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Patience...it's not easy to wait for. We want it immediately and on demand. Maybe you've had a day like Alice Smith, who was having a hard day with her little boy, and patience seemed nonexistent in their home. She had dishes to wash, clothes to fold, and her job to get to after dropping off her son at preschool. After a busy day at work, she picked up her son, fed him supper, played a few games with him, got him ready for bed, and read him a bedtime story. She explains what happened next:

I had just put my little boy to bed for the umpteenth time and my patience was running out. When I heard him cry "Mama" again, I yelled to him, "If I hear you say 'Mama' one more time, I'm going to [be really mad]." For a little while, all was quiet. Then I heard a little voice whisper, "Mrs. [Smith], can I have a drink?"¹

Our days don't always go smoothly, and sometimes in our frustration it's hard to wait for things to get better. Sometimes we might even pray, "Dear Lord, teach me to be patient, but do it *right*

now." We're so used to fast food that we're lured into thinking we can have fast faith—faith on demand, simple, quick, and easy. Forget the waiting. Avoid the struggles. And for goodness sake, leave out the temptations—and do it now!

Most of us have discovered, however, that faith is not immediate, for it takes years to form and develop. Our faith, our trust in God, grows through struggles and doubts, temptations and failures. Even the most faith-filled people struggle when they encounter difficulties, which I was recently reminded of when my friend, who serves as a priest in another community, discovered he has what the doctors call a "sick liver." None of the scans and medical tests have revealed the problem, so he wrote to me, "I hope it is something that can be healed. Faith is really being tested and prayer and belief are difficult." He wondered why he had survived a bypass surgery just a few years ago and recovered so well only to have to face a mysterious illness. He wrote, "This priest is having some faith

issues, obviously. My parishioners and friends have more faith than me, it seems.”

Faith isn't a prepackaged item we purchase off the shelf, and when it runs low we cannot purchase more. It's not something we either “have” or we “lose,” as when someone says, “I've lost my faith. It was here a minute ago.” Faith is not something we lose under the couch and search the house to find. Sometimes faith may feel dormant, as though it's resting, buried under a foot of ice and snow. Other times it bursts forth with joy, as the first crocus emerging from the ground. We all place our faith in something or someone, but as a church, we strive to grow in our faith in God.

Patience is part of faith, and the season of Lent reminds us of waiting and learning together. The word *lent* comes from the Old English word *len(c)ten*, from which we get our word “lengthen.” The word refers to spring, when the days begin to lengthen, to get longer. In the church, the 40 days before Easter serve as a time to “lengthen” our faith, to stretch our faith through reflection and study and

prayer. Some suggest that by giving up certain foods, we lengthen our ability to give up immediate gratifications and to instead remember those who hunger and thirst for justice. Others suggest that we give up bad habits, such as harsh words, addictions, or other practices that cause harm to ourselves or others. Lent is a season of patience, of stretching our beliefs and habits.

During our six weeks together as we wait for Easter, we will hear from people who encountered Jesus and yet struggled with their faith: The Roman governor Pilate who wondered about the meaning of truth as he had to decide whether Jesus lived or died; Peter who listened to Jesus teach and yet denied even knowing him; and the high priest's gatekeeper who recognized Peter as one of Jesus' followers. We'll even hear from two crowd members as they struggled to understand why Jesus faced such ridicule and scorn.

It would be much easier to not hear their stories, to skip from the ashes of Ash Wednesday to the good news of Easter. Why wait? We already

know the ending of the story, so why take six weeks to get there? Life is complicated enough. We're busy. Why wait?

I think those are similar questions that Martha might have asked. She knew Jesus. She had prepared meals for him, but she was so busy that she almost missed who he was. She even complained that Jesus wasn't quick enough, that he delayed too long when she needed him the most. I could tell you her story, but I think it's better to hear from Martha herself.

I'm Martha, though you've probably heard more about my sister Mary—the one who listened to Jesus while sitting at his feet when I was in the kitchen getting dinner ready for our guest. Jesus told my sister, "You have chosen the better way." I've always wondered what Jesus meant by that statement, and I wonder if he was telling me that listening to him teach was more important than the work I was doing in the kitchen. But if I had sat there with my sister listening to Jesus, no one would have eaten that night! How would you feel if you were a guest and everyone sat and listened to you, but no one fed you? Hungry, right?

Another time when Jesus visited our home I was busy serving, and once again Mary focused on Jesus—this time pouring an expensive bottle of perfume on Jesus' feet and wiping his feet with her long hair. Even one of Jesus' disciples thought this action was a bit extreme and suggested that she could have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor. Jesus defended her by saying "Leave her alone. You will always have poor people, but you won't always have me. She has kept this perfume for the day of my burial."

Little did I know that Jesus' burial was just around the corner, for earlier Jesus had done an amazing thing for my brother, Lazarus, that made death seem irrelevant. Jesus was visiting another town when my brother became very ill, and we sent word to Jesus to please come and help him, for we had seen Jesus heal many people who were ill. Jesus stayed another two days, and by the time he arrived Lazarus had been dead in the tomb for four days. When he arrived, I was so mad, and I blurted out, "Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would still be alive."

Jesus said, "Your brother will live again."

*I knew that, for in the end all would rise again, but I wanted my brother **now**.*

Jesus replied, "I am the resurrection and life. Those who trust in me will live—not die. Do you believe this?"

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I blurted out something I never expected to say, “I believe you are the Promised One, the Christ, the Messiah!” I was so filled with hope that I ran to get my sister, Mary, and together we went to Lazarus’ tomb with Jesus—all of us crying with grief at the loss of my brother. Jesus said through his own tears, “Move the stone away from the entrance.”

I objected, “But Lazarus has been there four days. The smell will be terrible.” We believed that one’s spirit hovered around a dead body for three days, but after four days one’s spirit left, so there was no chance of life again. Jesus’ request made absolutely no sense. I wondered if his grief had distorted his sensibility, but he began praying and giving thanks to God as we rolled away the stone.

Jesus shouted, “Lazarus, come out,” and then I knew that Jesus had really lost it—but then I saw the most amazing sight I’ve ever witnessed: my

brother came walking out of the tomb, still wrapped in the burial cloths.

I now understood why Mary listened to Jesus teach, for he offered a vision of life far greater than I could ever imagine. Even though I was always busy with the details of hospitality, I’m the sister who proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. I guess that should count for something!

I hope that as you prepare to approach the cross and discover surprising new life at the tomb, that you welcome one another with hospitality—and take time to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn. Pause. Soak in Jesus’ teachings. And learn.

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¹ Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 2069-2072). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #232. (adapted)