

## **A Note About the Message, “The Road to Bethany”**

Please be prepared that this morning’s message focuses on our walk with God, grief, and grieving.

The biblical lesson from John 11 highlights the story of Jesus Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. In midst of the miracle of life and life everlasting, we witness the tale of Christ’s interaction with Martha, sister of Lazarus, grieving his death and her loss. We overhear Martha as she confronts God and expresses herself.

*“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.” (John 11: 20-23)*

Know this, my friends: as we journey along the roads we travel, where there is sorrow, there is holy ground; where there is holy ground, God is nigh. May Christ’s sanctuary be holy ground this and every Sunday. May we be welcomed as we are, with our grief, our anger, our tender places, into a safe, sacred space where we gather together, hold each other up, and practice authentic, deep listening to God and one another.

*Shalom, James*

### **“The Road to Bethany”**

Lent 2019 Worship Series: The Roads We Travel  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Lent, Sunday, April 7, 2019  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

### **Holy Scriptures: John 11: 17-27**

John 11:17-27 (NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup> She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

## What the Preacher Said

When Bethany Becknell stayed home from church with a sick child,  
she live-steamed the worship service [on her computer].  
The pastor spoke of how depersonalized our lives have become  
and said one doesn't even need to go to a store to shop;  
instead one can say, *"Alexa, order toilet paper."*  
Bethany Becknell heard a voice from her bedroom—her Amazon Echo speaker—  
saying, *"Okay, I've added it to your cart."* [\[1\]](#)

## What the Bible Said

Our lesson from the Gospel of John highlights the miracle  
of Jesus Christ raising Lazarus four days after was dead and buried.  
Right before we get to celebrate the miracle of life and life everlasting,  
we witness the tale of Christ's interaction with Martha,  
who is the sister of Lazarus and Mary.  
Martha is grieving his death and her loss.  
We overhear Martha as she confronts God and expresses herself.  
*"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.'" (John 11: 20-23)*

Before we dig into this very human, very divine interaction,  
let's put the passage in perspective.  
Today's Bible passage from John 11 is what may be called a highwater mark.

There are 5 highwater marks in the Gospel of John. [\[2\]](#)  
According to that ultimate authority on factual accuracy, Wikipedia,  
*"a highwater mark is a point  
that represents the maximum rise of a body of water over land.  
Such a mark is often the result of a flood,  
but highwater marks may reflect an all-time high, an annual high  
or the high point for some other division of time."* –Wikipedia

Speaking spiritually and biblically,  
in the Gospel of John there are 5 highwater marks, 5 conversations, 5  
experiences

when Jesus Christ's ministry is  
initiated, identified, defined, clarified, and proclaimed.

At the Wedding in Cana, in John, Chapter 2,  
mother Mary inspires her son Jesus

to initiate his earthly ministry of grace,  
inspiring him to turn water into wine.

“Do whatever he tells you to do,” says Mary.

At Jacob’s Well in Samaria, in John, Chapter 4,

a woman drawing water draws Jesus into a conversation  
about the coming Messiah, to which He boldly responds,  
“I am he, I who am speaking to you now.”

At Bethany, on the road at the outskirts of town, in the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John,

Martha, filled with grief she pours out in her anger and loss and sadness,  
confronts Jesus about the absence of God.

Jesus consoles Martha, telling her Lazarus will rise again.

Martha then defines the mission of Jesus of Nazareth.

“I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God,” she says,  
“the one coming into the world.”

Also at Bethany, just before the Passover festival as described in Chapter 12 of John,

Martha and the risen Lazarus are present with the disciples  
when their sister Mary broke the seal  
and poured expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus.

The fragrance filled the room.

There were immediate protests, calling it a waste.

Yet Jesus rebuked them.

He praised Mary’s act of discipleship and worship.

He reminded them, “You will not always have me.”

Just as Mary clarified Jesus’ ministry of service above self,

at Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus Himself took a basin of water and a towel  
and washed the feet of His followers,  
modelling discipleship and worship.

The fifth highwater mark, in John 20, finds Mary at the tomb, weeping.

The stone had been rolled away; Jesus’ body was gone.

A man she supposed was the gardener approached her.

She asked where the body was, and he said her name, “Mary!”

“Rabbuni!” she said.

“Go,” said Jesus, “...tell them that I am now ascending...to my God and your God.”

