

"The Epistle of Martha"

based on Revelation 2:8-11

Funeral Sermon for

Martha L. Riley

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Sermon delivered on August 5, 1999

From: Martha Riley, child of God, servant of the Lord, baptized in Christ and one graciously blessed by the Holy Trinity through Word and Sacrament,

To: Those whom I call my family; to each and every one whom I regard as part of my family:

Grace, mercy and peace to you.

The Lord has been so good to me and I look forward to that day when He takes me home to be with Him forever. Jesus has accomplished everything in order for that to happen. He has lived His Life for me. He died in my place and paid the price for all my sins. He rose again on Easter morning and because He lives, I know that I, too, shall live. The Lord Jesus ascended into heaven in order to prepare a place for me that where He is, there I shall also be. Indeed, all things are ready for me.

However, I would have you know that, as my death drew near, my mind was troubled, first of all by a few tasks that I believe I needed to do, and secondly, because I realized that I no longer had the physical strength or the mental focus to accomplish them. You see, I had some individual letters that I wanted to write to you, but as each day progressed, it became obvious to me that I wasn't going to get them done. I told this to my pastor and he suggested that we begin working together immediately in order to accomplish what I wanted to get done. This being done, I would be granted a quieted spirit that would permit me to depart this life in peace.

Therefore, this sermon is my letter to those of you whom I call my family ... to my sons and their families ... to my extended family ... to my neighborhood family ... and to my church family. The words and promise of Jesus spoken to His people in Revelation 2:8-11 are the Biblical text which is the basis for my funeral sermon. Please listen to that text under the truth that this sermon is ...

... *The Epistle of Martha*

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the First and the Last, Who died and came to life. 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the Crown of Life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.'"

Thus far the Word of the LORD my God.

Dear family, the eternal and incarnate Son of God, the crucified and risen Jesus, told the Apostle John to write down these words to troubled Christians who were members of the Church at Smyrna in Asia Minor. There was tribulation and persecution that made people wonder if they should continue to confess the LORD as their God. There was poverty among the Christians, but it was only physical poverty; a poverty with respect to the wealth of this world. Jesus, in fact, reminded His people there at Smyrna, just how rich they were in the holy things of the Lord - in things like forgiveness, eternal life, salvation, hope, the Word of God and an inheritance awaiting them in heaven.

But dear family members, please remember that as a Christian, I have a God Who did not remain distant but Who came here to this earth for me and for my salvation. In my sermon text, Jesus said, *I know your tribulation and your poverty*. He knows it, not just from a distance, but from experience. The baby Jesus' first bed was a manger that was borrowed from animals. He had no place to lay His royal head and He never owned a house during His thirty-some years between His Birth in Bethlehem and His Crucifixion on Calvary. Even His Body was placed in a borrowed tomb.

In fact, Jesus knows tribulation and poverty beyond what we are even able to imagine. The Son of God left the magnificent splendor of heaven when He came to this earth to redeem us from sin, death and the devil. This is *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9)*. When Jesus suffered and died on the cross on account of your sins and mine, He was slandered and crucified by Jew and Gentile; He was besieged and assaulted by Satan and the forces of darkness; He was abandoned and forsaken by God and man. This is my Jesus, *Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the Throne of God (Hebrews 2:2)*.

Just as Jesus told John to write to the pastor and people of Smyrna, so I ask my pastor to relay these words of Jesus to you today, *Do not fear what you are about to suffer*. If you are a Christian, do not fear what might happen in your life - whether it be prison, testing or tribulation. If you belong to the Lord then you have nothing to fear. As that great hymn of Christendom declares and proclaims:

Tho' devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill, They shall not over-pow'r us.
This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none, He's judged; the deed is done;
One little Word can fell him.
("A Mighty Fortress is Our God", st. 3)

Dear family, my death is approaching and I take great comfort in the words of Jesus Who said, *Do not fear what you are about to suffer*. Therefore, even *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil* for the Good Shepherd is with me. The Christian is truly able to sing with confidence:

And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.
("A Mighty Fortress is Our God", st. 4)

On this day when you are gathered together, I really want you to listen carefully to what Jesus says to you in the next verse and consider the truth of it and seriously think about how it applies to you. Jesus said, *Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the Crown of Life*. God the Father has given His Son as the saving Gift to the world. God the Son has given His Life for the redemption of the world. God the Holy Spirit has given His Word in order that we might believe in Jesus and be among those who will be saved.

