

Sermon March 29, 2020

Psalm 130 UMH 848

John 11:1-45

A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." When he heard this, Jesus said, "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again." The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?" Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world. ¹⁰ But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them."

He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up." The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well." They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death. Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him." Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world." After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb.

When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, "Remove the stone."

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." Having said

this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go." Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

We are living in a time where life and death is on our minds. When we turn on the news, we hear about the number of people infected with coronavirus, and the number of people who have died. We hear about the lack of protective equipment, and how people are hoarding. And we also hear about the possible death of our economy, and the possible death of our way of life. We grieve for those who have died, and we grieve for the things that we have given up and the things that we might be asked to give up. Like Mary and Martha we want to say that if Jesus had been here, this would not have happened. Some people will lose their faith as they think that God has not answered their prayers. Some will say that God has sent this as a punishment. The story is not over, though, it is just beginning.

Jesus got word that his friend was ailing. Instead of rushing in to fix the problem, he stayed where he was for a few days. Sometimes fixing a problem too quickly actually takes away the chance of learning and growth that can occur through struggle. Or maybe Jesus was just busy. He was on the other side of the Jordan healing and teaching, and many people were coming to believe. They were coming to believe in the kingdom of God, the kingdom that does things differently, where the rich are brought low and the poor are raised up, where the hungry are fed, and the thirsty are given living water. They were starting to believe that love is more important than power. And they were starting to believe that this kingdom that Jesus talked about lives within them and among them and they were charged with bringing it into reality. They were starting to believe that they could make a difference.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that you can make a difference? Do you believe that God's kingdom is within you and among us if we but live it? Anyway, Jesus waited a few days and then told his disciples that he was going to Bethany in Judea. His disciples tried to talk him out of it. They were afraid. There were religious authorities who were looking for an opportunity to stone Jesus. The religious authorities did not like Jesus' teaching of the first being last because they were among the first. They liked it the way it was. They did not want to change or have to give up their privilege.

I hear people talking on the news about trying to preserve the economy. They don't want to give up the way of life that they have enjoyed. They are among the first, who, like the religious authorities in Jesus' day, don't want to give up the privilege that they enjoy. So they say that it doesn't matter that more people will die if we stop isolating and social distancing too soon. They say that the economy is more important. It is a matter of the privileged not wanting change.

Jesus had to step past the objections of the gathered people in order to raise Lazarus from the dead. The people expected things to be the way they always had been. "The smell will be awful." Don't open the tomb. Why risk it? Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb anyway. "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus, come out of that dark place, accept new life. Come into the light. When Lazarus responded, he was still bound. Jesus had to tell the people to untie him and let him go. Untie him from your expectations. Untie him from the past. Let him go from the way it used to be. Let go of your way of thinking and judgment. Let go. We are currently in a dark place. We don't know how long we will be here, isolated from each other as Lazarus was isolated in the tomb. I do know that it will end. We just don't know when.

When we are released, we will have to unbind each other from the expectation that we will go back to the way things used to be. We will have to let go of the past, and step into a future that is new and unknown.

We will have a new opportunity to build the kingdom of God, the place where love replaces wealth and power. We will have an chance to say that we don't want to go back to the way things were, with wealth and power concentrated among a few people. We will have an opportunity to be more compassionate and loving and kind, as we prayerfully discern what activities we want to pick up, and what, if any, activities we now see as unnecessary. In order to do this, we need to unbind ourselves and others from the expectation that things will go back to the way they were before.

Let us pray.

Holy and loving God, we need to feel your presence with us to quell our anxiety. We need your guidance in order to discern how to face the future. Show us what expectations we need to release to you. Show us how to make a difference. Show us how to be your kingdom. Help us to see this time of slowing down as an opportunity to open our hearts to you and listen to your still, small voice.