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“Do you believe this?” Jesus asked her” (John 11:27).

St. Martha

Jer 15:10, 16-21; John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

The figure of Martha is an evolving presence in the Gospels. She first appears in Luke when she and her sister, Mary, welcome Jesus to their house. She provides hospitality by preparing a meal, while Mary welcomes Jesus by sitting at his feet to listen to him. Jesus praises Mary for choosing the better part, prompting us to wonder if he went hungry that day.

The story is a stock setting for a familiar adage about spiritual things being superior to material things. The common wisdom is that both are necessary. Like other stories involving two choices or examples, we are both Martha and Mary, we are both Pharisee and Publican, saint and sinner.

Martha reappears in the fourth Gospel, still the practical one, but now she and Mary have a brother named Lazarus, whose resuscitation is the final sign in the Book of Signs that reveals Jesus as I AM, the sacred name of God. Martha sets the scene for the miracle by making it graphically clear that Lazarus is dead when she tells Jesus his corpse will smell when they remove the stone from the tomb.

The story reminds us of another faith encounter later in the Gospel. Martha is like Thomas, who approaches the resurrection with the same earthiness that grounds

their faith. "I want to touch his wounds, put my hand in his side." Martha proclaims that the dead will rise from their tombs at the call of Jesus. Thomas proclaims that the crucified Jesus who died on the cross is the glorified Christ who appeared to the women and the Apostles.

We celebrate Martha because, like Thomas, she is among the witnesses to Jesus. She was struggling with the loss of her brother when she affirmed her faith in Jesus. "Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God." Thomas asked the hard questions and demanded proof, and then he proclaimed, "My Lord and my God" before the Mystery of the risen Christ.

Most if not all of us will have our share of funerals to work our way through these questions of faith before we come to our own experience of death. Not simply the stories, but the believers who have gone before us with names like Martha and Thomas, or the names of our own beloved dead in our own cloud of witnesses. It is this community that grounds us in faith, not only within our own circle and generation, but going back to the first believers who staked everything on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus as the promise of eternal life.

We believe that we shall see our beloved dead face to face in the world to come, the great reunion of love when every tear shall be wiped away. The scriptures invite us to imagine that every Eucharist we receive here on earth is a pledge of future glory and the invitation to an eternal banquet. If Mary is in charge, we know there will be plenty of holy talk, and if Martha is on duty, we know there will be a great meal.