

March 12, 2008  
Community Lenten Services  
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As we near the end of the season of Lent, and prepare to walk into Holy Week, John's gospel takes us to the story that we usually call "The Raising of Lazarus," although I hope you will notice as we read it how much more time John spends telling us about Jesus' relationship with the living people than he devotes to describing the actual event. The story is very long, actually beginning back in chapter 10 when Jesus retreats to the Wilderness beyond the Jordan. When chapter 11 opens, we are told that a man named Lazarus is ill—very, very ill—the word is used five times in the first verses—and his sisters, Mary and Martha, have sent this news to Jesus. The disciples with him seem to expect Jesus to hurry back to them; but instead, he lingers out in the desert.

This writer has organized his telling of the ministry of Jesus around seven signs—wonderful things that Jesus does to demonstrate that he is indeed the promised Messiah. Each of the signs gets more and more dramatic, until this last one, where he actually raises the dead—demonstrating that there is nothing that is beyond the power of God. However, the shadow of the cross is etched more and more sharply across Jesus' face with each succeeding sign until we hear in the epilogue to this story near the end of Chapter 11, "So from that day on, they planned to put him to death." This is the bridge between the story of Jesus' life, and the story of Jesus' death. Let's pick up the story at verse 17. Listen for the Word of God to you on this day. John 11: 17-44

### Wish You Were Here

I have just returned from a week in New Orleans working with Habitat to build a whole block of new houses. It's been nearly three years since the disaster that we called Katrina, although the locals in New Orleans have taken to just calling it *the Flood*. They want you to know that the land that was underwater along the Gulf coast was larger than the entire country of England. The two hurricanes were merely a small piece of the problem; and the insurance companies have refused to consider most of the damage as storm damage. If it is flood rather than wind and rain, they don't have to pay. Flood damage is not covered in your regular household insurance. New Orleans is a mess. And there aren't enough signs of recovery. But then there are a lot of people who say it was a mess long before the storm. There are just too many poor people and too many drugs and too many guns and too much corruption in government and in business and it just seems so hopeless. No matter how many work trips go down to help, or how many houses Habitat can build, it will just be a tiny drop in the "bucket list" of things that have to be done to restore any kind of order to that city. But then we could probably say that about Baghdad or Beirut or Washington DC, for that matter. I pray and pray. I pray for peace and health and wholeness. I ask God to make things right. And there is just so much that is wrong.

When Jesus shows up in Bethany, Martha doesn't wait for him to get to town. She slips out, away from her sister and away from the house full of mourners who had assembled there, in order to confront Jesus by herself. The writer pauses in the telling of the story to point out the

geography. It's a long, steep climb from the Wilderness beyond the Jordan—that lowest point on the face of the earth around the Dead Sea—to the heights in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Jesus would have been hot and dirty and incredibly tired. There is no mention of the disciples. So it seems that this conversation takes place in private between Martha and Jesus. Martha says, **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”** (v21). The commentaries work very hard at pointing out that this is a confession of faith from Martha, a typical Jewish combination of lament and hope, and not an accusation. But accusation is exactly what I hear. **“If you had been here!”** We read this as if it were a very calm conversation between friends, but it's not. There is a tired man and a grieving woman. I wonder if she whimpered these words helplessly through her streaming tears, or if perhaps she might have screamed at him in rage. Don't you hear her saying to him, “Where have you been? Why weren't you here? Why didn't you come sooner? I've seen you heal others, but you let Lazarus die when you could have prevented it! Don't you care about him? Don't you care about me?”

And later, her sister Mary also comes out to meet Jesus with exactly the same words. Mary is followed by all their friends and neighbors who had come to the house to weep with her—the custom of the day required that they hire at least two flute players and probably some professional mourners to weep and wail at the house and at the tomb, in the same way that we might hire caterers for a funeral. Funerals were very loud and very public events in their world. As Martha said privately, Mary repeats very publicly for everyone to hear, **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”** (v32).

