

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our Lenten journey with Jesus has been quite a trip. We joined him after his Baptism by John in the Jordan as he was led by the Spirit into the desert where he prayed and fasted for forty days. Weakened by his fasting, suffering the loneliness of long, hot desert days and the cold, howling winds of desert nights, we watch as he undergoes all the temptations that the wiles of the devil can conjure up. Fortified by his exemplary courage and resolute faith in his stand against all the evil that the world has to offer, we follow him as he gathers his best friends, Peter, James, and John, and climb the mountain where he is revealed in all his glory as he converses with Moses and Elijah and is proclaimed by God to be his Beloved Son, to whom we are to listen.

Traipsing down the mountain behind them and traveling across the desert once again to the town of Sychar in Samaria we listened in on the conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman, a lost and lonely soul, trapped in a life of seeking love in all the wrong places. Didn't our emotions almost overcome us as we listened to how his compassion and caring lead her to recognize him as the saving grace, the life-giving water, she had sought all her life? Weren't we struck with awe as we saw this woman move beyond her shame and sorrow to become the first evangelist, leading her fellow townspeople to come to believe him to be the Savior of the world?

Off we went again into the desert, with its hot days and cold nights, arriving at the pool of Siloam and listened as the disciples questioned whether the plight of the blind beggar sitting at the side of the road was a result of his sin or that of his parents. Jesus said his condition was not the result of sin but was allowed that God might be glorified in him.

Then, we witnessed Jesus spitting in the dirt, making mud that he smeared on the eyes of the blind man, whom he directed to wash in the pool. We stared in amazement at this man, once-blind, now able to see. We listened as the Pharisees questioned him, his parents, and Jesus Himself, who tried every which way to explain away the miracle they themselves had witnessed, and listened as Jesus exposed their own spiritual blindness, which can also afflict us.

Now, we follow as Jesus and his disciples withdraw from the Pool of Siloam, which was just south of Jerusalem. We left there because it had become apparent that the leaders, the Chief Priest and Sanhedrin, were plotting how to kill Jesus. We travel about two or three days away from the City. Now comes word that Lazarus, one of Jesus' dearest friends, is sick. His sisters, Martha and Mary, plead with Jesus to come, believing that he can and will heal him. But Jesus decides to stay for a couple of days where we have encamped. He's in no hurry to go. This, of course, reminds us that God moves according to His Plan, not ours.

The disciples believe that he is motivated by the same fear that they have, namely that he, and possibly they too, would be arrested or stoned to death. They still don't know who he is and how fearless he truly is. They are still thinking as humans, not as God does. Finally Jesus says, "Let us go back to Judea," and they all start arguing with him.

We do that a lot, don't we? When it's really obvious to us what God wants us to do or calls us to do, we argue with him. We even try to convince Him that He is wrong.

I recently had that kind of problem with God. A person called me who I knew was contentious. I decided not to return her call. She called again a week later, leaving a voice mail that was even more insistent. I knew she wanted to draw me into a fight between her and her ex-husband, and I didn't want any part of it. Very self-righteously, I determined there was no way I was going to become involved. My conscience kind of bothering me, about a week later, it was with that self-righteous attitude, that I dared to bring the problem to God in prayer. Immediately, my prayer convicted me of disrespecting this person who had twice reached out to me. I then argued with God that I knew where the conversation was going to go and I wanted no part of it. Then, the Lord revealed to me how many times I had brought problems to him that he didn't want any part of either, but he always listened to me. Who did I think that I was?

God won that argument! After three weeks I returned the call. The woman was surprised to hear from me. I explained to her that it was only after prayer that I returned the call because I really did not see it as my place to be an intermediary between her and her ex-husband. She proceeded, as I knew she would, telling me of all of her ex-husband's faults, short-comings, and failures. I listened patiently and told her these were all matters she should take up with him, not me. Well, she went on and on, and I repeated again and again, it was really none of my business and I couldn't help her. It was the responsibility of her lawyer to work out those problems with his lawyer, and matters to be resolved in court hearings. In the end, she thanked me for returning her calls and listening to her—which apparently was all that she really wanted. She said how grateful she was.

