

## SERMON NOTES

Sixth Day After Christmas  
Synaxis Gospel  
John 11:1-46

### FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

#### INTRODUCTION

The time is sometime between December and Passover, the last year of our Lord's earthly life. In Jerusalem, probably in December, Jesus had healed the man born blind and the discussions following the miracle had so incensed the leaders of the Jews that they had tried to stone Him. Jesus had then withdrawn from Jerusalem to the place beyond the Jordan River, where John the Baptist had preached at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus was staying there when messengers came from his dear friends, Martha and Mary, to inform Him that He was desperately needed back in Bethany, a village close to Jerusalem.

#### SYNAXIS READING

John 11:1-46

*Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.*

*The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, "Lord behold he whom You love is sick."*

*But when Jesus heard it, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it."*

*Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus; when therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was. Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."*

*The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"*

*Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."*

*This He said, and after that He said to them. "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep."*

*The disciples therefore said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."*

*Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."*

*Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."*

*So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days.*

*Now, Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother.*

*Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him; but Mary still sat in the house.*

*Martha therefore said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."*

*Jesus said to her, "Your brother shall rise again."*

*Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."*

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

*She said to Him “Yes Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”*

*And when she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, “The Teacher is here, and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she arose quickly, and was coming to Him.*

*Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. The Jews then who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.*

*Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

*When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled, and said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, Lord, come and see.”*

*Jesus wept. And so the Jews were saying, “Behold how He loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind, have kept this man also from dying?”*

*Jesus therefore again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.”*

*Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.”*

*Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”*

*And so they removed the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank Thee that Thou hearest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me*

*always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me.”*

*And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.”*

*He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

*Many therefore of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees, and told them the things that Jesus had done.*

## NOTES

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha, very close friends of Jesus. Apparently Jesus would visit the family when He was in Jerusalem. As our reading informs us below, Bethany was a village about two miles from the capital, Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

The family may have been prominent in their community. They had the means to entertain Jesus and His disciples,<sup>2</sup> and, later, Mary lavished a pound of very expensive ointment (perfume of pure nard) on the feet of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in their bereavement many Jews came from Jerusalem to console them.<sup>4</sup>

In his Gospel, Luke describes a visit to this family’s home.<sup>5</sup> Martha seemed to be the hostess of the home; she is said to have “welcomed Jesus into *her* home.” Moreover, Martha was the person caring for the details of the dinner party. Mary had left the work of serving to Martha, and had chosen instead to sit at Jesus’ feet to hear His teaching. Jesus refused to send Mary to help her sister, suggesting that Martha simplify her preparations to only one dish—an elaborate meal was not necessary. The teaching was more important.

And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.

This act of Mary’s had caused her to be quite renown among Christians after the Resurrection. Since Mary was a rather common name, John identified her as this particular Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:18

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:11:38

<sup>3</sup> John 12:3. The nard, an import from the Himalayas, was worth a year’s wages.

<sup>4</sup> John 11:18-19

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:38-42

The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, “Lord, behold he whom You love is sick.”

This statement shows us how close this family was to Jesus. They were very dear friends. The urgency of the message was no doubt stressed by the messengers.

But when Jesus heard it, He said, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.”

The *ultimate* purpose of the sickness was not that Lazarus would die, but for the glory of God. This statement may have been made in the presence of the messengers and for the benefit of the sisters.

The glory of God is the revelation of His character. The result of the sickness of Lazarus would be a great revelation of Who Jesus Christ really is.

Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus; when therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was.

This verse informs us that it was the entire family that was close to the heart of Jesus. The ‘therefore’ tells us that *because* He loved them, He did not immediately rush to Lazarus, but waited for two days. Notice this message is what Jesus *heard*, His knowledge was greater. As we shall see, at that point in time and unknown to the messengers, Lazarus had already died.

Then after this He said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”

The disciples said to Him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?”

After the two days had passed, it was time to go to Bethany, in the province of Judea. Jesus was in Perea, an area on the eastern side of the Jordan River. It was in this area that John the Baptist had first begun to preach.

Jesus had left the Jerusalem area in response to the intense reaction of the Jewish leadership. After He, on a Sabbath, had healed a man blind from birth, the discussions between the leaders of the Jews and Jesus had resulted in their attempt to stone Him for blasphemy. The reason they gave was that “You being a man, make Yourself out to be God.”<sup>6</sup> Earlier, He had referred to Himself as “**I AM**”, the Name of Almighty God.<sup>7</sup> Then He had maintained, “I and the Father are One.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, He had said “The Father is in Me and I am in the Father.”<sup>9</sup> After each statement they had attempted to stone Him.

