

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year A)

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*John 11:1-45*

*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

*Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'*

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'*

*When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So 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?'*

Today's story is the final of four consecutive passages from the Revised Common Lectionary that contain very lengthy and details accounts from John's Gospel. The Second Sunday in Lent, we journeyed through the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. The Third Sunday in Lent, we journeyed through the story of Jesus and the Woman at the Well. The Fourth Sunday of Lent, we journeyed through the story of Jesus and the blind man. Today, we are gifted with the story of Jesus and the Raising of Lazarus.

Although I think this title is a bit of a misnomer. Because very little of the story is actually dedicated to the raising of Lazarus. It's a bit similar, in a way, to last week's passage. Last week's passage took up an entire chapter of John's Gospel. But only a few verses of it document the healing itself. The other 90% of the chapter is about the fallout in the community because of that miracle. In a similar manner, not much of today's passage documents the actual raising of Lazarus. Therefore, I would suggest a different title for today's passage: Jesus and the Agonizing Prelude to the Raising of Lazarus.

The problem of the story, Lazarus' illness, is given to us in verse one. But he is not raised until verse 44. The dozens of verses that exist in the area between the two contain some of the most agonizing verses of lament in the Gospels.

We know that Jesus had a special relationship with the characters in today's story. Mary and Martha are, of course, the sisters that bicker back and forth in that well-known story. Mary, we're told, is also the same woman who anoints the feet of Jesus with her hair in a striking act of love to basically anoint him for his death. And we're told that his relationship with Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, was no less close. The evidence of this is in how the sisters choose to relate their desperate message to Jesus. Jesus is away, you see. He's not in town so the sisters send a message to him that Lazarus is sick. And instead of saying, "Lazarus is sick," they send Jesus the following message, "Lord, he whom *you love* is ill."

We grieve when anyone gets sick. But it hits home especially hard when it is someone who we hold dear. Less than a month ago, the coronavirus seemed but a distant threat when it was making some folks sick abroad and thousands of miles away in Washington State. But now it's hitting too close to home as coworkers, loved ones, friends and acquaintances, are getting tested and perhaps testing positive for COVID-19. We know what Jesus felt like when he heard the news that someone close to him was not well.

But a puzzling thing happens in this story. Jesus doesn't immediately go to help. First, he seems to dismiss the severity of Lazarus' illness. Then, instead of dropping what he was doing, he stays in the place that he was for an additional two days before he heads to Bethany, the town where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived.

Now, I don't know what was going on in Jesus' mind. I know many pastors, including myself, who have had to make agonizing choices, having to prioritize competing responsibilities at the same time. And, truth be told, you *don't* have to be a pastor to know that struggle. We just don't know what it was that compelled Jesus to delay his travel to Bethany. But this we do know, the fact that Jesus delayed himself adds another layer of complexity and grief to an already desperate situation.

Then, when the disciples learn that Lazarus has died, they seem despondent. Thomas even suggests that they go to Lazarus' body so that they may also die with him. Surrounded by a cloud of grief, Jesus and his disciples finally depart for Bethany.

What they find when they get there is a grizzly scene. Lament is everywhere. They find out that Lazarus has been dead and sealed in a tomb for four days already. Mary and Martha are besides themselves

with grief. Friends of theirs from Jerusalem have come to console them and to lament with them. Martha is the first one to find Jesus and yell at him in anguish, “How dare you? Where have you been? If you had been here, my brother, *your* friend, would still be alive!”

Have you ever been somewhere else when something bad has happened to someone who is close to you. And then after the fact, whether justified or not, someone who you also love comes up to you and says “where were you when we needed you?!” Friends, there are few things harder to hear than that. And that’s exactly what Jesus gets from his beloved Martha. He says to her that Lazarus will rise again but his words fall upon deaf ears, ears that have been closed off to good news because of the weight of grief. She thinks Jesus is talking about the eventual resurrection, you know, where everyone gets resurrected at the same time in the future. She doesn’t realize that Jesus is talking about the here and now.

Next, as if it wasn’t hard enough to hear it once from Martha, now Jesus has to hear it again from her sister. Mary comes up to Jesus and repeats the agonizing accusation: “Jesus, you weren’t here when your friends needed you. If you had only been here, my brother would still be alive.”

It becomes too much for Jesus. He weeps. Not a gentle tear rolling down the cheek. Not a silent cry that easily goes unnoticed unless you’re paying attention. Jesus weeps. He weeps an agonizing lament. He wails. He collapses on the ground because he just can’t hold it back. Maybe he was sad. Maybe he was angry at himself. Maybe he was beginning to blame himself for Lazarus’ death. Maybe he was afraid that he had screwed up and let his loved ones down. Friends, we’ve all cried the tears that Jesus cries in this passage. We’ve all doubted ourselves. We’ve all grieved what could have been. We’ve all felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the world’s grief.

You may have noticed by now that I didn’t read the full passage prior to this sermon. I deliberately asked Isaac to end the reading before Lazarus is actually raised from the tomb. We’ll get there, I promise. But not yet. I split up today’s reading because I believe that this passage encourages us to linger in lament. The persons who wrote John’s Gospel could have given us a much more abbreviated form of this chapter. They could have simplified it, shortened it, and left out all of this agony, all of this grief. But they didn’t. They chose to leave it in there because lament is an important part of the road to resurrection.

Perhaps if this passage teaches us anything it is that it’s ok to grieve. And there is much grief going on around us and among us right now. The coronavirus has changed *everything*. Just the past two weeks alone have brought on so much change and sacrifice, more than most - if not all - of us are used to. We are all giving up so much. And that means change. And change means loss. And loss brings lament.

It’s ok to grieve weddings that have been postponed or cancelled.

It’s ok to grieve the loss of a job.

It’s ok to grieve the fact that you can’t hug your new grandchild.

It’s ok to grieve the fact that the baby shower has been cancelled and the birth plan has been scrapped.

It’s ok to grieve the vacation or the graduation celebration that has been cancelled.

It’s ok to grieve the fact that we can’t gather physically for worship or fellowship as a church.

It's ok to grieve the fact that you can't go play in person with your school friends or your neighbors.

It's ok to grieve.

Grief is normal. Grief is manageable. Grief is healthy. Grief is nothing to be ashamed of.

So friends, resurrection is coming. But not yet. For now, we're still stuck in the tomb with Lazarus. We're holed up in our homes and cancelling all public gatherings. And that has disrupted every aspect of our lives. So, amid the grief, know this: that all of the sacrifices we're making are for a higher purpose - to protect those around us who are most vulnerable. And if *that's* not the work of the Gospel, I don't know what is.

So friends, I'm going to end today's sermon with the end of today's passage from John's Gospel. We're still in the tomb, my friends. But hear the promise that is coming:

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'*

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**