

Sister Elizabeth White  
Memorial Mass  
October 22, 2011

Homily by Sr. Hilda Carey '50

*John 11:32-39*

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

This passage which Fr. Neenan has just read forms the vital center of the much longer account of the raising of Lazarus. And at the heart of the well-known story lie the words:

*And Jesus wept so that Jews said: "See how he loved him."*

Jesus does not appear primarily concerned with the surrounding discussions of the need for faith. He does not respond to several veiled reproaches for having done nothing to prevent the death of Lazarus. He does not even react to the longstanding but loving rivalries of Martha and Mary. He is perturbed by the grieving that surrounds them and he weeps for love of the man, Lazarus. And so he orders, "Take away the stone" and "his dear friend" (according to some translators) emerges into life. We are left marveling at the love of Jesus and echo "See how he loved him."

And now we meet to celebrate another life, another recipient of that same love, Liz White.

If you were to Google Dumbarton Oaks, you would read all about the historic international meeting in 1944 which laid the groundwork for the United Nations; you would be regaled with descriptions of the medieval library and the museum, all the storied beauty of the house and grounds; but you wouldn't find the story of a little girl many years ago running through the mansion, admonished by her mother, "Don't rush through the house and knock over the vases." That little girl was Liz White, and as she later told her colleagues at Boston College, those vases were a thousand years old.

As the years passed, whatever happened to the vases, Liz didn't stop running. She taught in a number of Sacred Heart schools in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, at Newton College, the University of the Sacred Heart in Tokyo and finally, Boston College. As a young nun at Newton, in that

era when young nuns not only taught a heavy load of classes but ran around in the afternoon encouraging hoards of exercise-needy students to exert themselves; scavenged some precious time for research and class preparation; and then turned to various community jobs, including carrying Reverend Mother's sewing to reunions, Liz managed to organize an acapella madrigal group later called "the switchboard sextet" where she taught us to sing four part Elizabethan madrigals while she handled all the incoming calls to the college. Liz was, as one of her students, now a Ph.D., said recently, "one of the very best teachers I ever had." Generations of students and colleagues give the same testimony. "There are many people who love her." She was a classy woman, so funny, who loved the history of her family and carried it so wonderfully, spreading abroad her enthusiasm for her uncontrollable and remarkable nieces and nephews. People loved seeing her eschewing the shuttle bus, striding along between Newton and Boston College. They recall her ready smile, always warm but touched with a sparkle of challenge. They haven't forgotten her singing voice, her enthusiasm, her love of Dante or her students.

When I took her Dante class in the forties, I ended up sleeping with the "Paradiso" (fortunately a small one) underneath my pillow. When I took her Old English course, I spent hours at night with a jiggly, illegal flashlight (lights were out at 10:00 in those days) trying to translate OE poetry into modern English without sacrificing mood, rhythm, kennings or caesuras. How many professors inspire such spontaneous extracurricular activities? Liz did.

One of the students in the late sixties remembers how one winter she took her students outside to sing carols.

She recalls: It was snowing slightly, a perfect night for getting in the Christmas mood. The song I remember best is "The Twelve Days of Christmas" because she led us in all the gestures and dance moves for each of the 12 days, leaping and dancing gracefully as we tailed behind. At the time, I was amazed because I thought of her as someone who would be at home reading Shakespeare every night, not dancing in the snow. Looking back now, I'm not amazed at her dancing but at her grace and her patience with us.

More than twenty years later, when she retired from regular classwork at BC, she was still teaching. The same former student adds, "She had not lost a bit of her spark and was looking for an easy way to help international students work on their English skills. I couldn't imagine a better teacher for them."

Perhaps the best summary of Liz and her life is that many thousands loved her for her cheerful energy, her brilliant teaching, but mostly because of the love she poured out for ninety years.

Can we have any idea how much Jesus loved her?