

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr Bart Roush**

**March 26, 2023**

**John 11:1–7, 17–44**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

We are hungry, O God, for truth, for justice, for love. Nourish us, Spirit, move among us, within us, and around us if necessary, so that your Kingdom might come and your will be done, according to your living Word this day. Amen.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So, the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ...

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise

again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So, the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So, they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 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.” Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

I really love the story of Jesus, Mary, and Martha, but I wonder why this story of Jesus, Mary, and Martha isn't one we seem to remember. There is a lot going on in this story and it is full of details, and like last week, there are many different players in the tale. I think it interesting that the story is often labeled as “the raising of Lazarus,” but the actual sign and act of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, only takes up two verses in the whole story, and it comes toward the end. There is much build up and conversation before the actual sign itself. And because of the extraordinary nature of the miracle, of raising Lazarus from the dead, perhaps we tend to skip the lead up to the story, perhaps we forget to pay attention to what Jesus says before the raising of Lazarus. Given all of this, I understand why people only think of the other Mary and Martha story when we hear their names.

Some of you may remember the other story. The one where Jesus comes to the house of Mary and Martha, and Martha gets mad at Mary because she just wants to sit at the foot of Jesus and learn. Martha gets upset because there are so many preparations and things to do, and Mary isn't helping at all. When Martha complains to Jesus, he gently admonishes her and tells her that Mary has chosen a better activity by sitting at Jesus feet. And so, we get sermons and lessons that tell us to be more like Mary and less like Martha. That seems to be the story we most

remember about these sisters, but there is this one from today as well. And, I think it provides a lovely counter to the other story, and more nuance to who Mary and Martha are.

Jesus has gotten word that his friend Lazarus is ill, but Jesus tells his disciples upon hearing about Lazarus that the illness isn't fatal, but that the illness will be a way for the glory of God to be demonstrated. Jesus has heard of his friend being ill, and he does not rush toward him to heal him, but rather stays where he is for two days. This seems out of the ordinary. We expect Jesus to leave right away, after all, we are told, a friend who Jesus loves is sick. We have already witnessed Jesus heal other people, surely Jesus will, upon hearing the news of his beloved friend being ill, leave from where he and the disciples are to go heal his friend. But instead, he waits. After two days, he departs to make his way to Bethany.

As Jesus is approaching Bethany, the town where Lazarus is, one of Lazarus's sisters, Martha comes to meet Jesus. Martha doesn't wait until Jesus makes it to their house, she is out there waiting expectantly, eagerly. She is in distress, deep grief, full of emotions. As she approaches Jesus she says clearly, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

This is one of those times where I really wish we had stage directions in scripture. I wish we had a parenthetical phrase next to these sentences to know how Martha delivered these lines. Was she angry? Despondent? Resigned? Hopeful?

The first sentence, especially, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died," can be read, I believe, a number of ways. Perhaps it is a complaint and Martha is angry with Jesus because she's mad that Jesus left and wasn't around when Lazarus fell ill.

Maybe Martha is declaring what she has witnessed before when Jesus has healed others, knowing that if Jesus were around when Lazarus got sick that Jesus would have healed him and she is hoping, against all hope, that Jesus will be able to perform another miracle.

Maybe her words are meant to comfort Jesus, who has lost his friend. Maybe Martha is consoling Jesus with an acknowledgement that he would have done whatever he could if he had been there, and it is a thankfulness for his friendship. Maybe it's all of these things.

Whatever the statement is, she does not stop there, but she also says, "But even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." Martha, who in that other story, is the one admonished for not having much faith, or the proper faith, Martha is the one who demonstrates her hope in what Jesus can do.

Jesus simply replies, "Your brother will rise again." And Martha hears Jesus' statement "as general words of comfort, of the vague sort often addressed to survivors that stand beside a loved one's grave."<sup>i</sup> She responds to Jesus with "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." Perhaps she has resigned herself, in this short interaction, to realizing that her brother is dead, that Jesus could not have prevented it, and now only the resurrection at the last day is what is left. The future holds promise, but only at the end of time.

