

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open the bible at the center of your group and light a candle beside it. Recall the names of people you love who have died. Pray Romans 8.11:

LEADER: The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us.

ALL: The one who raised Christ from the dead will bring our mortal bodies to life through the dwelling of the Spirit in us.

Inevitably in our lives we stand at the graves of those we love. Perhaps it is misting as it was when we stood at my mother's grave and each shoveled dirt into the place of her resting. It was October. This final family act of love seemed like a fall planting for an as yet uncertain spring.

When we bury those we love, we lose all they learned in their lives—the quickness of their fingers on a violin, their mastery of physics, their wisdom in relationships, the way the holy showed through in their kindness. What lives on? Every death raises questions about its meaning and makes of our graves places where faith must begin.

Our graves call the question—what do I believe

about God? Sometimes the veil between worlds seems thin. We experience our loved ones intensely present with us.

None of us knows what lies beyond death. We have only our experience of God in our world and in our holy history. Henry Nouwen compares dying to the trust between trapeze artists. One lets go, trusting the other will catch her or him.

Christians are companions in hope that the God who creates and sustains the world will raise us up. We are companions in hope that the new life Jesus promises will be our own.

We live in promise, not certainty. We walk with Jesus, who did not sidestep death but trusted the God he experienced believing and inspiring him; he gave himself in human unknowing.

Jesus grieves in Sunday's gospel with three people he loves. His friends Martha and Mary believe Jesus could have saved their brother Lazarus, but he didn't come in time. The gospel sets a scene familiar: two sisters stand at their brother's grave with a friend.

● Who have you accompanied in sickness and death?

● What funerals do you remember especially? For what reasons?



GOSPEL

Jesus is resurrection and life.

NARRATOR: There was a man named Lazarus, who was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. The sisters sent word to Jesus to inform him, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

JESUS: This sickness will not end in death; rather it is for God's glory, that through it the Son of God may be glorified.

NARRATOR: Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus very much. Yet, after hearing that Lazarus was sick, Jesus stayed on where he was for two days more. Finally he said to his disciples:

JESUS: Let us go back to Judea.

NARRATOR: When Jesus arrived in Bethany, he found Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. The village was not far from Jerusalem—just under two miles—and many Jewish people had come out to console Martha and Mary over their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary sat at home.

MARTHA: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died. Even now I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask.

JESUS: Your brother will rise again.

MARTHA: I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

JESUS: I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, though they die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die. Do you

believe this?

MARTHA: Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the messiah, the Son of God: he who is to come into the world.

NARRATOR: When she had said this, Martha went back and called her sister Mary.

MARTHA: The Teacher is here, asking for you.

NARRATOR: As soon as Mary heard this, she got up and started out in his direction. Actually Jesus had not yet come into the village but was still at the spot where Martha had met him. The Jews who were in the house with Mary saw her get up quickly and go out, so they followed her, thinking she was going to the tomb to weep. When Mary came to the place where Jesus was, she fell at his feet.

MARY: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died.

NARRATOR: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had accompanied her also weeping, he was troubled in spirit, moved by the deepest emotions.

JESUS: Where have you lain him?

ALL: Lord, come and see.

NARRATOR: Jesus began to weep.

MOURNERS 1: See how much he loved Lazarus.

MOURNERS 2: He opened the eyes of the blind man. Why could he not have done something to stop this man from dying?

NARRATOR: Troubled in spirit, Jesus approached the tomb. It



was a cave with a stone laid across it.

JESUS: Take away the stone.

MARTHA: Lord, it has been four days now; surely there will be a stench.

JESUS: Did I not assure you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God displayed?

NARRATOR: They took away the stone, and Jesus looked upward.

JESUS: Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, that they may believe that you sent me. Lazarus, come out.

NARRATOR: The dead man came out, bound hand and foot with linen strips, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

JESUS: Untie him and let him go free.

NARRATOR: Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and saw what Jesus did put their faith in him.

Martha believes Jesus is the messiah.

Like the Samaritan woman and the man born blind, Martha and Mary speak as individuals but also as representatives of the Christian community that gives us John's gospel. Between Jesus' death and resurrection (A.D.30) and the writing of John's gospel (A.D. 90-110), this community told and lived Jesus' story. The cycle-A Lenten gospels show us that this early community faced its own later conflicts by reflecting on events in Jesus' life.

On one level the raising of Lazarus is an event in Jesus' lifetime. On a second level the raising of Lazarus is a sign that shows us the Johannine community's reflecting as we must on who Jesus is to them and to their loved ones who are dying. The dialog Martha and Mary have with Jesus explores the relationship between the crucified and risen Jesus and disciples like their brother who face death in the late first century.

