

Through Life Restored

Fourth in a 4-part series
Encounters with Jesus

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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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. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But 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.” ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” ¹² The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” ²⁸ 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.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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.”

⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The 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.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

As we have followed these long narratives through John’s gospel, in worship on Sunday morning, and through this year’s Lenten Devotional book written by our members, I hope you have noticed three things in particular. First, the cast of characters has increased in size considerably, from that first midnight conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, to the Woman at the Well and Jesus, witnessed by the disciples and verified by a group of Samaritans, to last week’s story of the Man Born Blind – which included the disciples and the Pharisees, plus the blind man’s parents and neighbors. Secondly, and this is related to the increased number of people gathering around Jesus, the tension is mounting. As the crowd size increases, so does the danger for Jesus as he makes his way toward the agonizing passion of his betrayal, trial and crucifixion. Third, as Jesus moves through the gospel, his identity as the Son of God becomes more powerfully revealed.

With Nicodemus, that revelation comes simply from the lips of Jesus – telling Nicodemus he is the personification of God’s love for the world. Then, his gift of Living Water to the Woman at the Well becomes a Truth received by many others who come to believe in him. When he heals the Man Born Blind – his words become action - revealing his identity as a performer of miracles. And today’s story is the culminating revelation of Jesus possessing a power reserved for God

alone. Today in Bethany; the whole village is there, and we have moved close to Jerusalem - within walking distance actually, where all too soon there will be throngs of people in an uproar shouting, “Crucify him!”

At the beginning of this fourth encounter, Jesus had been notified that Lazarus was seriously ill, but he had taken his time to get there, he literally orchestrated a delay, and when he got there it was too late. Lazarus was dead; the funeral was over, the body was in the tomb. It had been in the tomb for four days. Even the beautiful language of the King James Version cannot clean up the scene. It says of Lazarus, “He stinketh!”

Now we, in our modern day culture, have managed to take the stench of death away. No longer does a body of a beloved family member stay at home to be cleaned and prepared for burial. A while back an article in *The Economist* took up the high price of funerals with this reflection: “A weakening of organized religion, coupled with the breakdown of the family, means that the “traditional” funeral faces a decline, so in its place - the idea of boosting revenues through more elaborate funerals can reach an extent which defies parody. One American undertaker, for example, apparently offers a coffin fitted with a mobile telephone, air conditioning, a light and a computer toy, all in case the corpse revives.”¹

I experienced something like this once, when I served a church in Atlanta years ago – at the city’s most prominent funeral home doing what pastors do when we are invited by families to help them navigate not only the spiritual dimensions of death, but sometimes the practical ones as well. The family and I had talked about scripture readings, music for the service, and the kinds of things about the deceased that I would lift in a prayer of thanksgiving for a long life, well lived. Then, we went together, to view the body in preparation for receiving friends

¹ The Economist, May 24, 2007.

for the public viewing later that evening. Even this old tradition has become nearly obsolete.

On this particular occasion I also went with the family to pick out a casket. They wanted something simple and natural looking, made of wood. We got, however, the whole spiel from the least expensive to the top of the line. The last coffin we viewed was their most deluxe, costing more than ten thousand dollars, as I remember it. The undertaker was quite enamored with the guaranteed water seal, the silken inner lining, and the shiny, durable metal exterior. In the culmination of his description of the coffin he said, "If this thing had wheels you could take it out of here and drive it down Spring Street." By then, we had all had enough of this, and one of the family members between me and the undertaker stroked the chrome handle of this Cadillac of coffins and said simply, "Yep, only the driver of this baby is dead."

Lazarus was dead. John's gospel story is not unlike our stories of death. There is the illness that leads up to the final breath. There is the shock that someone so deeply loved is gone. There are the sad repetitions of the "What ifs" ... If only you had been here... If only you'd come sooner... If only... There is the crowd of family, and the crowd of friends, gathering around to comfort the sisters, to grieve together, and to hold vigil like we all do when a person we love dies. There are tears in this story too - as there are tears in our stories. Not only Mary's tears and Martha's tears, but also, Jesus' tears.

We know that Jesus was close to this family, closer than any of his other companions. It was to their home he went when he was tired; they fed him when he was hungry. Mary and Martha are like sisters to Jesus; and today their brother has died, their grief is palpable, and Jesus joins them in their tears. Holy, compassionate tears, God's own grief in the face of death is streaming down the face of Jesus. This story washes over us with all the familiarity of what it is always like when someone we love dies. It is a universal human experience, for every human being in the world - God so loves.

In the Buddhist culture, there is a tale about a woman whose child has died. In her agony, she went to the local guru and begged him to give her her child back. “Of course,” he replied – with a challenge. “Just bring me back ONE grain of rice from a household that has escaped the pain of grief.” She ran to the cottage next door, and to the one next to that, and to all the cottages in the village, in each one hearing of another’s grief, another’s loss. She did not get her child back, of course, but she learned something of great value: she learned that life, by definition, is struggle, with suffering its frequent cost, and death its final price. Through her own tears of grief and desperation to reverse her course, she learned compassion and empathy toward the suffering of others. She learned she could drink from any bitter cup without becoming bitter herself, because it was a cup shared by all who had ever lived.²

In the raising of Lazarus, what we discover is that God is willing to join us in that shared experience of death; of losing someone we love forever. But in the raising of Lazarus, we learn that when we face death, we do so with hope – because of Jesus.

This story is the Prelude to Jesus’ own death, and it points to the Postlude of his crucifixion, which is the never-ending hope of resurrection. When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, remember he is only two miles from Jerusalem. The disciples had warned him against going to Bethany, because the plot to kill him has grown in volume and intensity. Bethany is too close to Jerusalem for Jesus’ own good – it is a dangerous place for him. The opposition to Jesus has been marshalling forces, and his enemies wait only for one last deed to make their case, and to be done with this man. So in John’s gospel, this raising of Lazarus is the pivotal event that leads to the cross. It seals Jesus’ fate.

² James Kay, *Seasons of Grace*, “Life before Death,” p. 38.

But it also points beyond the certainty of death for Jesus and for all of us. For the sake of the crowd standing around, we are told, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, Come out!” Then the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in his burial clothes. Jesus said to the people, “Unbind him and let him go.” Jesus says of Lazarus: “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified in it.” New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock says, for Jesus “to call Lazarus out of the tomb is to put himself in... When he screamed into the tomb, “Lazarus, come out!” he yelled loudly. The Greek word here means to scream as a woman might scream in childbirth; to howl, as an animal might howl in the forest, to shriek as one in great pain might cry out. It takes a lot to call the dead back to life. All of Jesus’ life was concentrated in that one scream – and it cost all that he had to give.³

It foreshadows Jesus’ own death. But it foreshadows something else too. Here in Lent, a couple of weeks before Easter, we are already given a clue about Easter. The resurrection of Jesus is not just something that happens to Jesus. Because of Lazarus – we know it is an event that also happens to us. We too cannot go from house to house and ever find a grain of rice from another human being who has not suffered the death of a loved one, or faced down one’s own death. But, because we have become witnesses to the Raising of Lazarus, we can go about our daily lives with the full knowledge that the Great God of All Creation, in the person of Jesus Christ, enters humanity unto death, so that we are never alone in ours. We are never alone in death; we are accompanied by God and always with hope in the resurrection.

AMEN.

³ Fred Craddock, John, Westminster Bible Commentary.

