



“Blind Spots”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 21: 1-11; John 11: 28-37

March 29, 2026 – Palm Sunday

As many of you know, we have spent this Lenten season exploring a series of encounters between individuals and Jesus, focused primarily on a handful of moments that take place in the Gospel According to John. We looked at Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the blind man who was healed, and others. Each week we had a Wednesday discussion about an encounter that we would then explore on the coming Sunday. Today, however, I actually want to do a bit of a revisit, as we go back and look again, through another lens, at the encounter between Mary and Martha and Jesus upon the death of their brother, Lazarus.

I don't want to spend inordinate time going through the entirety of the story, as Rick led us through it in a creative way last Sunday. But, I do want to take us back into that narrative. John tells us that Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that Lazarus is dying, but that Jesus doesn't exactly rush over to see him. Jesus seems to take his time getting to Bethany and when he finally arrives, Lazarus has already been dead for four days. As he approaches the town, Martha comes rushing out of the house, runs towards Jesus, and proclaims, "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." There's an exchange that follows in which Jesus speaks of himself as 'the resurrection and the life,' but what I want to draw our attention to is the manner in which Martha approaches 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."

Now, it's not explicitly stated, but we have every reason to believe that the Mary and Martha of this story are the same Mary and Martha from the story in Luke's gospel in which Martha is bustling around trying to be the preeminent hostess while Mary simply sits at the feet of Jesus and takes in all that he has to say. So, assuming these are the same two women, it's not exactly surprise that Martha is the one who comes running out of the house with a desire to 'fix' things. "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Martha's approach to Jesus is one filled with faith, but also filled with an anticipated resolution to the problem at hand. Martha runs to Jesus because she is convinced that Jesus can make things better! Then, after Martha shares this exchange with Jesus, John tells us that she goes back to get her sister.

We pick up the story, here, in verse 28 of John 11.

When [Martha] had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31 The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

When we explored this encounter in our weekly Bible discussions, one of the things we considered was the question of what hope looks like in grief. I was compelled, in considering that question, by the two similar (and yet at the same time distinct) comments that these sisters bring to Jesus upon the death of their brother. On the one hand we have Martha – that bustling doer – who rushes to Jesus not only with the proclamation of faith that Jesus could have prevented that death, but also that deep desire to do something about it. To fix things. To resolve the situation. To make it all better. On the other hand we have Mary – the one who in Luke’s story simply rested in the wondrous presence of Jesus in her home – who comes with the grief, the sorrow, and the faith – but without the ‘and we can still do something about it’ that Martha adds to the mix. I was compelled by those two moments because I think that together they reflect what hope looks like in grief – that hope looks like coming to God with the depths of our pain and sorrow, and at the same time trusting in God that the pain and sorrow we know is not the end of the story to be written. I was compelled by those two moments because I think that together they reflect so much of our human experience of navigating the trials of life as children of God. And, I was compelled by those two moments because I am convinced that so many of those who gathered on the streets as Jesus entered Jerusalem that day were, in their own ways, in that very same place!

When we read these Palm Sunday stories of Jesus riding into Jerusalem in this parade-like atmosphere of people shouting their praises, throwing their cloaks on the ground to pave his way and waving their palm branches in rejoicing, we get these images of the exuberance of crowd, the energy of the moment, and glories unfolding as Jesus made his way into town. One of those things we often overlook, however – and we’ve talked about this in the past – is that the vast majority of those who came rushing out of their homes and workplaces to be a part of this jubilation were not people who had experienced, or in many cases even witnessed, the miraculous things that Jesus had done up to this point.

No doubt there were a few there who had perhaps been healed by Jesus, or had seen such things take place. Very few of Jesus’ miracles, however, actually occurred in Jerusalem. A few had happened throughout the region, but the vast majority had taken place in Galilee, some 75-100 miles away – which at the time would have been a 4-5 day journey. Jerusalem wasn’t filled with people rejoicing because of what Jesus had already done for them – it was filled with people rejoicing in what they’d heard he could do, and what he might do for them. Those people on the

streets weren't simply celebrating the wonders Jesus had performed – they were leaning into the hope of what was this could yet mean for them!

We don't know the circumstances of those people gathering on the streets that day. Some were, clearly, disciples who had been travelling with Jesus and had an insider's view as to what had taken place. There were likely a few who'd been in other places of Jesus' ministry previously. Most, however, were those who had simply heard stories through the proverbial grapevine and were gathering on those streets because they had challenges of their own. There were, no doubt, those with illness and disease who'd heard of others who'd been healed. There were those who had been cast out by society who knew tales of Jesus welcoming those unwanted by the rest of the world. There were undoubtedly those whose errant ways drew them to the stories of grace and welcome by this teacher from Nazareth. There were those who had seen much, and most certainly those who knew little but were just caught up in the frenzy of it all. In the midst of all of that, however, there are countless faceless individuals who were shouting those hosannas because they were having their own Mary/Martha moments. There were all sorts of people in that crowd who knew grief – who knew strife – who knew pain – and who were drawn into that presence of Jesus with that two-fold sensibility of owning the pain that we know while clinging to the hope of the yet to be realized promises of God's providence in our lives. But it's right there, in the waiting, that we encounter the catch of that moment of hope!

There's a moment at the end of that passage we shared from John, as Jesus weeps over the death of Lazarus, in which some onlookers say, "*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*" The truth is that it is difficult to divorce our hope from our expectation. It is hard for us to cling to the hope of what is yet to come in and through God's providence without also succumbing to the human tendency to try to dictate what that ought to look like. Those onlookers see Jesus weeping over the death of his friend, and because the resolution to the problem isn't coming in the time and manner they expect, their reaction is to question the power of Jesus as a whole. As soon as Jesus' response doesn't fit their anticipated framework, they become dubious about it all. Their expectation trumps their hope, and their hope is lost.

That, I want to suggest, is the power of those encounters of Mary and Martha – the power of the jubilation that surrounded Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem that day. There was undeniable grief and sorrow for Mary and Martha, and there was undoubtedly strife and pain that embroiled many who were waving those palm branches that day, and there is no question that they all would have hoped/wanted/expected things to be different. Mary and Martha most certainly thought Jesus could/should/would have been there sooner that their brother would not have died. But, still, they were able to lean into the hope beyond expectation. They were able to own the strife and sorrow of the moment and cling to hope and promise of what could be, without allowing their delineation of what and when that resolution should be to overtake that hope. They were able to come to Jesus in pain and to claim the promise of God at work in their lives, without reaching that point of lost hope that inevitably comes when we start expecting the form that God's providence should take in our days.

When we explored that question of what hope looks like in the face of grief, I was taken by that shared sensibility of Mary and Martha of coming truthfully before God with the pain that they

knew while clinging to the hope that such pain was not the end of the story – even when that story had gone well beyond the point of their expectation. In grief, in struggle, in loss, in illness, in the plethora of life’s challenges, that is what hope looks like – turning to God with the honest truth of our pain and the hopeful anticipation of what is still to come, without succumbing to that human tendency in which our expectation so quickly trumps our hope.

The power of that moment for Mary and Martha – the wonder of that jubilation on the side of the road as Jesus entered Jerusalem – is that people clung to a hope that sat apart from their expectation. People clung to a hope that, even though they knew not what was to come, or when, they knew that God was entering into the scene, and that was enough!