Mary of Magdala went to the disciples [to proclaim] her news: “I have seen the Lord!”

This we witness how Jesus Christ’s ministry is

initiated, identified, defined, clarified, and proclaimed.

We note that the 5 highwater marks are all personal;

they all reflect heartfelt conversations, personal conversions,  
and the breaking down of long-held conventions;

they all involve people who push and pull Jesus into living into His true calling,  
just as we witness God in Christ transforming the lives of the women;

and yes, the 5 highwater marks all involve women,

women of various backgrounds, ages, stage of life;

women whom Jesus respects and recognizes;

women received as pioneers in God’s saving activity.

## What Martha Said

Clearly today's lesson from the Gospel of John stands in tall cotton,  
as we say in the south.

As well it should.

*"When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him..."*

We imagine determination in her steps, tears in her eyes, anger in her tone of voice.  
*Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."*

Like Jesus, let's meet Martha where she is, without judgment, with grace;  
without responding defensively, or turning away, or adding fuel to the fire,  
responding instead with a compassionate, consoling presence.

We observe that Jesus acknowledged her grieving soul.

God acknowledges our grief.

Grief is a gift of God.

Grief is good.

There is such a thing, a feeling, an experience of good grief.

Grief is a reminder that we are alive.

Grief helps us to remember,  
to remember who we are and whose we are,  
to remember the sacred memories  
of our beloved who are dearly departed.

Grief is good,  
helping us to contend with the losses we have in life,  
to live with loss,  
to welcome in hope,  
to welcome in one another,  
to welcome in God's grace,  
which is sufficient for this and every need.

Grieving is often akin to standing barefoot on a sandy shore.

The waves roll in and tickle your toes, then return to cover your feet.

The waves recede and then return.

Sometimes the waves of grief wash over us, soaking us from head to toe,  
and the salt water mixes with the saltiness of our tears  
until who knows where one begins...

And when the waves recede, we pause to reflect, to take stock of our souls.

Let it be.

Be in the moment when the waves of grief roll in  
and when there is a pause, a respite.

These are God moments, for the Lord is with you.

Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground.

The scriptures mercifully speak to our situations:

*"God will wipe away every tear."*

We do not suffer alone;  
we do not long for our loved ones alone;  
we do not miss their touch or smiles or presence alone.

God and God's people are with you.  
At some point a well-meaning soul may say to you,  
    "It's been a day, a week, a year, ten years. Why do you still grieve?"  
And they may add my least favorite phrase, "Get over it."  
Remember this, my friends.  
There is no statute of limitations on grief and grieving.  
Closure is a myth.<sup>[3]</sup>  
There is no such thing.  
Human beings live with grief; we don't have to get over it.  
There's no ticker-tape parade because you've finished the journey of grief;  
    no confetti, no gold watch and retirement party,  
    no "and then I will be happy and over my grief."  
Rather than an ending, there are oscillations, ups and downs, ins and outs,  
    that may grow closer or grow further apart,  
    yet are still there, ever-present in our memories and hearts,  
    keeping us connected with Who and Whose we are.  
Grief is a gift of God.  
Grief is a reminder that we are alive.  
Grief helps us to remember, to commune with the holy.  
Jesus connected gently, honestly, patiently with Martha,  
    whose grief and anger and pain were so close to the surface.  
He guided her to live into a faith-informed place, a safe place,  
    to be present with God in holy ground.

When my father, George E. Calvert, passed away in 2005,  
    my father in law, Betty's dad, Don Brewer,  
    pulled me aside and told me a story.  
Don said that when his father died,  
    an elder from the Christian Church pulled him aside and said,  
    *"There will be times when you wish you could sit on a log  
    and have a heart-to-heart with your dad. You still can."*  
Don told me that he has found that to be true, and now so have I.  
George and I have met, in holy ground, me living in sorrow and he an ever-living soul.  
There have been special times when George and I communicated,  
    whether in dreams, in prayer, in the midst of an activity we had shared,  
    when the waves rolled in and he was in the salty water.  
Last Sunday night, Dad came to me in a dream, so happy, so happy.  
In the morning I learned that his great-grandson Jack was born into this world.  
A soul in life everlasting danced with joy at the birth of new life on earth.  
We can commune with angels.  
What a blessed gift!

