fact that there would be a stench, Lazarus being dead for four days. But as big a moment as that was, the defining moment of that day was when Jesus talked to me about God's love.*

*One more small thing... not so small... pretty important to me. Jesus wept over Lazarus. Jesus showed that the relationships we have in our lives here are important and rich and real. It may be that these relationships are one of the many ways that we connect to the love of God.*

*What a day! And it will not be long before we are all hearing of these things again: tombs and tears and triumph.*