

Requiescat in Pace – Mary Louise Burns
Proverbs 31:10-31
2 Timothy 1:3-14
John 14:1-6

I have heard Christian women say that the passage from Proverbs, the section that is commonly referred to as “The Wife of Noble Character” is altogether unrealistic. The reason women folk say this is because, they say, no woman is that good. It’s a tongue-in-cheek complaint that no flesh and blood woman can live up to that standard. Proverbs 31, they say, sets us up to fail. It’s good to know and not obfuscate one’s own shortcomings. Perfect people don’t need a Savior. Perfect people don’t need a crucified King. It is also said that we shouldn’t look for virtue within ourselves... let others do that. It was a man, by the way, who wrote that section about the wife of noble character. Solomon wrote it. Poor Solomon; he had too many wives. Dale Burns had just one.

One of Mary’s favorite things to say was that Dale, as an older man, still had his waistline, his hairline, and his first wife. Apparently that was the Air Force officer’s trifecta, not necessarily in that order. How about Dale’s eyes on Easter 1950? We say that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Did Dale see the wife of noble character as he heard Mary say that she would love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health until death parts them? All of us are familiar with what is beautiful. Beauty enriches one’s life. We all know what is *objectively* beautiful. The glory of a blazing orange sunset, Michelangelo’s Pieta, a precious day-old infant, a young man helping an old woman navigate her way, the thrill on a little boy’s face when his father comes home from work – beauty enriches our lives. Truly, we have a physical reaction to great beauty – our pulse increases, capillaries in our brains enlarge to flow more blood, and, most pertinent today, our eyes dilate. Beauty is in the eye. The beholder apprehends what is authentically beautiful and life is enriched.

I’ve been told that Dale doted on Mary. Love inspires that kind of service, that kind of care. Mary was the wife of noble character to Dale – he saw it in her, found it in her, treasured it in her. Mary was elegant and simultaneously welcoming to all. She was faithful and forgiving. Many profited by these traits but none more than Dale. “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels” (Proverbs 31:10). As Dale’s mind was darkened by the scourge of Alzheimer’s, it was Mary who ventured daily to her husband’s side to serve him lunch. “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (Proverbs 31:30). Mary knew that she was loved by God when she did not deserve such love. None of us do. As familiar as we are with what is beautiful, we are equally familiar with what is dreadful. This world is broken. Man is fallen. Woman is fallen. Avarice, narcissism, deceit, violence – these are not minor blemishes on humanity’s complexion. Objectively, in our sin, we are a horrific sight.

I chose the passage from Timothy to read for Mary’s memorial because it mentions Lois and Eunice, two godly women who had a profound impact on Timothy. Grandmother and mother, these women carried Christianity in their vocation as maternal pillars in their family. Lois and Eunice taught Timothy the Scriptures. At the heart of the Scripture is Christ crucified. At the heart of the Scripture is God’s grace. At the heart of the Scripture is a divine love that takes the

initiative, love that pursues the forgotten and marginalized, love that gladly gives up life to save the beloved. Mary knew that love; Mary knew that grace; Mary knew that glory – Christ’s glory, the cross’ glory, the object beauty of divine forgiveness. Faith sees the Messiah suffering and knows that His beauty is transcendent, everlasting. The eye of the beholder... what do you see? Today, in the context of death, in the context of a memorial service, what do you see?

Thomas had no idea what Jesus was talking about. Thomas couldn’t see the picture that Jesus was painting. Thomas’ eye couldn’t apprehend the beauty. Spiritual turmoil whirled around the disciples. The religious authorities were salivating at the thought of apprehending and punishing the Lord Christ. Everyone felt it. Everyone was on edge. And Jesus was telling them not to be troubled. “Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms... I go there to prepare a place for you... I will come again and take you to be where I am... you know the way to where I am going” (John 14:1-4). Thomas didn’t care how he sounded. He *didn’t* know and blurted out, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:5). Thomas’ eyes were cloudy with distress. Who could blame him? Most of us have been there, in a spiritual fog, uneasy, pessimistic, God’s promises hanging limp in our hearts. The Bible says that we walk by faith not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The Bible says that faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see (Hebrews 11:1). Well, what do you see?

Mary saw a hospital room. You know what those look like. A hospital room has a job to do. It’s functional, not elegant. It’s not built to welcome you, like having Christmas tea at Mary’s. Mary saw the monitors, the professionally dressed nurses, the cold surroundings of her room. Though being cared for by a gentle and capable nurse provides some solace, Mary’s surroundings could hardly be described as beautiful. The Bible says that in this life we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Thomas said that he wouldn’t believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead unless he was able to put his finger into the Lord’s wounds. “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25). Mary walked by faith, not by sight. All her life – faith not sight. As a musician, a church musician, Mary would play the hymns of the church, the great melodies of faith. Hark, the Herald Angels Sing. Christmas danced in her hands as she would coax the music of faith from an organ. Jesus Christ is Risen Today. Easter triumph flowed from her hands as the congregation sang of the greatest thing this world has ever known. No one saw, with their eyes saw, what they sang but they sang as if they did. The eyes of our hearts have been enlightened with the glory of a manger, the glory of an empty tomb, the glory of an ascendant Christ (Ephesians 1:18-20).

What did Mary see? In that hospital room, with her son John holding her hand, what did Mary see? She saw face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). No more seeing in a mirror dimly, Mary died and she saw the beauty of her Lord – face to face. She knew in part in this life but now she knows fully. Those aren’t my words. Those are the words of Scripture. Beauty – divine and eternal beauty – broke in on Mary’s eyes, her soul. She died and the crucified and risen King was there. All of the worldly clouds, all the fog of doubt and pain and fear drifted away in a moment of glory. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). All the blessings of faith were realized in one marvelous moment as

Mary died. She lives. Mary lives because Christ lives, because Jesus loved us and gave His life up for us and conquered death. Death has no sting. Death has no grip on Mary, no grip on you. What do you see? Timothy had Lois and Eunice who taught him the Scriptures, Scripture that opened the eyes of his heart to see a crucified yet triumphant Lord. What do you see? Ultimately Thomas was told to put his hands into the Lord's side, to stop doubting and believe. Picture Mary dying and Thomas' words coming from her mouth: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). That's what I see. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Mary's eyes are filled with beauty, filled with heaven, filled with grace, filled with love, filled with Christ the King.