When I hung up the phone, I looked up to God and said, "Well, are you happy?" In my heart, I heard this response, "Yes, you respected her, as I respect you when you call on me." Then, I realized I was happy too.

When all the arguing was done, Jesus explains that Lazarus has died and that he was going to him, and Martha and Mary. Thomas, whom we will soon refer to as "doubting", courageously speaks up, "Let us go to die with him." And off we go to Bethany, which is less than two miles from Jerusalem. As we approach, Martha gets wind of it and runs down the road to meet Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Was this a reproach? Was Martha kind of blaming Jesus' delay in coming as the reason her brother died?

Haven't many of us done that at times, blamed God for not being here when we needed him? How often have we felt let down by God?

Martha, despite her disappointment, persists, "But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Jesus responds, "Your brother will rise." Martha says, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day."

Here Jesus does it again. Just as he did in the presence of Satan in the desert, with Peter, James, and John on the mountain, to the Samaritan woman at the well, and to the formerly blind beggar near the Pool of Siloam, Jesus again reveals who he truly is, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Then, the Lord asks Martha, and us, "Do you believe this?"

Can we say with Martha, as we stand there with her, "Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."?

Just like the Samaritan woman; just like the once-blind beggar, on seeing Jesus for who he really is to her, Martha can't keep it to herself, she has to go to her sister Mary, and bring her to Jesus. Why don't we do more of that? What is preventing us from telling those whom we love who Jesus has become to us, and seek to bring them to him, as Martha brought Mary?

Mary comes to Jesus, falls on her knees before him, crying her heart out. Seeing her heartbreak and that of their friends, Jesus can't take it. The disciple tells us, "When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled...and Jesus wept."

It's so awesome! Knowing when we're in trouble; when our hearts are breaking; when we feel terrible loss and inconsolable pain, Jesus cries with us. He bears with us our unbearable sorrows. He truly is a compassionate God, that is, the God who suffers with us.

But this suffering, this terrible loss, this heartbreak is too close. He loves these people too much. They've meant too much to him for too long, so Jesus decides, "Take away the stone."

He does that for us too, a lot of times, because he loves us as much as he loves Lazarus and Martha and Mary. How many times has he shouted out for us, "Take away the stone of an angry heart. Take away the stone of a mean spirit. Take away the stone of resentment. Take away the stone of addiction. Take away the stone of lust. Take away the stone of self-righteousness. Take away the stone of prejudice."

And we resist, as Martha resisted, “Lord, by now there will be a stench.” But Jesus assures us, as he assured Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?” Sure, it’ll stink removing those stones that have kept us buried in darkness for so long, but how else will the glory of God that is within us be revealed?

Then, Jesus cries out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” He cries out to us too, “Come out of that anger! Come out of that mean spirit! Come out of that resentment! Come out of that addiction! Come out of that lust! Come out of that prejudice! Or come out of whatever grave that you’ve allowed yourself to be buried in! COME OUT!

Then, finally Jesus says, “Untie him and let him go.”

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, that job is the one that Jesus is giving to us to do. This is what we are to do as His Church. When we see people struggling to change; trying to overcome their past faults or failures; walking unsteadily out of the graves that perhaps they have dug for themselves, it is our job to “untie them and let them go”. That means we have to reach out to people we see who are in trouble, not avoid them. We sometimes even have to listen to contentious people who want to complain about an ex-spouse. We have to gently help remove the angers and resentments; the prejudices and hurts; the addictions and the failures that caused them to bury themselves in the first place. When we gently and compassionately help untie those things that bind people coming out of darkness into the light, like those who had come to be with Mary and Martha, many whom we untie will come to believe in Him too.