

Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist

John 11:17-37 (1-45)

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?”

1. “He’s Moving”

Brett Blair shares this joke.

Three friends were discussing death and one of them asked, “What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?”

The first of the friends said, “I would like them to say, he was a great humanitarian who cared about his community.”

The second said, “He was a great husband and father who was an example for many to follow.”

The third friend said, “I would like them to say, ‘Look, he’s moving.’”

2. Good News

We could all use good news right now and short of that, a laugh. I have good news for you: God has a resurrection for you! He wants to bring you out into the light again. He wants to bring you out of that tomb of oppression and give you a new start. He has the power to do it. He can bring you back to life.

Our reading from John 11 speaks to this. Mary and Martha live in Bethany and are some of Jesus' closest friends. They send word to Him that their brother, Lazarus, is desperately ill. They ask Him to come. By the time Jesus gets there, Lazarus has died. He has been in his grave for four days. Mary and Martha come out to meet Jesus and they express their grief. They both say, "If only You had been here, our brother would not have died."

The family and friends have gathered and in their deep sorrow, they begin to weep over the loss of their loved one. The heart of Jesus goes out to them...and Jesus weeps with them. He loved Lazarus, too...and He loves them...and He shares their pain. Jesus goes to the cave-like tomb and tells the people to roll back the stone. Martha warns Jesus that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Jesus tells her, "Only believe and you will see the power of God."

So they roll the stone away. Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come forth." Incredibly, miraculously, amazingly, before their very eyes...Lazarus is resurrected. He comes out of the tomb. He still

has on his grave clothes. His head and feet are still wrapped with mummy-like bandages. However, he has been resurrected.

3. Rise Up

November, 2019, the virus we know as the “Coronavirus” or “COVID-19” appeared in Wuhan, China. Today, nearly five months later, that same virus is affecting people around the world. COVID-19 is potentially on a trajectory that will continue to infect people in 150 countries for months to come—their health, their finances, and their weary spirits.

This event, next to Sept. 11, 2001, may be the most devastating world event of the 21st century and is already being compared to two monumental events of the 20th century: The 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic that infected 500 million people around the globe, killing about 50 million, and the October 1929 US stock market crash and the following Great Depression that reverberated around the world through the 1930s.

The Spanish Flu was a three year epidemic. The Great Depression lasted a good 10 years through the 1930s. The changed and devastation of COVID-19 is still in its infancy. But these kinds of devastating events don't just impact our wallets and our health. They severely impact our emotional, mental, and spiritual health. 1918 ended the bloodiest war (WWI) in history with huge losses of life but was followed by more loss with the Spanish Flu. Both devastated the young, killing primarily those

from 18-40. In 1929, the suicide rate jumped to 18.9% after stocks plummeted 13% on Black Monday (October 28) and another 12% on Black Tuesday (October 29). The economy would take years to recover.

Yet the human spirit, aided by the Holy Spirit, continues to strive, to hope, and to love.

Every time we face death, destruction, despair, and devastation, we call upon the Holy Spirit to renew us, refresh us, and set us on our feet again. Just as faith surged in the past after global changes and difficulties such as the industrial revolution, the revolutionary, civil, and world wars, the Spanish Flu, and the Great Depression, we live in a time when faith is needed now more than ever.

4. Giving Thanks

Ours is a God who does not despise or hate the affliction of the afflicted and does not hide His face from them. There is always a sense in which great living is found in the midst of suffering and tears.

There is a Yiddish folk story that tells of a well-to-do gentleman of leisure much interested in the Hebrew scriptures. He said, "I think I grasp the sense and meaning of these writings except for one thing. I cannot understand how we can be expected to give God thanks for our troubles." The rabbit knew instantly that he

could not explain this with mere words. He said to the gentleman, “If you want to understand this, you will have to visit Isaac the water-carrier.” The gentleman was mystified by this, but knowing the rabbit to be wise, crossed to a poor section of the settlement and came upon Isaac the water-carrier, an old man who had been engaged in mean, lowly, backbreaking labor for some fifty years.

The gentleman explained the reason for his visit. Isaac paused from his labors. Finally, after several minutes of silence, looking baffled, he spoke: “I know that the rabbi is the wisest of men. But I cannot understand why he would send you to me with that question. I cannot answer it because I’ve had nothing but wonderful things happen to me. I thank God every morning and night for all His many blessings on me and my family.”

It is true, is it not? The pure in heart see God. The humble in spirit know Christ’s joy and enter into God’s glory. Paul writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

5. Real with God

Knowing the human condition as we do, and being familiar with our own patterns of grief, it is easy to imagine the emotions Mary and Martha were experiencing at the death of Lazarus—exhausted, devastated, frustrated. During his illness, they sent word to Jesus that His friend was ill, and they waited expectantly for His return and for the healing that they knew would take

place. After all, they had witnessed and heard of the healings of the royal official's son, the paralyzed man by the pool of Bethesda, and the man born blind. It was their turn. Surely He would come.

Now, after several days have passed and their brother has died, Jesus strolls into town. Martha is the first to greet Him with, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." One gets the sense that the greeting is real. It is raw. It is unvarnished. Mary's encounter with Jesus echoed that of her sister. This time there was no oil to anoint His head...there were no tears to wipe with her hair.

The story unfolds, as we know, with the dramatic scene of Jesus calling Lazarus forth from the tomb after he lay dead for four days. The miraculous healing points to the power of God to overcome even the sting of death. The delayed unfolding of this miracle points to the difference between God's timing and human timing. Mary and Martha authentically reveal their deep anger and disappointment in the face of the seeming absence of "the healer" from the first half of their story.

There is something profound in that their authentic expression reflecting their deepest anger and fear was a precursor to the healing of their brother. By opening themselves up fully to Jesus, they were able to receive the gift that awaited them. For Mary and Martha, the healing gift was the resurrection of their brother. For others, the healing unfolds more gradually through restored familial relationships and inner peace.

The healing we long for often begins with our willingness to be real with God—real about our anger, real about our disappointment, real about our fear.

6. **Lent**

Teri Peterson tells of one Lent when they reversed the Advent candle tradition—at every worship service during Lent they blew out a candle, until the last was extinguished at the end of the Good Friday service. Though the days lengthened outside the sanctuary, inside the darkness was growing as they took this journey through wilderness, despair, and dark valleys. By the end of the season, they longed for the light of resurrection. They had learned to trust God in the wilderness and to be honest about their distress.

How often do we find that God seems to have left us alone? It sometimes seems as if God has a penchant for disappearing or for hiding just when we most need to know God's presence. We call into the darkness and get only darkness in return, and so often we give up. We stop talking to God, perhaps afraid that we shouldn't be angry or sad or despairing or lonely, perhaps tired of receiving no answer.

I have always said that if it seems that God is not there, that it is us that have moved, not God. God is with us at all times. God never leaves us. We can leave God, but God never leaves us.

We need to trust in God. In this time of trial and tribulation, we need to trust in God. We will get through this. The love and grace of God will get us through this. In our trust in God, we need to help others get through this. That includes staying in contact with others to help them through. We stay in contact through phone, computer, e-mail. In this time of strife, God's love is there for us and for the whole world.