**Galileo’s Head Was On the Block
Sunday, May 16, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell**

*Galileo's head was on the block
The crime was lookin' up the truth*

Some of you will recognize those words as the opening lines of a favorite Indigo Girls tune … telling the tale of Galileo who dared to not only look up the truth but to tell it … and who paid a price for that crime in a time when the radical idea that the earth actually revolved around the sun – and not the other way around – could not be tolerated.

And in response to the “but the Bible says” folks of his generation, Galileo is reported to have replied: *The Bible shows the way to go to heaven, not the way the heavens go.*

Imagine if there had been Twitter in 1616 when Galileo faced the Roman Inquisition to defend himself against the crime of looking up the truth.

I’m guessing the trending hashtags might have been

#GalileoCancelsBible

and the 17th century version of Fox News

would be blaring headlines like:

Cancel Culture Strikes Again: Film at Eleven.

The rise of the term “Cancel Culture”

is but one of the ways heads are put on blocks

for the crime of lookin’ up the truth

when the truth challenges narratives

that keep the powerful in power …

when those who have been marginalized, silenced, or erased

by how history has been told

by those with the power to decide who tells the history

dare to tell the part of the story that hasn’t been told.

And we’ve seen plenty of examples in our Breaking News cycles

of the cost truth tellers are paying for lookin’ up the truth

when the truth challenges narratives that keep the powerful in power.

The head of a congresswoman on the block

for the crime of lookin’ up the truth

about a free and fair election

is one example.

The heads – or at least the political careers –

of those challenging us to look at American complicity

in the genocide being waged against Palestinians in Gaza is another.

So is the ongoing challenge to look up the truth

of how unexamined white privilege

continues to feed, water, and fertilize the systemic racism
that plagues our nation.

Sometimes procrastinating writing a sermon by scrolling through Facebook is just a waste of time -- and sometimes it pays off with a quote like this one I found yesterday from Mark Van Steenwyk:

“When someone challenges dominating myths, the powerful strike back. This happened to the prophets. This happened to Jesus. It will happen to you, should you start poking around at the myths that hold our society together” reminding me of these words of Frederick Douglass: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

 Mike described that pattern in his sermon last week:
“When we are afraid,

we begin to wield supposed absolute truth

as a weapon to consolidate our power

and protect it against change

that might liberate others

yet create uncomfortable uncertainty for ourselves.”

Change that might come if we look up the truth:

* that the land we stand on this morning was stolen from the Tongva people.
* that the wealth that built the economy that funded the building of our beloved church was built on the backs of black and brown people.
* that very scriptures we inherit as the family album telling our history as a people of God have systematically erased the stories and voices of women who have been at the center of our faith from its very beginning.

There’s a cartoon that has been widely circulated – we actually used it for a service leaflet cover a few years ago during Easter season. It pictures three women and the twelve disciples … with the caption “So, ladies: Thanks for being the first to witness and report the Resurrection … and we’ll take it from here.”

And for nearly 2000 years, that’s how it rolled until

… an inch at a time

… the patriarchal paradigm that stood as unchallenged

as the biblical narrative that the sun revolves around the earth

began to be challenged by those

who were willing to be indicted

for the crime of looking up the truth

that respecting the dignity of every human being

required dismantling systemic sexism

that relegated women to second class status

in the Body of Christ.

This year we’ve been given the gift of living through our liturgical year together using a lectionary – the list of scripture readings appointed for reading each Sunday – created by biblical scholar Dr. Wil Gafney and centering women’s stories ... in this case of sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany.

And today we hear the second half of that story ... the one that left off last week where this morning's Gospel began with these words from Martha:

“Yes, Rabbi, I believe that you are the Messiah,
the Son of God, the one who comes into the world.”

I love the fact that planted within the great drama of "The Raising of Lazarus" there is such a wonderful subplot: "The Confession of Saint Martha" -- or at least that's what I would call it if I got to be in charge.

To recap: Lazarus, friend of Jesus and brother to Martha and Mary, had been in the tomb for four days when Jesus finally arrived in Bethany and the Gospel writer tells us: "When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home."

This is a complete reversal of roles from the first time we meet them in the scriptural story – that time when Mary gets in trouble with Martha for not pulling her weight in the kitchen and instead crosses the cultural expectation boundary by sitting at Jesus’ feet to listen to his teaching instead.

This time it is Martha who leaves the women mourning and goes out to meet Jesus: a radical departure from cultural expectations and a radical change for Martha.

Yes, the raising of a Lazarus was a miracle -- but what draws me into the story this morning is that transformation we see in Martha.

The same transformation that turned Saul from the persecutor to Paul the evangelist -- that turned Peter from the blustery fisherman who denied Jesus in the courtyard into the "rock" on which the church was founded -- changed Martha from a woman whining about needing help in the kitchen to a woman empowered to go out and ask for what she wanted.

To the woman who goes directly to meet Jesus as he is coming into town -- and then confronts him in the road just outside the city: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." What courage -- what chutzpah!

And then, in response to Jesus' question: "Do you believe?" we have a moment that is memorialized in one of the windows in the chapel here at All Saints Church: “The Confession of Saint Marth:”

"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ,

the Son of God,

the One who is coming into the world."

And here’s where I paused to look up a little truth.

And the truth is that the same profession of faith

that earned Peter an extra feast day in the liturgical calendar

(January 18 in case you want to check it out)

left Martha ignored.

The truth is that this is yet another example

of how the voices and stories of women

have been either marginalized, sidelined or erased altogether.

Too be clear, with all the challenges facing us

in our world, our nation, and our church

spending our energy lobbying

for another liturgical feast day for Martha

is arguably not the highest and best use of time at the moment ...

nevertheless it is a clear example

that the absence of her recognition in the narrative of our faith

is one of the sins of omission it is long past time

for the church to both confess and make amends for.

To center the story of Martha's transformation

is to widen the narrative of the power of the Spirit of God

calling each and every one of us to health -- to wholeness –

to realizing our full potential as children of God

and to the life abundant which is our inheritance.

It is a change that isn't about making us someone we're not

but about making us more authentically who we are.

It is a change described in this song I learned years ago at a women's retreat:

*I will change your name.
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, Outcast, Lonely or Afraid
I will change your name.
Your new name shall be
Joyfulness. Confidence. Overcoming One.
Faithfulness. Friend of God. One who seeks my face.*

That's the life abundant God intends for each and every one of us:

joyful in our work, confident in our gifts,

secure in the love of the God who calls us to live

not in the anxiety of earning approval

but in the peace of knowing

that we are both fully loved and fully known

and that the only thing asked in response

to the gift of the inexhaustible power of God’s indestructible love

is to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Decades ago now William Sloan Coffin famously offered these words that still echo with power today: “The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.”

As we see more and more light

at the end of the COVID19 tunnel

and move forward together

to what our Bishop John Taylor has described as

“back to a future we can’t yet envision,

may we be given grace, like Martha,

to march out of our comfort zones

to speak the truth

about that which needs fixing, healing, and raising –

in ourselves, in our families, in our church and in our world

even if we end up like our brother Galileo
with our head on the block

for the crime of lookin’ up the truth

… the truth we are promised

will ultimately set us all free.
Amen.