

March 26, Lent 5A, (John 11:1-45)

Martha hears Jesus' promise, but she has a brother whose body is starting to decay.

by [Lynn Jost](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue

Lauren winner tells the story of 12-year-old Julian, who told her father, a pastor, that she couldn't go forward with confirmation because she wasn't sure she could promise to believe everything she was supposed to believe forever. Her father replied, "What you promise when you are confirmed is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise is that this is the story you will wrestle with forever."

There's plenty to wrestle with in John's story of raising Lazarus. How reassuring to be able to wrestle with this story alongside the formidable Martha. I'm with Martha when she scolds Jesus for delaying arrival until it's too late to heal her brother. Even with the extra knowledge I have as a reader, I'm not convinced the delay will glorify God. My faith isn't as strong as Martha's when she says, "Even now I know . . ."

Jesus' bold "I AM" statement here is the most powerful in the Gospel. It's the boldest, farthest-reaching of any promise in John. The claim "I am the resurrection and the life" reflects Jesus' intimate relationship with God. The statement declares Jesus' authority existentially and eschatologically over the most challenging circumstances. Jesus promises that those who live and believe will never die. Gail O'Day calls the promise "an invitation to experience the power of God's love in the world that defeats death by believing in Jesus. . . . God present in Jesus has decisively altered the believer's experience of life and death."

Martha's response to this amazing proclamation-promise expresses my own trembling, I-want-to-believe-it faith. Somehow the archaic language of the King James Version appears particularly apt. "Yea, Lord," Martha says. Today these words work like a cross between the crowd's cheer before a final Hail Mary pass and the affirmation of the promise I will wrestle with forever. Neither admitting doubt in the veracity of the promise nor offering full assent, Martha's confession, bold as it is, seems to be as much as she can say at this moment: "I know that you are the

Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Martha hears Jesus promise that those who believe will never die, but she has a brother whose body is starting to decay. She hopes in a final resurrection, but her pragmatic personality accepts the facts of nature.

I also wrestle with the emotions of Jesus in this story. The calm manner of Jesus’ delay in the first scene appears to me otherworldly—hardly the actions of a human whose best friend’s death could be prevented. Perplexed translators of Greek disagree whether the words are better rendered “greatly disturbed and deeply moved” (NRSV) or “anger and indignation” (German translations, following Luther). If the English translations sentimentalize Jesus’ emotions, what is the reason for Jesus’ fury?

Narrative gaps in John 11—Martha’s heroic struggle to believe, the hard-to-explain anger of Jesus—help us as readers in at least two ways. One, the irresolvable nature of the questions keeps us engaged with the text. We try out various solutions without ever reaching a soporific conclusion. Two, we dig deeper in the story to connect loose ends. Any solution will need to draw on Jesus’ bold self-proclamation, Martha’s faith-filled but incomplete response, and Jesus’ emotional engagement.

Martha’s response directs our engagement. Though Martha hears Jesus’ self-proclamation as resurrection and life, she focuses on what she already believes. Jesus is God’s anointed, God’s child, and the one coming into the world. Whatever happens, Martha, like the healed blind man in John 9, lives in the new light coming into the world to glorify God. Jesus’ strong emotional reaction reveals his life-and-death struggle with the sinful opposition of the religious establishment who reject life and light. Those who should see Jesus clearly criticize (11:37), exclude (9:34), and conspire (11:45–57).

Through it all Jesus offers resurrection life, empowering those who live by believing in what O’Day calls “the everyday rhythms of life.” Mentioned only once more in the Gospel of John, Martha lives in the resurrection as she “serves” a dinner in honor of Jesus and Lazarus (12:2). After Jesus initiates the process that will have him raised up to bring glory to God (12:22–26), he calls his disciples to follow his example—and Martha’s—by serving rather than lording over others (13:15). That’s resurrection living!

Resurrection life is the daily life of the church. We sponsor refugees. We open our doors to Head Start and 12-step groups. We march in BLM and pride parades. We

supply hospice chaplains. We work to end gun violence. We offer hospitality to the homeless. Those who live and believe will never die!