

*Sister Elizabeth White*  
Memorial Mass - October 22, 2011  
Homily by Sister 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?

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Eulogy by Ann Buttrick '53

My name is Ann Buttrick and I am Liz's youngest sister and also one of her students.

First of all, I would like to thank the Newton College Alumni Association, in the name of our whole family, for having organized this memorial mass for Liz here at Newton. She would have loved to be here, as Newton College was the place she really came into her own as a teacher. It was here that she first had the chance to engage with college-age students, and to infect them with her enormous enthusiasm for literature and the arts.

I never knew Liz at home when I was growing up as I was 13 years her junior, but our sister Alida says that she always had her nose in a book, including under the bed-cover with a flashlight. She was an excellent student, no surprise there, and excelled at just about anything she set herself to master. Liz was home-schooled at first, when we lived in New York City, and for years she had a day-a-week in the Metropolitan Museum. Until the day she died, that museum was the only place she really felt at home in, and could navigate her way around without a hitch. She also attended a wonderful after-school program called the King-Coit School for Theater and the Arts (this in the days before heavy homework). A Broadway Theater was hired at the end of every year, and their play-of-the-year had a run. Liz always seemed to get the lead parts, as Auccasan in *Auccassan and Nicolette*, and Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. I have a clipping from the Herald Tribune with a photo of Liz, heroic on a wooden horse, brandishing a sword.

When Liz was 12, we moved to Germany for a couple of years. She was enrolled in a strict convent school, where nobody spoke English. This must have been a real shock to her, as she was probably considered stupid for the first time in her life. However, when I questioned her about why she hated that school, she snorted and said, "The teaching was poor, AND THERE WAS NO LIBRARY!" After a miserable year, she switched to a boys school where her siblings were. This was a big improvement – by then she was fluent in German, and the teaching was excellent, but it was a boys school, and tough. Alida witnessed a scene in that school: an aggressively, nasty something-or-other slapped Liz so hard that she broke her glasses. Liz immediately slapped that teacher right back . . . hard!

Liz was sent to Noroton when we moved back to the states in 1934. It must have been pure heaven after her German adventures. She graduated from there, then went on to four years at Manhattanville, a year at Radcliffe for a masters in classics, and then to novitiate at Kenwood.

I was packed off to Kenwood as a student the year that she entered, and one of my first clear memories of Liz was trying to sort her out from the flock of white-veiled novices. It was not that difficult, as she had a hard time slowing down to a stately, religious pace. Then she became my teacher occasionally as a novice –practice-teacher at Kenwood, and then later at Eden Hall where she was my class mistress in Third Academic. Finally, when she moved to Newton College, I trailed along after her. My papers came back ablaze with red ink corrections, exclamation marks, and a stern "see me!"

She was allergic to purple prose, inaccuracies, poor organization, grammatical slip-ups and bad spelling. I learned more from her than from any other teacher in my life. Her fiercely high standards are not easy to shake – I feel her right over my shoulder still. For several years after I was married, she was still returning my letters with those red-ink corrections.

I was lucky to get to know her as a friend, after the cloister rules eased. In her Boston College years, she spent many of her holidays with us. After Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner, she would gleefully join our kids at the latest James Bond movie and they would all giggle away together – I have a favorite memory of her, standing next to our living room window, swaying slightly, deep into the book-of-the-day. Books were a passion and I think they had a stronger reality for her than the world around her.

Once we took a 12 year-old grandchild to visit her Great-aunt Liz – Liz's lunch suggestion turned out to be a bar, where she ordered a beer and then asked the astonished 12 year-old what she was reading. Luckily, it was Jane Austen. They were off to the races, bonded for life, and we never got a word in edgewise.

Students were her joy, and she would have been just delighted to see those of you who have come here today to remember her – back at the Newton School she loved.