When Martha and Mary meet Jesus, they each say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." The repetition tells us this statement is important. Martha and Mary raise a question in the life of the early Christian community in which many expected Jesus to return in glory within their lifetimes.

● What questions do you have about death?

● Before what graves have you stood and asked as Martha and Mary do, "Why didn't you save the

one we love?" What answer did you get?

In reflecting on Lazarus's death, the death of someone Jesus loves, the community remembers Jesus himself suffered death and transformed its meaning. The gospel inextricably links Lazarus's death with Jesus' death, and Lazarus's new life with the promise of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus' journey to Bethany takes him just two miles from Jerusalem, where mourners quickly carry the news Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead to the high priests. These officials immediately convoke the Sanhedrin and decide to kill Jesus (John 11.46-53).

This chapter that tells the story of Jesus' raising of Lazarus ends with the officials deciding Jesus must die. When he weeps with Martha and Mary over the death of their brother and his friend, Jesus stands at the door of his own grave. Raising Lazarus sets his passion in motion. Lazarus lives to face death again. Jesus leads Lazarus and all his disciples through death to life. We can see Martha and Mary in the gospel art unwrapping not only Lazarus but every Christian in the promise of the resurrection.

● What do you appreciate about Jesus, truly human in this scene as well as truly divine?

As her conversation with Jesus begins, Martha believes Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been there. To her, Jesus is someone who cures illness and has a special closeness to God that will get him whatever he asks. She believes in a wonderworker.

When Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again," Martha thinks he is talking about resurrection on the last day. This is faith that Jesus is the apocalyptic figure who will bring good to triumph on the last day. Early Christians expected this day in their lifetimes.

The community that gives us John's gospel believes Jesus is more than a wonderworker or an apocalyptic figure. In Sunday's gospel Jesus calls Martha to this deeper faith. "*I am* the resurrection and the life," he says. Jesus' words say that he is *I Am*.

This is the name of God in the Old Testament. Martha affirms one of the ten *I Am* statements in John's gospel, identifying Jesus as the pre-existent Word who was with God from the beginning and was God.

John's community also sees Jesus as the messiah, the king greater than David that the prophets expected. Martha affirms in her confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ,



the messiah. “Yes, Lord,” she says, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world.”

Martha confesses the faith of later disciples who have reflected on all the scriptures say about Jesus and who have faced the death of their loved ones. The raising of Lazarus manifests God’s same life-giving power that raises Jesus himself from the dead and makes the grave a threshold of divine promise for every Christian.

The time above all to make Martha’s confession is at the graves of our loved ones. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The gospel calls us to find the ultimate meaning of our lives in the mystery of Jesus’ story, in the light he gives to life, in the hope he gives in death.

● What helps you believe God can and will raise us up when we are in pain? When we face death?

● What do you say to someone suffering the pain of a child, parent, or spouse dying?



Ezekiel imagines his people restored to life.

Ezekiel gives us images of God’s transcendent power which we know well from spirituals—dry bones that rise again, the wheels that move by the grace of God. Ezekiel speaks for the God of Israel but he lives in exile in Babylon—modern-



day Iraq. He is among those the Babylonians take captive in 598 B.C., ten years before they finally level the city of Jerusalem and its temple. The temple vanishes with its priests and festivals that once assured the people of God’s presence with them.

What God gives Ezekiel in exile are visions, dreams of new birth in the midst of the dry and scattered bones of his people. Israel doesn’t become an independent nation again until modern times. But out of Israel’s relationship with God come two world religions—Judaism and Christianity. Ezekiel’s vision is without earthly foundations; it is sheer faith in God’s life-giving power.

These bones will rise.

Thus says the Holy One: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am God, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! I will put my spirit in

you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am God. I have promised, and I will do it, says God.

Ezekiel 37:12-14

● What speaks to you in Ezekiel’s vision?

● What speaks to you in the artist’s portrait of Ezekiel?

PRAY

Name a sign of spring that makes you personally aware new life is waking from winter death or dormancy.

LEADER: God who creates and sustains all life.

ALL: We are made in your image and likeness.

LEADER: God of spirit and truth.

ALL: You call us into communion beyond our borders.

LEADER: Jesus, light of the world.

ALL: We walk in the light of your life.

LEADER: Jesus, resurrection and life.

ALL: You promise life with you forever.

Sing: “We Remember,”
Gather #593.

Exchange a greeting
of peace.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of *SUNDAY BY SUNDAY*, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.