The disciples here addressed Jesus in Aramaic as “Rabbi”—a title like ‘Rabboni’ that means ‘Teacher’. They were surprised that after his recent encounter with the Jewish leaders, He would think of returning.

Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”

This is a puzzling statement that at first blush seems not to fit the context. However, Jesus’ words illustrated that the disciples should not think that He was making an unwise decision. The situation with Jesus is like that of a man who walks in the daytime—He sees perfectly the way to take and does not stumble. Jesus always moved in the light of His Father’s will. To live one’s life outside that light would be to stumble in darkness.

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<sup>6</sup> John 10:33

<sup>7</sup> John 8:58

<sup>8</sup> John 10:30

<sup>9</sup> John 10:38

(At this time of the year, the earth was nearing the Spring equinox, when there are exactly twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness.)

**This He said, and after that He said to them. “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep.”**

Jesus gave the reason for His decision to return to the Jerusalem area.

Lazarus—their friend<sup>10</sup> as well as His—had died and Jesus would restore his life. Jesus used, here, a euphemism for death—sleep—that was common then, and is still used among Christians today.<sup>11</sup> It implies that death, for those who trust in God, is like sleep, temporary and not a permanent state.

**The disciples therefore said to Him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep.**

Knowing that when a fever passes, restful sleep indicates the crisis is over and recovery is underway, the disciples misunderstood Jesus’ tender choice of words. It was a natural misunderstanding.

**Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.”**

Jesus saw that He needed to explain with the harsher term. Jesus did not say “I am glad that Lazarus died.” He was glad that He had not been present for *their* sakes. They needed to see to believe.

**Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.”**

The ‘therefore’, again alerts us to a reason for what follows. Above, we were given the reason for the statement by Thomas. Jesus had said that Lazarus was dead, adding, “But let us go to him.” Thomas figured that to go to Lazarus’ home in Bethany would result in their being killed by Jesus’ enemies. He remembered that not long ago, Jesus’ enemies had tried to stone Him. Since Jesus, nevertheless, was determined to go, Thomas, urged the other disciples to go as well.

It is interesting that it was Thomas Didymus<sup>12</sup> who took the lead in this instance. Normally we would expect the leader to be Simon Peter. Mark, who, it is believed, wrote his Gospel from information supplied by Peter, does not mention the Lazarus event. Perhaps Peter, a married man, was away from the group during this momentous event.

**So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days.**

This is a summary statement of the state of affairs when Jesus arrived in the Bethany vicinity.

Jesus had waited two days before He had set out from Perea. It is estimated that the trip took one long day. Lazarus died then shortly after the sisters sent the message and by the time the messengers arrived in Perea, he had been dead one day. Three days later Jesus arrived in Bethany.

Some Jews had the idea that when a person dies, the spirit remains nearby. When the body’s face begins to change through the effects of decomposition, the spirit finally leaves. After four days there was no possibility, in their eyes, of the spirit returning to the body.

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<sup>10</sup> The word translated ‘friend’ is φίλος. When used as an adjective, it means ‘beloved’ or ‘dear’.

<sup>11</sup> See St. Paul’s use of this euphemism in 1 Corinthians 15:15-19; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; and St. John’s use of ‘rest’ in Revelation 6:11; 14:13.

<sup>12</sup> Didymus means ‘twin’.

Now, Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off;

We see how convenient it was for Jesus to visit His dear friends during the times He was in the capital.

And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother.

This implies that the *many* Jews were from Jerusalem and gives an indication of the prestige of the family.

Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him; but Mary still sat in the house.

Another indication of Martha's position in the household: the news reached her first that Jesus was approaching.

Martha, aware of the Jerusalem comforters in the house, may have wanted to protect Jesus by discreetly meeting Him before He arrived. She probably thought it best to meet Jesus before she told Mary, who, in her grief, might not consider the danger in which Jesus was putting himself.

Sitting down was the position for mourners.

Martha therefore said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.

This statement, later repeated by her sister, Mary, should not be seen as an accusation concerning His delay. Martha must have realized that the messengers they sent to Jesus arrived after Lazarus had died. They knew that if Jesus had been there, of course Lazarus would have been healed.

Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

Despite her grief, Martha was still able to express her faith in Jesus. The fact that her brother had died did not alter her belief that whatever Jesus requested of God, He would do it.

However, given her later statements before the tomb, it is not likely that she was hoping for a resurrection on that day. But her faith in Jesus, so expressed, resulted in her being given the most profound and sublime teaching in all of Holy Scripture.

