

***Loving God...Changing Lives: Lazarus***  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher  
March 29, 2020 John 11:1-3, 17-27, 32-34, 38-44

None of us could have imagined that our lives so quickly would be reordered to such a high degree. A restaurant near my home, The Finnish Bistro, gave me a new Finnish word that I continue to hold. The word *Sisu* it is a unique Finnish concept that begins when perseverance has reached its limits. *Sisu*; acting rationally while holding on in the face of adversity.

There are life moments that we draw on, such as inner strength, that as we look back, we are amazed of the wherewithal that got us through that time. That is difficult to see when we are in the middle of this crisis with so much that is still unknown. In this time, we rely on the strength of each other and in our faith to provide *Sisu* that takes us beyond anything we could have imagined that we would endure.

Today's scripture lesson is about two women who draw their strengths from resources beyond what they could bear. The story is of three friends of Jesus, Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. You may be acquainted with Martha and Mary from other stories in the Bible. Remember Mary was the one sitting at Jesus' feet while Martha was banging around in the kitchen being resentful that Mary was not helping her. Martha is the practical, earthy one concerned about the realities of the present. Today's lesson is a story a crisis, in which fortitude and even *Sisu* is call upon. Listen how Martha meets the crisis of her brother's death. *John 11:1-3, 17-27, 32-34, 38-44:*

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." <sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

<sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup>She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” <sup>32</sup>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.”

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>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.” <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I 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.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>The 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.”

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Jesus’ friends, Mary Martha and Lazarus, are in crisis. In this close-knit family, their brother is dying. They know Jesus well enough, that surely he will come and make things right. But no Jesus! Lazarus is very sick...Lazarus dies....no Jesus. The rituals of death begin...no Jesus. Resilient Martha can handle her brother’s illness that is a crisis that happens. But her friend, Jesus,

not being there, what is that all about? Lord when are you going to come? We need you now!

By the time Jesus comes into town, emotions are running high! It's too late, it's too late the worst has happened! Why weren't you here when we needed you most, Jesus? What was so important that you couldn't come and save Lazarus? You were off healing a blind man instead of being here with us.

This story tells us a lot about the dynamics of faith. We talk about faith, we say we have faith. We try to convince ourselves that everything will work out. All will be well, but when it gets to the nitty gritty, when we see the results to the horrors of the crisis, our faith turns to God. Where are you, God? We feel abandoned and alone. We can be like Martha, in a moment of clarity. We say, "Yes, I believe you are the Son of God." The next minute we say, "Stay back, Jesus. We can't open the tomb -- it will surely stink!"

One minute we are saying all will be well, we will be stronger when we come out of this time of isolation. The next minute we are asking how long, we will never recover!

In this moment of death of a friend, we see who Jesus is. Jesus tells Martha, death does not have the final say. **I am life.** Jesus is the source in which death is not the end. This is the precursor to the ultimate life over death, which is the Easter message that we proclaim every time we gather. Jesus is showing all the onlookers, the mourners as well as Martha and Mary, that with Jesus there is life. It does not matter how difficult things are. In that, Jesus brings Lazarus back to life. Spoiler alert: Lazarus eventually dies at some later date.

What happens in the Easter message is the game changer! Jesus is the resurrection. Death does not hold the power over life when we grasp the one who gives us life. Jesus gives us a hope that cannot be dashed by disappointment, lost dreams or viruses.

Throughout this Lenten season, we have been hearing about figures who loved God and their lives changed. Nicodemus, the woman at the well and now Martha first take Jesus literally. Nicodemus asks, “How can we be born again from our Mother’s womb?” The woman at the well says, “Show me this water that quenches my thirst for good, so I do not have to go to this dreaded well with others.” And Martha dismisses Jesus’ words – “Yes, I know we will see my brother at the judgment day, I know that already.” Jesus offers each of these figures something new. He tells Nicodemus that God’s love will not abandon us. The woman at the well is told that the Spirit will quench our thirst and fill us. To Martha, Christ gives life so that all is not lost, all is not gone.

We are in a dark and dangerous moment of all of our lives; we are joined by sisters and brothers worldwide, facing the same dangers and darkness. Jesus tells his friends who waver between affirmation of Jesus and accusation, “I am not on your terms but on God’s terms, and I am the resurrection and life. Believe in me!” As we move beyond perseverance toward the Finnish word of Sisu, we grasp what Jesus says to a heartbroken sister. With broken hearts, we see it for what it is -- the message of Easter. Nothing, nothing in this world or the next not an unseen virus or a broken economy can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ who gives us life.

Thanks be to God. Amen