When the call comes to us that a loved one—and this text specifically identifies Lazarus as “the one that Jesus loved” (v3)—when we hear that a loved one is seriously ill, we drop everything and go. We get someone else to make our excuses for us—to cover our routine responsibilities—to take care of the children—to feed the dog—and we go. We ask neighbors and co-workers for help that we would not ordinarily consider asking for, and the help comes—sometimes generously and sometimes grudgingly, but it comes. We ignore the distance—hopping on the next available flight at ridiculously inflated prices, which we would never dream of paying under any other circumstances. Usually it's not until we are in the air that we realize that we have failed to pack our toothbrush or get enough cash from the ATM to pay for the taxi ride from the airport to the hospital. And when we arrive, there is generally nothing that we can actually do to help in the healing process—except to be there. It's the presence of a loved one in desperate situations that matters.

When a loved one is ill, we go. But Jesus doesn't. Jesus lingers in the wilderness—waiting, waiting for just the right time. He will not be pressed by anyone else's agenda. Don't you wonder what Martha has in mind when she adds, **“even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him”** (v22)? Is that her statement of faith? Is it a statement or a desperate plea? Could she possibly imagine that this crowd was gathered up not to mourn her brother, but to witness an amazing miracle? That this crowd of mourners were the ones who would be saying to everyone they met, “You should have been there!” Does she envision that Jesus can—and might—put life back into Lazarus' four days dead corpse? (The details at the tomb make that doubtful; remember that when Jesus commands them to open that tomb, it's this same Martha who says, “No, no, it will stink.”) But in this conversation, Jesus doesn't really respond to her statement at all. He says, **“Your brother will rise again”** (v23). It's clear that Martha doesn't

think that will be happening today. She answers as if from her Sunday School catechism lesson, **“I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day”** (v24). It’s the proper answer of someone well trained in the tradition of the Pharisees. “This is what I have been taught. Yes, yes, I believe it”. She hears, as all of us do, only what makes sense to her, and she nearly misses what Jesus is trying to explain to her.

He says, **“I am the resurrection and the life”** (25). When we hear one of these great “I am” statements in John’s gospel, it’s a peculiar construction in Greek, we know that Jesus is identifying himself with the name that God gave to Moses on Mt Sinai, “I am who I am” (Ex 3: 14). God is the power that gives life and death. Jesus is the power that gives life and death. Jesus is the Resurrection and the life. Victory over death is not confined to some distant future. It’s here and now—fleshed out in Jesus himself. It’s not a someday thing, it a today thing.

And then Jesus asks the hard question. He says in a very neatly constructed symmetrical sentence, **“Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Martha, do you believe this?”** (v26). And Martha says, **“Yes, Lord, I believe.”** I wish Martha had had the courage to say to him, as Thomas will do around the table at the Last Supper, “I don’t know what that means! How can we follow if we don’t know where you are going?” (a very loose paraphrase of 14:5) “Explain it to me more clearly.” But she says, **“Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world”** (v27). It’s the best speech that anyone gets in the gospels. It’s the speech that the other gospel writers give to Peter. But, she doesn’t really answer his question. She doesn’t say that she understands what he means by “those who believe in me will never die.” She doesn’t claim that she understands how it can be possible that “those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” Martha doesn’t begin to grasp what Jesus had said. What she believes in is her relationship to Jesus. She can only affirm the Jesus is her Lord. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the culmination of all the hope of Israel.

This story is the prelude to Holy Week. Every detail anticipates the passion narrative. Death will seem to conquer. God will seem to be absent. But the tomb will be empty on Easter morning. Jesus will be physically separated from those he loves, but it will not be a complete separation. He will never really be absent from them. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. We have heard him promise, **“God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life”** (3:16). Life is promised to us—on both sides of the grave. We are called to believe in resurrection—even when we can see no hopeful signs—maybe especially when we see no hopeful signs. Believing in Jesus conquers death and transforms life. Life is available for Lazarus, and for Martha and for Mary and for us and for New Orleans. Jesus doesn’t promise to remove the evil from the world. Death is still very real, but not ultimate nor final. Lazarus will still die. Martha and Mary will still die. You and I will die, too. But the dangerous promise that Jesus shows us in this last sign is that in our relationship with him, there is life. The Promise is life. We can have life. Here. Now. In this world just as it is; still recovering from the flood--Devil-filled, as Martin Luther called it. We are called to be an Easter people, even though we live in this “Good Friday” world. **“Martha, do you believe this?”**