Jesus said to her, "Your brother shall rise again."

This statement is one that she had probably heard also from those consolers in her house that were of the party of the Pharisees. Resurrection was taught by the Pharisees in opposition to the priestly Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection from the dead.

Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Martha, like the Pharisees, believed in the resurrection that will take place on the last day. She had that precious hope and knew she would see her brother again. But now with His next question, Jesus asked her to take her faith much further. She was being given, in the hour of her deepest grief, a moment to shine.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Of course Jesus and Martha were speaking Aramaic, but our record of their conversation is in Greek. In Hebrew (and Aramaic) the name of God was written but not pronounced. When translated, the Name means 'I AM' in English or ΕΓΩ ΕΙΜΙ in Greek. It is not necessary to use the personal pronoun with a verb, in Greek; the subject is reflected in the verb itself. But the pronoun was sometimes employed for

emphasis. *I* am—with the emphasis on the ‘I’. Here, in the Greek translation, Jesus used the emphatic personal pronoun. It seems, from Martha’s response, that in Aramaic, Jesus did indeed refer to Himself as the great I AM.

All life and all resurrection is to be found in His Person, the Person of Almighty God, the great I AM. Moreover Jesus gave the promise that has ever since comforted the hearts of those Christians who mourn the death of a loved one—death does not strip the beloved one of life. Moreover, if we believe in Him our life cannot ever be snuffed out—it is safe in Him. Whether we live or die physically, our life goes on; we remain spiritually alive.<sup>13</sup>

**She said to Him “Yes Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”**

Martha may have been busy managing the household, but somehow, on the fly, she had absorbed as much teaching as her sister Mary had learned sitting quietly at Jesus’ feet.

Martha had learned that the great anointed King, the Son of God, was God Incarnate. She now confessed that she believed this One to be standing before her in the Person of Jesus. Jesus is the great I AM. It was a moment of shining faith.

**And when she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, “The Teacher is here, and is calling for you.”**

Martha again seems to have tried to protect Jesus from the mourners from Jerusalem. She discreetly lets Mary know of His arrival and that He was expecting her.

**And when she heard it, she arose quickly, and was coming to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him.**

However, Mary did not pause to think of the effect her actions would have on the crowd. She jumped up and went to Jesus, Who waited at the same place where He had met Martha.

**The Jews then who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.**

Because her action was hasty, Mary not only exposed Jesus’ presence to the Jerusalemites, but she was deprived of a private interview with Him, for the crowd of mourners followed her.

**Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”**

Rushing up to Jesus and falling at His feet in grief, she repeated the same statement of her sister. This has caused many commentators to speculate that the sentence had been oft repeated between the two sisters. However, she added no word of faith as her sister had done. She simply wailed at His feet, crying bitterly. She missed her moment to shine.

**When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled, and said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, Lord, come and see.”**

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<sup>13</sup> Some commentators understand Jesus to be speaking of physical life when He said “he shall live even though he dies”, and of spiritual life when He said, “everyone who lives (spiritually) and believes in Me shall never die (spiritually).”



This meeting did not result in the same expression of faith and hope that had just passed between Jesus and Martha. Instead there was bitter wailing, from Mary and from those who followed her. Perhaps Jesus hoped for more faith from this woman who had sat at His feet and listened to His teaching.

When He saw their attitude of what He must have perceived as unbelief, he became angry. “Deeply moved in spirit” is the translation of  $\square\upsilon\epsilon\beta\rho\iota\mu\eta\sigma\alpha\tau\omicron$  a form of the verb that conveys a snort of suppressed rage and indignation. It has been paraphrased as Jesus “groaned with indignation from His innermost being,”<sup>14</sup> and He was deeply troubled.<sup>15</sup>

He directed His attention to what He had come to do. He went to the tomb.

**Jesus wept. And so the Jews were saying, “Behold how He loved him!”  
But some of them said, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind, have kept this man also from dying?”**

We have a different expression for weeping here. This is not the term for bitter wailing—this is a form of  $\delta\alpha\kappa\rho\upsilon\omega$  and pictures tears of sadness flowing. Perhaps He wept for the failure of Mary, perhaps because of the pain His dear friends were experiencing at that moment.

The Jews from Jerusalem interpreted the tears as a sign of deep love. Still, some of them questioned the love. A man who had the power to heal a man born blind, as Jesus had so recently exhibited, could He not have kept His dear friend from dying? The expected answer from the Greek grammatical construction is “Yes.”

**Jesus therefore again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.”**

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus was once again indignant and filled with suppressed rage (the same term as above). But coming to the tomb He commanded them to open it.

**Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.”**

From this answer to Jesus, we can see that Martha had not expected Jesus to raise her brother from the dead at this time. She gently objected to exposing the obvious decomposition that had by now altered the body of her brother.

**Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”**

If Jesus told her this personally, it was not recorded. But perhaps He referred to the message He had sent back to the sisters—that this sickness was not for the purpose of death but for the glory of God.

Martha had in fact believed in Him, though she had not understood what He had meant by the statement.

**And so they removed the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank Thee that Thou heardest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always; but**

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<sup>14</sup> Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), p.321

<sup>15</sup> Some commentators suggest that this anger was not directed at the attitude of Mary and her consolers but at death and the sin that resulted in mankind’s death. But Jesus had confronted death before without this expression of anger ( See Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:22-43; and Luke 8:41-56 for the account of the raising of the daughter of Jairus.)

because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me.”

Jesus had already prayed inwardly to the Father, but the people needed to understand that Jesus always, and only, acted with the good pleasure of His Father. They needed to know that God had sent Him to do this miracle. The miracle would prove that everything He had said was absolutely true.

The prayer accomplished something else as well. Jesus did not pause to utter this prayer *before* the tomb was opened, but *after*, thus, guaranteeing that all those present were acutely aware that, indeed, a dead man’s body was decomposing in the tomb.

And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.”

It is written that when Jesus returns to earth He will descend from heaven with a shout . . . and the dead in Christ will rise first.”<sup>16</sup> We have a preview, in the case of Lazarus, of that great day of resurrection. All those believers whose bodies were laid to rest will hear the voice of the Son of God and come forth to be rejoined with their spirits that He will bring with Him.

Lazarus heard and obeyed.

He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

We are not told how Lazarus wrapped up in the shroud bindings managed to come out, but he did. Once out, the people who witnessed the miracle could free him. This gave the amazed crowd something to do to help them adjust to what they had just seen.

Many therefore of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees, and told them the things that Jesus had done.

The result of the miracle was the glory of God. Those who had seen it believed in Jesus. No one could or ever has restored a dead, corrupted body to fresh new life—only Jesus, the Lord of Life can accomplish such a miracle. God manifested Who He is that day and those who saw believed.

It is not necessary to think that those, who reported the miracle to Jesus’ enemies, did so from bad intentions. They may have only wanted the leadership to know, as they now knew, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. However, the news only moved the Jewish religious leaders to determine to murder Jesus as soon as they could lay their hands on Him...

## APPLICATION

We are celebrating the Nativity Octave, the eight days of Christmas. This Sunday falls on the sixth day of the celebration. In two days we will celebrate the naming of our Lord, but today, we are called to focus our thoughts not on the first days but on the last days and the approaching death of Jesus Christ. In doing this, we do not simply remember His birth but we remember why He was born.

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16

In John's Gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus was the last sign—before the Resurrection of our Lord—that should bring us to faith in Jesus Christ. For those who witnessed the miracle, it had that result. But they were not prepared for the Crucifixion that dashed their hopes. Therefore, it is the Resurrection that confirmed their faith and ours.

Jesus had said that the sickness of Lazarus was not for the ultimate purpose of death, but for the glory of God. In the Old Testament, the people were given the words of God by Moses and the prophets, but it was from and by God's actions that they knew Him. It was His actions that revealed to them Who He is. His character, revealed by His actions, is His glory. He is not only the God of mighty and creative power; He is the God of justice and mercy, of love, compassion and forgiveness. He is faithful and true to His promises. His love for mankind is immeasurable and He offers us His life.

But, we must trust Him. Our disbelief separates us from Him, from the life He offers. Anger at disbelief and deep sadness at the separation it brings, caused tears to flow from the eyes of our Lord that day in Bethany. The Lord of Life was in their midst and they wailed without hope. Only Martha, enduring the terrible loss of her brother, clung to her faith in Him.

It was a shining moment for Martha. Her faith outshone the darkness of her grief. It was at that moment that she was given more—the promise of Life, not just at the final resurrection of the dead on the last day, but Life now, eternal Life that can never pass away because it is in Him and He shares it with us. Just as He said of the ancient believers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” Physical death does not change that life. All that He promised Martha—and us—was proved by the mighty command to Lazarus, “Come forth!” The glory of God was revealed in Jesus Christ; He is the resurrection and the Life. Therefore, though our tears may fall in times of suffering and grief, may our faith be like Martha's and shine—so that others may see and come to know Jesus Christ, for the glory of God.