In your Baptism, God has given you the gift of faith and the strength to remain faithful throughout your life. Those who remain faithful ... who continue to listen to His Word by reading it and coming to Sunday School ... who continue to receive the gifts of God by coming to Church ... who continue to receive the true Body and Blood of Jesus in Communion ... who continue to confess their sin and hear the Word of forgiveness ... and who do this unto death, shall be saved and shall be given the Crown of Life and shall be received into everlasting Life in the very Presence of the Almighty Lord. Oh how I look forward to that day!

This does not mean, however, that I have earned my way there by doing good works and will be in heaven by convincing God that I have been a good woman. That is just not the case. No one can earn the right to be in heaven. It is a gift from God's grace through faith in Christ. Even now, as this sermon is being written, I am a sinner and don't deserve anything but eternal condemnation. I have fallen so many times in the past and so many times recently. But I believe and trust that Jesus has taken the penalty and paid the price on the cross for every single one of my sins, failings and fallings.

"I believe that Jesus Christ has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious Blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own, and live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity" (*Small Catechism, Apostles' Creed, 2nd Article*).

So even with this cancer consuming my body, I am able to close my eyes and know that peace and comfort which comes from God's Word that whether I live or die, I belong to the Lord (Romans 14:8). Thus, even though I await the day of my death when I leave this world, I know that I will not suffer the second death which is the *Lake of Fire* (Rev. 20:14). I trust that the Lord will grant me the gift of faith in Him unto death and that I will receive *the Crown of Life*. My soul is safe with Christ and even now, my mind is more and more being occupied with the things from above.

There are times, however, when I have concerns about matters here on this earth. This sermon, in the form of my letter to you, addresses my final concerns. I am troubled by the fact that so many of my family members and my extended family members have departed from the Lord, His Word, and His Church. Jesus did not say, "Remain faithful for awhile." He said *Remain thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the Crown of Life.*

Each one of you is traveling, from one minute to the next and one step at a time to the day of your death. Is the day of your death this week or fifty years from now? Truly, only God knows. However, your death is coming just as certain as I am facing my death as this letter is being written. This death that we await is common to us all. Christians and non-Christians alike experience this first death. However, Jesus' Life, Death and Resurrection was undertaken that you and I might be rescued from the Second Death which is the Lake of Fire.

Do you not hear the words of Jesus? *Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the Crown of Life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.*" There is an eternity of difference between saying, "I was a Christian" and "I am a Christian" and between declaring, "I was baptized" and "I am baptized." The Lake of Fire is a place where those will go who will have to admit before the Judgment seat of God, "I used to be faithful."

Dear family, I was not able to do anything more for you other than remember you in my prayers as this sermon was being written and now, as this is being read to you or as you are reading it, I wait for those of you who will be with me in heaven. If you need to repent and return to the Lord and His Church, may God grant you this grace and gift. If you remain in Christ and are still one of His children, then I encourage you, *Be thou faithful unto death, and Jesus will give thee the Crown of Life.*

The Lord has been so good to me and I look forward to that day when He gives me the Crown of Life and takes me home to be with Him forever. I thank the Lord my God for all those whom I call family. I thank Him for those who have preceded me in death and wear the Crown of Life. I praise God for those who call me "mom" and pray that God would grant you wisdom, courage and strength in the upcoming days and for as many days as the Lord God grants you here on this earth. I thank the Lord for those who call me "grandma", "aunt" and "nana." What a joy to be surrounded by children all my life, but especially in these last days.

I thank God for my friends and neighbors. May those of you who know Jesus remain faithful unto death and be given the Crown of Life. May those of you who might have, today, for the very first time, heard about who Jesus is and what He has done for you, may you believe in Him as your Savior and remain faithful to Him too. The Bible declares that the arms of Jesus and the doors of His Church are open wide for you.

I thank the Lord for all those whom I call family at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church and who, throughout the years, have been such an important part of my life. What a blessing to be a member of this congregation and have such faithful people as brothers and sisters in Christ. Your visits, cards and prayers have been a source strength for me and a joy to receive. I also thank the Lord God for having heard His Word preached to me by faithful pastors, and especially now for helping me get this sermon written. My signature below indicates that the words of this message have been

approved by me and also means that my soul is at peace. I am now left with nothing to do but to remain faithful unto death and be given the Crown of Life.

As this sermon is being written I am thinking of you. As this sermon is being read you are thinking of me. May God grant that you and I be a part of that eternal family reunion in heaven. Dear family, please use the ears of your hearts to listen to the Biblical text for my funeral sermon once more.

Revelation 2:8-11 - And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the First and the Last, Who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the Crown of Life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death." Amen.

signed: *Martha L. Riley*

dated: *March 1, 1999*