And whenever our grief explodes at God and Creation or any handy target,  
    bursting outward or inward in vivid expressions  
    of anger or hurt, shame or despair,  
    God can take it, and sometimes we can, too.

## What the Kubler-Ross, Frances Weller and Dr. King Said

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross did the world a service  
when she identified five stages of coping with terminal illness.  
They also help to identify stages of living with loss:

*Denial*  
*Anger*  
*Bargaining*  
*Depression*  
*Acceptance*

Denial – This isn't happening. Shock. Disbelief. There must be some mistake.  
Anger – Emotions explode outward or tear us up inside. This is so unfair. Why me?  
Bargaining – A temporary truce. What do I have to do to reverse fortune? "If only..."  
Depression – Intense sadness. Public manifestation of inner pain. I feel so damn alone.  
Acceptance – Letting go. Moving forward. Seeing changes created in the process.  
Accepting help. Accepting hope. Accepting healing.

A common myth about the 5 Stages of Grief  
is that we go through each one, in a row, one at a time, like clockwork,  
then arrive at last at the place of Acceptance,  
where all is well, move yourself directly to Go, collect \$200.  
Fact is, we may go through one, or two, or more stages;  
we may go back and forth between stages;  
we may dance with acceptance then slip back into an earlier stage.  
Furthermore, there are other stages Elizabeth Kubler-Ross didn't mention  
that are equally valid, equally real.  
Guilt. Shame. Stress. Anxiety. Forgetfulness.  
And Joy. Hope. Falling in love again with the one's we loved and lost.  
And in each stage, in each very real moment, there is God.

And maybe that is why Martha stormed out,  
hellbent to meet Jesus on the road to Bethany.  
She was going to give him a piece of her mind,  
and she was looking for peace, peace of mind.  
"Grief has never been private; it has always been communal," said Frances Weller.  
"Subconsciously, we are awaiting the presence of others,  
before we can feel safe enough  
to drop to our knees on the holy ground of sorrow." [\[4\]](#)  
"We suffer together. We are intervulnerable.  
As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, we are all connected  
in an "inescapable web of mutuality."  
In our intervulnerability is our salvation..." [\[5\]](#)

## What the Preacher Said

At the cemetery in the circle around the grave was a family with five children.  
The kids were elementary age and younger.  
Their eyes were locked on the casket and on the open hole in the soil and on me,  
on the bright robe and festive stole and they appeared to listen to the eulogy.  
They were taking in everything they could  
from the communal celebration of God's gift of life and life after death.  
When the liturgy was over,  
I made it a point to seek out the family.  
I asked the parents for permission to speak with their children, which they gave.  
I knelt down on the green grass to get on their eye level.

"It is so good that you are here today," I said.  
"Children should be at funerals.  
When I was your age my little sister died of sudden infant death syndrome.  
As sad as I was, and as sad my whole family felt,  
my parents taught me about how much God loves us,  
that God loves us so much  
we are raised to life everlasting after we pass away.  
My parents said that my sister Carol was in heaven forever  
and was whole and complete;  
she lives forever with God and all those who have passed on before us."

And then I told them that after her funeral  
I felt so comfortable talking about life after death  
that sometimes I helped my friends when they lost loved ones.  
Over time that gift of helping people became, for me,  
a vocation, a calling, a lifelong ministry of comforting people  
in times of need or sadness or loneliness.  
So, I said, it is good for children to be here, in a cemetery, at a graveside service,  
and maybe if you found some comfort in your sadness  
now you know how you can comfort a friend who feels sad.'

When I stood up after kneeling on the grass  
my knees cracked, really loudly,  
so who knows what they'll remember most."

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

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<sup>[1]</sup> Reuters News Service, published in Christian Century, March 27, 2019, Page 9.

<sup>[2]</sup> "5 Highwater Marks in John" are from my notes taken during a Bible study conversation with the Rev. Dr. David Jordan, Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church of

Decatur, GA. This is a subject my colleague covers in his book Approaching the Presence (co-authored with Diane Jordan, 2016).

<sup>[3]</sup> Pauline Boss, "The Myth of Closure" National Public Radio, Krista Tippett.

<sup>[4]</sup> Frances Weller, The Wild Edge of Sorrow, 2015. P. 74.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid, quoting Miriam Greenspan. P. 74.