

St Brandon's, Sermon for 22nd March 2026

Ezekial 37.1-14, John 11:1-45

Rehearsal for the Passion

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Today we start Passiontide, the fortnight lead-in to Easter. We hear more, and longer scripture, than at any other time of the church year, not to make the last two weeks of Lent extra pious but because it is imperative that we hear again, and dwell on, the story of our Lord's passion. I counted up the chapters given to the passion story in each gospel and reckon it occupies between a fifth and a quarter of Mark, Luke and Matthew, in that order, and a over half of the gospel of John. Hence we hear more of John's gospel at this time of year than in any other season.

In today's gospel reading, the passage from John tells how Jesus sees opportunity to reveal his divine identity to those closest to him. Time is running out, as the disciples point out, he has just escaped an attempt to stone him to death. He needs to do all he can to ensure that the **truth** can be reliably told in the wake of his death. With so much political and temple power against him, the truth is not going to be the story the authorities put out. He needs reliable followers to see indisputable evidence of him being The One sent from God, so they can witness to the truth and help make sense of what he knows is going to be fast-moving and world-changing. A flashpoint in history that will be subverted and suppressed by the dark forces at play in the world if the light of belief is not well and truly lit while he is still here in person.

So, Jesus decides to wait two days before going to the sisters, whom he loves, to make sure that their brother Lazarus is well and truly dead and buried. I wonder what that waiting was like for Jesus? Was he restless in his heart? Or deep in prayer, letting the Father decide the timing and what he needed?

Jesus doesn't share his plans with his disciples until immediately before the moment for departure. The disciples protest that Judea means danger, they are confused, reluctant, then Thomas's love for Jesus makes him rally them to all go with Jesus to death.

I wonder what the waiting was like for Martha and for Mary? It is evident from their comments that they knew he hadn't set off on receiving the message, it wasn't all travelling time that delayed him. They have had two days of anticipating his arrival. When word at last comes that he is near, Martha goes to meet him but Mary stays put.

Martha's conversation shows a remarkable confidence in Jesus' relationship with God – that God will give whatever Jesus asks of him. She believes Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. Their exchange is, perhaps, what Jesus wants and needs to hear at this stage, however, with no point of reference, no illustration of what Jesus means when he tells her, "***I am the resurrection and the life***", how can she begin to understand what he offers as Messiah, the sort of life and death to which he is referring?

Martha went to meet Jesus '*while Mary stayed at home*'.

To me, the phrasing doesn't suggest Mary was unaware of Jesus' approach, so why did she stay at home? Was it to give Martha privacy? To remain politely with the gathered, supporting mourners? Or did she *choose* to stay put?

When Martha returns and tells Mary privately that the Teacher is calling for her, that is a powerful and personal invitation, and one to which Mary quickly responds, whatever she is feeling towards him.

She goes to him, still waiting discreetly beyond the village, and kneels at his feet: the posture of beseeching, of worship, of humility. Her opening sentence is the same as Martha's, but whilst Martha had immediately followed her statement with a recognition that Jesus could still ask God for something and get it, Mary's sentence comes differently. Mary's single, desolate sentence comes from a place of pain and hurt, puzzlement, maybe. Or, perhaps there is even an edge of accusation and challenge: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" And the tears flood from her. These are the wrenched tears of new and raw grief, the place of questioning and disbelief, 'Why? Why did this have to happen?'

Jesus is seeing and hearing the pain he has had to cause his dear friend by his intentional and unexplained dallying. And it hurts, disturbs and moves him to tears also. He cannot yet explain himself.

I may be reading too much into the scarcity of exchange reported between Mary and Jesus but being convinced of her love, her devotion to her Teacher, her pained reticence suggests to me that her hurt might have included a sense of betrayal by Jesus. If Jesus truly loved them, how could he have forgotten them in their hour of need? How could he have neglected to respond with urgency to their urgent and explicit summons?

The reaction of the grieving supporters echoes this: *“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”* But Jesus’ tears and evident distress – he was greatly disturbed in spirit – point to the real depth of his real love for this family.

It is the grieving supporters that take Jesus to the tomb of Lazarus where Martha is waiting, but where is Mary? She is not explicitly mentioned again. Did she go with Jesus and the supporters? Did she follow behind? Was she present? The raising of her brother to life, certainly impacted her with the absolute conviction of Jesus’ true divine status, because soon after, six days before that last supper of Passover, she anoints Jesus’s feet with costly naird. Shockingly, she wipes his feet with her hair. What are we to derive from that? That she is perhaps the first to testify from a place of first-hand knowledge that he is the author of life, the source of all loving forgiveness, and the divine king in waiting? I imagine it quite likely, that on meeting Jesus with eyes veiled with tears on that day he would raise Lazarus, Jesus would have greeted her by name: “Mary”, and she reply, “Rabouni”, that means Teacher. Echoes of the first disciple who will witness the resurrected Christ: Mary Magdalene, at his tomb.

What I am leading to in this reflection, is the suggestion that this reading, this whole episode in Bethany is like a rehearsal for the events of Holy Week, as we call it. It is the passion narrative in parallel, a foreshadowing that will help embed the events of Holy Week in the disciples and followers’ memory, adding perspective and weight as they grapple to understand the events of Easter.

As I hear it, this Bethany episode starts with Jesus knowing that he is to do something counter-cultural to reveal God's glory, and God's glory in him.

Something that is going to put him in danger of his life (and does indeed hasten his end).

Something so dangerous that the disciples think twice about the risk and cost of associating with him.

An episode in which he sees and feels the price and burden of betrayal by one who once loved.

These are the ingredients of Maundy Thursday and the last supper.

The fear he will face for his own mortality, as he accepts the cup he must drink: the events of Good Friday.

The helpless, hopeless, bleakness of grief that comes in the wake of death: real, stinking deadness. That is the suspense of life and hope that Jesus must somehow prepare his disciples to trust and wait through. The deadness of the Saturday.

Then, of course, the astonishing ability of God to breathe life back into Lazarus. The mirroring of Ezekial's vision of preaching to the dead, bleached bones and seeing them fill with the life-giving breath of the Spirit.

Except that Lazarus is returned to human life – he will die in his latter years as we all do. Jesus, now revealing fully his true identity as the Son of God, divine and fully human will die – really die as much as Lazarus has – but God will raise him straight to the new life that is the final resurrection promised to us. This is the life that never dies. The life that we get glimpses of even here on earth when for brief moments we are somehow connected to heaven, are Spirit led and Spirit filled.

Here begins Passiontide. Don't skip over it, jumping from Palm Sunday straight to Easter Day. Pain and love go hand in hand. Feel the cost of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, the deadness of Saturday, to know the priceless value of resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Amen