

The Resurrection and the Life

Sixth in Lenten Series: Who Do You Say I Am?

by

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Palm Sunday

John 11:17-27; 12:12-19

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

In the next verses, Martha runs to get Mary, and the religious authorities begin gathering around to see what Jesus will do.

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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!"

We cannot even imagine how many times a version of this scene with Mary and Martha weeping for their brother Lazarus has played out over the course of the last year. As we begin to see light at the end of this long pandemic tunnel, we are still a nation in deep grief, in a world spinning in grief, fear and uncertainty about the future of the globe. It is estimated that in the United States one in five people have lost someone close to them to Covid-19. Add to the pandemic death toll the increase in violent crime so tragically on display recently in Atlanta and then Boulder this week, and the intensity of grieving people is escalating. It is estimated now that forty percent of Americans know someone who has been killed by gun violence or committed suicide with a gun.¹ We are a people exhausted by grief.

The gospel scene of these sisters crying in a cemetery has been a story repeated countless times over the course of the last year. Lazarus was dead. And it is a story so much like our stories of death. There is the illness that leads to the final breath. The shock that someone 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 friends, gathering around to comfort the sisters, to grieve together, and to hold vigil as we all do when a person we love dies. 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; their brother has died, and their grief is palpable.

This story washes over us with the familiarity of the universal human experience – death in all its fragile wrappings. Which gives us opportunity to admit something today that, I think, is harder to admit on Easter. Easter is our annual big deal celebration of resurrection, with the Halleluiah Chorus and the brass and the glorious full-throated hymns surrounded by the sweet scent of lilies while the world is all decked out for Spring. You can hardly find the tentative dawn of resurrection faith

¹ Forbes.com, March 11, 2021.

for all the Easter ornamentation. And besides, Easter is more about Jesus than it is about us.

But today, on Palm Sunday we can actually see more clearly how Jesus' resurrection is about us. Today's gospel meets us in the cemetery where all of us have once stood. This story is for those who have to live with death. Where we lean into the hope of resurrection more profoundly than any other place, including the sanctuary on Easter morning. It's in the cemetery, next to the grave of a loved one, where we stand beside these sisters doubled over in grief for their brother who has died, when the resurrection feels most personal, more palpable. Jesus does not spring forth from the grave on Easter morning, joyfully shouting "I Am the Resurrection and the Life!" He says in the graveyard, in the face of tears, to the ache in the belly, the longing of the heart.

The more muted celebration of Palm Sunday while we are still apart from one another may resonate more deeply with the truth of this gospel. Jesus comes to us in the isolating moments of deep and unspeakable grief and makes a promise. *I am the Resurrection and the Life*. It is the promise that makes sense of everything else that follows after someone we love has died. It makes sense of the peace and calm that follow the tears. It makes sense of the hope that builds to believing we will be together again someday on the other side of the thin veil that divides heaven and earth. It makes sense of the laughter that comes in the wake of the funeral as our hearts overflow with gratitude for what we had while we were together.

In the raising of Lazarus, what we discover is that God joins us in that isolating experience of death – of losing someone we love. God shares our suffering and sorrow though with a promise that those we love, and we ourselves will be raised with Jesus Christ. 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 has been marshalling forces, and his enemies wait 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. The very next day the palm waving crowd celebrate his victorious entry into Jerusalem while the Pharisees head off to do him in. As New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock, said so plainly: for Jesus "to call Lazarus out of the tomb is to put himself in..."²

So today, at the beginning of Holy Week, this gospel story invites us to linger in our grief, to be honest about what we have lost, the pandemic death toll in our country, the global count mounting toward three million; the long term effects of the virus on many survivors; the increasing deaths to violence; the unemployment, the poverty and sheer numbers of folks living on the edge, including our children and youth whose young lives feel upended; the peripheral sadness of Memorial services that never took place this past year; even the joyful occasions like weddings and graduations that had to be celebrated differently; the loneliness that has taken its toll. Today we are also invited to grieve Jesus' own death, to remember those Hosannas will soon turn into shouts to "Crucify him!", all of that grief is here in God's holy script.

Exactly a year ago, one of my theology professors at Union Seminary, now at Davidson College, had just completed a new and innovative systematic theology. Doug Otatti's book, *A Theology for the Twenty-first Century*, was ready to be published last Spring as we swiftly entered the first wave of the pandemic, and what appeared to be a century-changing moment. So Doug Otatti penned an addendum to the "Preface" in which he acknowledged the intrusion of the pandemic. He said it could be viewed theologically from the perspectives of both judgment and grace. The judgment was not to be found in the sense of divine thunderbolts of wrath but in the exposure of the "consequences of our skewed devotions to partial interests. The lingering debates between

² Gail O'Day & Susan Hulen, *John: Westminster Bible Commentary*, p.123-5.

individual freedom and corporate welfare which allowed the virus to spread uncontrolled for so long. The theologian calls these, “constricted fields of vision and attention,” which resulted in destructive actions and further loss.

But, Otatti said, we can also look into the experience of the pandemic “for traces of grace and the kingdom.” And where are those? In the midst of death, they are glimpses of resurrection: in hospital workers laboring in long and dangerous shifts, a preschool superintendent going to bat for teachers to be paid while the school was closed, supermarket and pharmacy employees risking their lives to make sure that people got the food and medicine they need... They are: a daughter lovingly kissing the FaceTime image of her father on her phone screen, saying goodbye, and praying with him as he dies alone in ICU; a Covid nurse at her dinner break seated at her computer screen with a cup of grape juice and morsel of bread, in an online Eucharist.³ All of that, and more, is Jesus standing in the cemetery next to grieving siblings, standing next to us and saying, *I Am the Resurrection and the Life*.

Friends, the resounding joy of Easter will be here soon enough. More welcome this year, perhaps, than ever. But in the meantime, during this Holy Week let us just be grateful that God has met us in the cemetery where we are living with death, in the midst of all that has been lost, in the midst of deep grief with the promise of resurrection.

AMEN.

³ Tom Long, “Tread Marks and Roses: Glimpses of Resurrection,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2021, p. 2-3.