

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Lent 5 (3 April 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2022-04-02 Sat 10:51>

Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

1 I. Upset the Equilibrium

Once there were two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha was a good hostess, working in the kitchen, serving her guests. Mary had other business, and she always could be found at Jesus' feet. We've heard this story before, haven't we? We're waiting to hear Jesus say, "Martha, Martha, Mary has chosen the better thing." But that's not today's story. Mary and Martha, it would seem, have made their peace with how things are. They have discovered their own spiritual gifts and callings. Today it is not Martha who criticizes Mary, but it is Judas.

Now as we read, we're told some unsavory things about Judas. The evangelist is totally seeing Judas through the eyes of his later betrayal. The evangelist's prejudice leads him to accuse Judas also of lying and petty theft. Judas takes the fall, too, for criticizing Mary's choices. She is spending too much money, too much time on Jesus. Couldn't she do something more productive with her resources?

But note carefully how this story begins: *Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.*¹ Resurrection is what this story is about.

2 II. Isaiah

Our first reading today is from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah always has something provocative to say. That's why he's called a prophet. Isaiah speaks of all the unexpected, just totally crazy things that God has done in the past. Things that are honestly beyond belief for us today: the stuff of legends. And God says, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing..."² In other words, God says, "you ain't seen nothing yet." It's time to let go of all your old assumptions, your conventional expectations. It's time to let the old things die because that's where God works. God does new things through death. That's what we mean when we use the word "resurrection."

¹Jn 12.1 NRSV.

²Isa 43.18f. NRSV.

3 III. Paul

This is the same message we get in our second reading from Paul. Paul knows about privilege, about status, about respectability, about religious credentials. Paul summarizes all these things as “confidence in the flesh” and evaluates it as “σκύβαλα.” That’s the Greek word. The best English translation has only four letters. We’ll just say it means “filth.” These things, these sources of confidence in the flesh, they’re not just neutral: they’re actively harmful because they prevented Paul, they prevent us, from receiving that which God has to offer. It’s like a child with a piece of Monopoly money refusing an offer from someone who wants to give her \$1000 in real money. You can’t even compare the value of the two. But as long as your hands are full of that Monopoly money, how can you possibly receive anything else, however much greater its value?

Paul knows that resurrection is the promise, and you can only get to resurrection by first going through death.

4 IV. Conclusion: Anticipate the consequences (tie back to beginning)

Next week is the Sunday of the Passion. We’ll read the account of Jesus’ death at length. Because without Passion Sunday, there’s no Easter Sunday, no Sunday of the Resurrection.

In your baptism, you were drowned with Christ, dying to what was before and united to his new, resurrected life.

In our Gospel reading today, Mary knew something about resurrection. Her brother Lazarus had been dead, and now he wasn’t. When Jesus said to her, “I am resurrection, and I am life,” it meant something real and personal to her. She seemed to do a foolishly extravagant thing for Jesus. Would you have done any differently if it was someone you loved that Jesus had raised from the dead?

Christians believe Jesus has done exactly that. Passionate followers of Jesus are always going to be criticized for their outlandish faith. They’re going to be accused of spending too much money, too much time on drawing close to Jesus. They’re going to be seen as wasting their resources, their efforts, their lives. But like Mary, they know. They know that all the things others value, things like time, money, resources, status, even respectability: it’s all “σκύβαλα.” It’s all standing between you and resurrection.

Mary has shown us the way to Easter, the way to Resurrection. Mary has faith in what Jesus promised, in what’s coming next. She is not afraid to spend all she has in getting there.

Amen.