

Faith: The Imagination to Hope

Homily of March 17, 2002

by Al Garrotto

Every time I hear the gospel of the raising of Lazarus, it reminds me of a time a few years ago when I went to see an opera at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles. And this was not just any old opera. It was a special one. It was called "I Am The Way," and it was about the life of Christ. It was part of a trilogy: "I Am The Way," "I Am The Truth," "I Am The Life." I only saw the first one. The composer of the opera was the great basso profundo of the Metropolitan Opera, Jerome Hines, and he starred in the opera, playing the role of Jesus. Now, Jerome Hines had to be at least 6'8" and he was an imposing man with this voice that would drill through concrete. And so, we came to the part about the raising of Lazarus and Jerome Hines was down at the stage, right front, and the tomb was elevated a few feet, at the rear corner opposite, and Jerome Hines is singing and he is talking to Mary and Martha. And there is a drumroll type of effect, and all of a sudden, the music stopped. Jerome Hines yells out, "Lazarus, come out!".... And he did! Jerome Hines had a voice that could wake the dead!

Nothing tests faith like the death, especially the untimely death, of someone whom we love. And so, when Jesus arrived at Bethany, He needed to find out if Martha and Mary had lost faith because of the death of their brother. And so, He said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Do you believe this? Do you believe that I have power to raise to life what has already died?" And Martha's answer was, "Yes, Lord. I do believe." Now, you and I share faith. There are at least three things that I think everybody in this room (maybe 99% at least) would agree upon, and that is: first of all, that there is a God; second, that Jesus is Lord; and third, that there is life after death. I think we probably all would agree to those three things. We might share faith in many other ways too, much more detailed than that, but at least those things.

But, what does it mean to say, "I believe.... I believe in God?" What does it mean to say, "I believe that Jesus is Lord?" What does it mean to say, "I believe that there is life after death?" The best definition of faith that I've ever come across is in the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, chapter 11, verse 1. (If you want to look it up when you get home, it is easy to remember: 11: 1.) And there it says, "Faith is confident assurance about what we hope for, conviction about things we do not see." I'm going to repeat that because it is not easy.... "Faith is confident assurance about what we hope for, conviction about what we do not see." Let's examine that definition of faith through Martha's act of faith. When Martha said, "Yes, Lord. I do believe," we have to kind of stretch that out and put more words in there to really express what it was that she was saying. And what Martha was saying was, "Lord, I have enough imagination to hope

that what you are saying is true.... I have enough imagination to hope that what you are telling me is true." Imagination.... hope.... These are right-brain functions. (Are you familiar with the right-brain, left-brain thing?) Faith resides in that part of our brain where the mystical is operating, where we are open to things that we can't explain.... artistic, aesthetical. Faith fits right in there in the right-brain functions.

Martha did not mean to say, when she said, "Yes, Lord. I believe...." She did not mean, "Yes, Lord. I believe because I have scientific proof that You have the power to take a living spirit and put it back into a corpse." Proof is a left-brain function.... Science, math, logic, all of these are the part of our brains where we demand, "Let me see it before I believe it." Faith is not logical. In fact, I think you and I will agree, that sometimes it is easier and more logical not to believe than to believe. Believing in God and in Jesus and the after-life (Think about that.), and the image that comes to my mind to explain that or describe it in some way is a trapeze artist. She is up there on a platform, holding the swing, getting ready to fly out into space. On the other side, there is another trapeze artist who is going to, just at the right instant, let that swing go from this side. And so off she flies with her grip on the swing. And she then lets go of the swing, does a triple somersault, and during that time she can't see the swing coming but she "believes," meaning she has the imagination to hope, that at the very moment that she is ready to reach out, that that bar is going to be there. Now, during that time between her letting go of this swing and before she has caught the next swing, that is faith. That's where faith is. Because we have let go of what we know and can prove (I can prove I am holding onto the swing.) but when you let go of that, there is no proof that the other swing is going to be there. There is hope. And that's what we have.

A spiritual writer named Morton Kelsey wrote a beautiful book some years back, called "The Other Side of Silence." And Kelsey tells this story. A man came to the edge of an abyss which he could not cross. And, as he stood there wondering, "How am I going to get from this side to that side?" he looked down and he noticed that there was a tightrope stretched from the other cliff to where he was standing. And then, in the distance, he saw a tightrope-walker with a wheelbarrow and somebody sitting in the wheelbarrow. Little by little, that tightrope-walker pushed the wheelbarrow and its passenger along that tightrope until they arrived at this side. And the acrobat smiled when he saw the astonishment on the face of the man who was the traveler, wondering how he was going to get across. The acrobat said, "I see that you are amazed. Do you think that I can do that again?" and the traveler said, "Oh, I am sure you can." The acrobat said, "OK. Hop in." And Kelsey finishes that story saying, "What did the traveler do?... What would you do?... What would I do?" I think I would probably have stood on that cliff a long, long time before I got into that wheelbarrow!

We live our whole lives between birth and death in that space between the two swings. That's where we live. We go through life. We do our triple somersaults or whatever else it is that we do. But that's where we are, right at this moment. That's where we've been.

And that's where we'll live the rest of our lives, after letting go of that swing and not quite yet being able to reach out and grab this one. We live our entire lives from birth to death standing on the edge of a precipice, abyss, looking across, wondering if there is a "there" over there and yet seeing this tightrope that is our only passage from here to the other side. We live our whole life there.

Now, do we have the imagination to hope that what Jesus tells us is really true, that He IS the Resurrection and the Life and, that there is a way to get from here to there even though we can't see it yet? Do we have the confidence to trust that there is another swing coming this way for us to grab onto, just at the right moment? Are we convinced that we do not have to see in order to believe? That's faith.