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“I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you” (John 11:22).

Earlier this month (July 21), we were introduced by Luke (10:38-42) to Martha and Mary, sisters who welcomed Jesus into their home. We return today to celebrate Martha in a different setting and in John’s Gospel, when she goes out to greet Jesus as he arrives in Bethany after the death of her brother, Lazarus. Martha is again in charge of hospitality while Mary remains at the house with others mourning her brother.

Both sisters will confront Jesus for delaying to come and save Lazarus. “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But Martha immediately professes her faith that God will do whatever Jesus asks. Jesus tells her that her brother will rise again. Martha affirms her faith in the resurrection on the last day, and Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life.” This is one of the final signs in the Gospel of John that identifies Jesus as I AM, the name of God Moses heard from the burning bush. Jesus is divine and has power over life and death.

This Gospel is used at many funerals because of its explicit affirmation of the resurrection. It also shows us Jesus’ human grief at the death of his friend. When he goes to the tomb, he weeps before raising Lazarus. As the tomb is being opened, the ever practical Martha tells Jesus that the body is already in decay. “There will be a stench.”

The account is remarkable for its realism about death, grief and the enormous leap of faith required to believe in resurrection in the presence of a corpse. Yet, this is the threshold of the deepest claim Christianity makes about God, Jesus and our hopes for life beyond death. Martha serves this threshold to real faith in much the same way that Thomas represents us in the upper room on Easter by expressing his doubts and demanding proof that Jesus was really alive after the crucifixion.

Martha, Mary, Lazarus and Thomas are all key witnesses in John's Gospel that the resurrection rests on more than physical proof, but rather on an encounter with the divine I AM, the Lord of Life. Physical death will come for all of us, as it did for Lazarus a second time and even for Jesus on the cross. Resurrection is more than restored physical life. It is transformation by love that makes us new beings in Christ.

St. Martha is the patroness of hospitality. She never stopped welcoming Jesus into her home, her relationships and into her heart. We are called to the same openness, trusting that in times of faith or doubt, joy or grief, life or death, Jesus will always be there to raise us up because he loves us.

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