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**Summer Preaching Series:**  
*Characters of the Bible*  
**Mary, Martha &  
Lazarus of Bethany**

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

August 19, 2018  
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018-08-19-AAA.mp3>

# Summer Preaching Series

## *Characters of the Bible: Mary, Martha, & Lazarus of Bethany*

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12  
Psalm 36:5-10

Romans 12:9-13  
John 11:1-7, 17-44

Earlier this week, the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, passed away. Tributes to Ms. Franklin describe her as one of the greatest voices of our time. Her music makes us feel something. It moves us. It takes us on a journey. This is especially true of her version of the gospel song, "Mary, Don't You Weep." Released in 1972 on Franklin's album, *Amazing Grace*, "Mary, Don't You Weep," recounts God's faithfulness and saving help by telling the story we just heard in our gospel account, the story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. I want you to hear a snippet of "Mary, Don't You Weep" now. In its entirety, the song is over 7 minutes long. We'll listen to 1 minute together. (*"MARY DON'T YOU WEEP" 3:30-4:50*)

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." These are words that both Mary and Martha say to Jesus in today's gospel reading. In fact, they are the first words out of each woman's mouths in the Gospel text. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Aretha's voice, singing these words, makes us feel the sisters' sorrow at their brother's death and brings life to the trust that the women placed in Jesus. These words are a declaration of faith. They are words of truth, conviction, and belief. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They are bold words of desperation and challenge. They are words that could only be uttered by someone close to Jesus, someone who trusted him and knew him well.

Mary and Martha were those kind of people. So was Lazarus. These siblings from the Judean town of Bethany were followers of Jesus, and they were more than that. They were his friends. The text declares, "...Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (Jn. 11:5). These siblings, who Jesus loved, are the focus of my sermon this morning as our summer preaching series, *Characters of the Bible*, continues.

This story is the first time the siblings appear in John's gospel, but it's not the last. They take center stage again six days before Jesus' crucifixion. Before entering the city of Jerusalem, Jesus stopped at the siblings' home in Bethany, just east of the Holy City, to share a meal. At this meal, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. The act was an extravagant gesture of Mary's love, and by extension, each of the siblings' love for Jesus. In the face of his impending death in less than a week, Jesus found solace and strength in the love of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

These are the only two times the siblings are mentioned in John's gospel. The sisters, without Lazarus, are mentioned in Luke's gospel once in chapter 10. In this story, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home and waits on him while Mary sits at his feet and listens to him teach. Martha asks Jesus to direct Mary to assist her, Jesus does not, but rather tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part by listening to him and it will not be taken from her.

In each of their scriptural appearances, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, offer Jesus friendship and all that friendship entails from hospitality and respite to candor and challenge. Today's gospel reading is usually thought of as the raising of Lazarus, but Jesus' raising of Lazarus actually occupies a very small part of the story. Of the 34 verses that constitute this story, only 7 of them, that's just  $\frac{1}{4}$ , take place at Lazarus' tomb. "The miracle of the raising of Lazarus is the climax of the story, but it is not its center."<sup>1</sup> The story centers on the conversations Jesus has as he travels to Lazarus' tomb with Mary and Martha.

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<sup>1</sup> *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 386.

In these conversations, the women confront Jesus about his absence. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And Martha confesses Jesus as the Son of God. Other gospels place these words in the mouth of Peter. John places them in Martha’s. The sisters know the truth of who Jesus is. They love him. He loves them. It is through this love and friendship that is not afraid to confront and to confess the truth, that the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection comes about. “Come out,” Jesus calls to Lazarus. Martha and Mary essentially say the same thing to Jesus. Come out to us. Help us. You are the Christ. Save us from the power that death has over us. Give us the power of life.

Our first reading from Ecclesiastes states, “A threefold chord is not quickly broken” (Ec. 4:12). Friends buoy us up. They keep us strong. They make us better people through their love for us and in the ways they challenge us. This kind of friendship is not a surface level relationship. It goes deeper than that. It’s not the kind of relationship where you get together with someone and shoot the breeze. While that is part of friendship, the kind of friendship that Jesus and the siblings from Bethany had, went deeper. It was life giving - both figuratively and literally.

In her commentary on Martha and Jesus, biblical scholar Ardy Bass comments, “Friends have influence over one another through discussion and disagreement. Friends hold each other accountable for their actions. They respect and accept each other, yet they are not afraid to confront each other when the need arises. Friends depend on one another for support in times of crisis, whether emotional or material. Friendship is a relationship of trust, confidence, and intimacy.”<sup>2</sup> Mary, Martha and Lazarus were those kind of friends to Jesus. Jesus was that kind of friend to them.

Who has provided that kind of friendship in your life? Who has loved you and supported you? Who has challenged you? Who has held you accountable? Who has spoken a truth about you that you needed to hear? Who has brought new life to you? Who has offered you respite and hospitality? Take a moment to think about that person or persons. Hold them in your mind and in your heart before God in thanksgiving for their friendship.

This kind of deep friendship is crucial for our health and wellbeing. It can also be beneficial for our faith lives. Friends who share our faith, friends who believe in God, and are willing to share their faith journeys with us, help us to grow in our faith. I’m curious if for you, when I asked those questions a moment ago, if anyone from Grace Church came to mind as a special friend in your life. Grace is a place where we come to worship God and to get spiritually fed to do God’s work in our daily lives. It is also a place where we find support and friendship – meaningful relationships that help us grow. This program year at Grace will center on the theme of friendship and fellowship. We will offer opportunities, like shared meals and small groups – where we can get to know one another better. There will be opportunities, should you want to, to go a little deeper and build the type of life-giving friendships that Jesus and the siblings of Bethany had.

“Two are better than one,” Ecclesiastes tells us, “two have a good reward for their toil.” Two can help one another and keep each other warm. Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus provided that kind of friendship for one another. God calls us to be that kind of friend.

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<sup>2</sup> “Martha and Jesus,” by Ardy Bass, published in *The Bible Today*, 32, March 1994, p. 90-94.