

**A Mass for the Departed: Barbara Larsen Klett (1935–2021)**

**Saturday, October 15, 2022, 2:00 PM**

**The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square, New York**

**Propers: Wisdom 3:1–5, 9; Romans 8:14–19, 34–35; John 11:21–27**

When I was in graduate school, I had two classmates who were members of a Roman Catholic religious order well-known for its serious, no-nonsense attitude. The three of us were having dinner one night, sharing stories about seminary. I asked them if their training had been as strict as I'd been told. They told me that it *had* been at times, though not as tough as in years gone by. And then one of them smiled and said, "It may have been tough, but there were always a few delicate flowers. They usually needed some special attention." This made me laugh. I questioned my friend, and he insisted that it had nothing to do with gender or sexuality. Rather, he said, his training had taught him that he wouldn't or couldn't always be the center of attention or get his way. He had to learn how to be ruled by his head as well as his heart. He had to learn how to care about his brothers, and to do the work he'd been asked to do; and, he said, some guys just have a harder time with those things than others do. That's all he meant, he said. He didn't want to be mean, and I believed him.

Those of you who did not know Barbara Klett may be wondering why I am unearthing this ancient memory. Those of you who knew her well, will understand: Barbara Klett was most definitely *not* a delicate flower.

I learned the truth of that early in my relationship with her—which did not begin auspiciously. I'd recently joined the parish staff and was in the sacristy one day when Barbara came in and someone introduced us. I was told that she headed up the Finance Office. Thinking, I suppose, that I could charm her with a bit of self-deprecation I said, "Oh, I guess I should tell you: I'm not all that good with numbers." Barbara looked at me, paused, and said, "Oh, great. *Another* one."

Barbara was smart, practical, hard-working—and she was *very* good with numbers. She had a good sense of humor, but she was never silly or foolish. She didn't do drama. And she was incredibly generous. In my early years at Saint Mary's, she was here almost every day, giving of her time and her talent, doing her best to keep this place running. I have this image of her, climbing the steps in the Parish House, heading to the Office, tall, slender, just slightly stooped, serious, determined, always carrying a bag with a book in it and probably the *Wall Street Journal*.

She was always impeccably dressed, though not necessarily conservatively so: every once in a while, she'd arrive wearing a pair of soft, black leather slacks, which amused the clergy, but, still, there she was, trudging up those stairs to pay the bills and deal with the practicalities of keeping a parish open in Times Square. She was incredibly faithful. And that's how I got to know Barbara Klett, day after day, Sunday after Sunday. We talked in the office during the week. She forgave me my innumeracy. And on Sunday we prayed and worshiped together. She sat right there, at one of the early Masses, usually next to her great friend, Mike Merenda. She'd listen to me preach a sermon. I don't know if she approved. She almost never said, but she always listened. I know my liberal politics annoyed her, but we never argued about politics. And because of all that, the work and the problem-solving and the annoying and the forgiving and the prayer and the worship and the listening, Barbara and I became, not friends exactly, but something else, members of the same community, fellow disciples, followers of Jesus, though she would never have put it that way.

Barbara went through some rough times in her later years. Her husband, Jack, had died, and so had many of her friends. That was a hard thing for her, and she told me so. She began to have problems with mobility. She fell more than once. Eliene, her very faithful friend and companion, and I told her to use her walker more, but she didn't like to do that. Many of you will remember a particularly bad fall that led to a serious surgery to deal with a cranial bleed. I visited Barbara in the hospital the day after the surgery. She was sitting up in bed. Half of her hair had been shaved. She had a big and very visible incision on her scalp. The other half of her hair fell fashionably across her face. I told her she was looking very East Village. She tried not to laugh. And then the oddest thing happened, I sat in a chair. She lay in her bed, and we talked about serious things and things not so serious, and sometimes we just sat there in silence. Neither of us seemed to be in a rush. She didn't seem eager to get rid of me. I anointed her and gave her Communion. And there was a kind of honesty and acceptance in the room. A terrible thing had happened. Barbara had had a narrow escape and had had to face her mortality and that is an easy thing for no one. And I felt no need to solve that or fix that. She had fallen, but she had survived, scarred but unbeaten, and with the future not quite certain for either of us; and we sort of just sat there, accepting what was real. And I realized something about Barbara that day: Barbara was no delicate flower, but she felt things as deeply as anybody. That fall, that injury, was a fearful thing. But I think Barbara was determined that day, as she always was, not to be *ruled* by fear.

I think she'd decided long ago not to worship fear, but to love and worship Someone else.

In all three of our readings this afternoon, there is a common theme: the author of Wisdom, Saint Paul, and Jesus offer words of hope. And each insists that hope is founded on resurrection. And resurrection in these texts is not just a theory. It is a belief and a reality. But it is also a way of life because resurrection is something embedded in the very workings of the world: resurrection is God's answer to human mortality, to every form of affliction, and to our fear of sickness and of death. Jesus, Paul, and the author of Wisdom talk about resurrection because they know that human suffering, doubt, and fear are very real. In the gospel lesson, Jesus assures Martha that Lazarus will rise again. And Martha stands in for all of us when she says, that all that may be true, but, still, "If you had only been here, my brother would not have died." *Where were you? Why does the world work this way? Why do our loved ones have to die? Why do we have to die?* Jesus does not answer those questions with philosophy. He answers them with his presence. I am here. I am resurrection and life, he says. And Martha acknowledges this: Jesus is the Son of God who keeps insistently coming into the world, refusing to abandon it or us.

Resurrection is not an abstraction. Saint Paul tells us this afternoon that resurrection is simply the love of Christ. And not even death, he says, can keep Christ from loving us, loving us right through our sins and our failures, loving us through death and into life. And that life-giving love begins not on our death beds, but now, right now. Love allows us to accept who we are, even if we are bad with numbers or are delicate flowers. Love allows us to turn outward to see what is real and still to have hope. Love gives us community, inspires generosity, and teaches us how to serve. Learning how to love gives birth to hope and is a foretaste of the risen life. Learning how to love is the *gateway* to resurrection. It gives us the strength to be grateful for the gift of life even in the midst of loss and grief. It gives us the confidence to say, in the words of the Prayer Book, "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song; Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

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