

John 11:1-45

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

March 26, 2020

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Prayer for Illumination: O God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. As we hear these words from scripture, may your Spirit enlighten our understanding and illumine the way that we should go. Amen.

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." So even 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."

Then, 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 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 Mary 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?" 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 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 upward 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." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us, for the Word of God within us: Thanks be to God.

Anyone else feel a little like they're entombed? All the social distancing and self-quarantine can make us feel sealed-off from the world. I especially think of those of you who live by yourselves—no one to sit down with at the end of the day, no human touch, not even a handshake.

Anyone else feel like their loved ones have been sealed-away from you? You may have particular people you're worried about, people you would normally go running to help—yet right now, to show up physically is to potentially endanger them. I worry about my older family members, but I can't go to their aid. I have a new grandchild due in another week, but we can't go to meet her or to help out with her care. You, too, I know, want to be there for the ones you love, and you can't be.

We have members who are sick. We have older people who live alone. And we can't go visit.

The first time I preached on this passage about the raising of Lazarus, I was doing a seminary internship as a hospital chaplain. I'd spent the night with a family at the bedside of their ten-year-old who had suffered a sudden aneurism while she was on an amusement park ride. That morning, she'd been fine. That night, she was brain-

dead. Her parents stood there sobbing and calling her name as the doctor unplugged the ventilator and we watched her stop breathing.

And then, I had to go downstairs and preach at the Sunday morning chapel service, and the scripture passage for the day was the story of Lazarus. This story where Jesus calls his name, and Lazarus steps out of his tomb, alive.

Ever since that day, I've kind of hated this story. I've hated it because it seems to hold out a promise that I can't fulfill.

There are all kinds of tombs that people get sealed into—even before this virus. I'm guessing that, like me, you have stood outside a few of those tombs, trying to call a loved-one out, only to be met with silence. There are the literal deaths that we'd like to undo, but there are also the equally heartbreaking, gut-wrenching deaths of addiction or depression or dementia, where the person is still physical alive, but we can't reach them, no matter how hard we try.

So this story of the raising of Lazarus seems somehow unhelpful, and even cruel.

Or it did. *Until* I realized that it's not really about Lazarus. And it's not even about saving anyone from death.

Consider that Jesus deliberately didn't help Lazarus avoid death. He let him die, and Lazarus was really dead: so dead that he was starting to decompose.

Not only that, but there's nothing in the story to suggest that after Jesus raised him, Lazarus became immortal. Which means that, at some point, Lazarus had to die again.

So then, what's the point? Why did Jesus *first* let Lazarus die, and then call him out of the tomb?

He did it for Martha and Mary and the whole grieving community—not to solve the problem of death, but as a sign.

But a sign of *what*?

Well, it's no accident that John places this story *here*, at this point in the Gospel where the cross is looming so large. He is preparing us for the fact that Jesus, too, will have to die—will even *choose* to die. Coming back to Bethany to comfort Martha and Mary in their grief, back to the place where the authorities were already plotting to get him, actually made Jesus' death that much more inevitable, and he knew it.

Like Lazarus, Jesus will die, and he, too, will be truly dead. But he won't stay that way.

Like any of us does when a loved-one is in danger, Martha and Mary spent Lazarus' illness frantically trying to save him. And when the stone sealed the door of the tomb, they thought their brother was lost to them forever.

But Jesus wanted to show that Lazarus was never lost to God.

He wanted to show that there was no kind of darkness that could seal God out. No kind of death where Lazarus couldn't hear God speak his name. No kind of tomb from which God couldn't call him forth into new life.

And that isn't true just for Lazarus. It's true for every person we think we've lost, and it's true for us, as well.

Right now, we don't know what's going to happen with the course of this pandemic. We don't know what's going to happen to those we're worried about because of this illness or for whatever other reason. We can do what we can to stay connected with phone calls and emails and video chats and good, old fashioned snail mail. We can pray for them and for ourselves and for all those working in health care and food service and grocery stores and delivery who would love to be able to seal themselves away in safety, but who can't. For their protection and for ours, we can wash our hands and touch only what we must and shop only when necessary and keep at least six-feet away. These things we can do, just as, I'm sure,

Martha and Mary tended to their brother at his sickbed, wiping his brow, spooning broth down his throat, and sending for Jesus to help.

And sometimes, it works. Sometimes we *do* see people get well when we never expected them to live. Sometimes we *do* see people suddenly wake up from addiction; or people who've been sunk into suicidal depression come back to life. Sometimes we do.

But not every time. And for each of us, there will be one time when that doesn't happen—because for whatever reason, we all have to go through death, just as Lazarus did, and just as Jesus did. There's no avoiding it.

So what do we do then?

Well, we weep, of course. We grieve. Even Jesus wept at the pain of grief.

But then, we let them go. Not into oblivion, but into the hands of God. Because the sign that Jesus gave us through Lazarus shows that, *ultimately*, we don't need to worry about our loved ones, no matter what kind of tomb they're in. Lost though they may seem to us, they are not lost to God. And even if they can no longer hear our voices, they will always be able to hear God's voice. When God calls them by name, they will respond.

So when the miracle doesn't happen for those we love: when all we get to see is the tomb, and them sealed inside, the story of Lazarus tells us that they are still, at

the most fundamental level, okay. They are still safely in God's hands. God will still call to them, and they will be able to hear God's voice.

As will we. No matter what kind of darkness surrounds us. No matter what kind of tomb we're sealed inside. God will always come to us and call us by name, summoning us safely into God's light, safely into God's life.

Thanks be to God.