Jesus replies by stating "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who believe in me will never die." And then he asks Martha if she believes this. And she responds, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world." Again, Martha displays her faith and belief. Afterward, she goes to get Mary to let her know Jesus has finally come.

When Mary meets Jesus, she offers the same opening greeting of complaint, or despair, or comfort, or whatever else it may be, “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” But nothing else follows. No other statement from Mary.

Now the story tells us that when Jesus heard this and saw that Mary and those that followed her were crying, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. And he simply asks, “Where have you laid him? And then Jesus begins to cry, which everyone around takes as an indication and expression of Jesus’ love for Lazarus. Maybe. The Greek word that describes Jesus as upset usually means someone who is irritated or agitated, not sad. This is deeply disturbed and troubled of a different sort. Maybe anger. Maybe frustration. Again, I wish we got an indication of Jesus’ mood in the notes, but we don’t get enough information as to know what he is thinking and why he is agitated. Grief is complicated, for all involved.

Grief comes with sadness, to be sure, but also sometimes it comes with anger, or disbelief, sometimes a sense of peace, sometimes an unwillingness to enter into grief at all. Grief is complicated.

Some in the crowd are saying, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?” It’s the same statement that both Martha and Mary make. This idea is reinforced from the start of the story when we are told Jesus does not depart right away upon hearing of Lazarus’ illness. But the thing is, Jesus knew Lazarus was already dead when he got the news. We are told toward the end of the story that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days when Jesus arrives. It was a day’s journey from where Jesus is to Bethany, the town where Mary and Martha lived. So even with the journey to find Jesus, the two days he waits, and the journey back, Lazarus has died the same day the messengers left, or shortly after. There was no way for Jesus to

arrive before Lazarus died. Jesus, ultimately, cannot prevent death, even of his friends.

So maybe Jesus is agitated because people are missing the point altogether. Jesus, we will come to find in the next couple of weeks, certainly defeats death in his own resurrection, but he does not prevent death from happening. Even after he raises Lazarus, eventually, Lazarus will die again. Jesus does not take all the pain away. He cannot remove our grief, because to remove our grief would also be to remove our love.

There is a popular quote, often attributed to the late Queen Elizabeth, but originally from a British Psychiatrist that wrote extensively on grief.<sup>ii</sup> It says, “The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment. To ignore this fact, or to pretend that it is not so, is to put on emotional [blinders] which leave us unprepared for the losses that will inevitably occur in our own lives and unprepared to help others cope with losses in theirs.”

Grief is something I wish none of us had to experience. But when we understand that we grieve because we have loved, maybe that makes it a bit easier to bear. “Grief and love cannot exist without each other. They are two sides of the same coin. If you love someone, the fact is that while that love may not cease, the relationship inevitably will one day.”<sup>iii</sup>

We grieve because we loved, and the deeper we loved, the deeper we grieve. None of us will be able to escape grief. Jesus knows this. Even in the midst of grief, Jesus declares, “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.” Jesus is telling us that death will not have the last word. And this declaration, this promise is given in the middle, where Lazarus is dead in the tomb. Stone cold. And that is incredible, because that is where the promise of life matters. When

everything in life is calling that promise into question, that's when it matters most.

The promise of life & resurrection comes in the middle of the story, while Lazarus is still dead in the tomb. That's when we hear the promise too - in the middle of our stories, in the middle of grief, in the midst of pain. And that is precisely when the promise can give us hope to keep going.

Artist and author, Jan Richardson, writes,

“When we suffer an agonizing loss, something of us goes into the grave. As we wrestle with our grief, we will be visited by questions about what new life waits for us. We will find ourselves faced with a choice: will we gather the graveclothes more tightly around ourselves, or will we respond to the voice of Christ, who stands at the threshold and calls us to come out?”

The choosing is not to be rushed. We need to give the weeping and wailing their due, the tears and the anger their place. It is only in reckoning with death—including the death that has taken place within us—that we can begin to discern what new life lies beyond the tomb of our heart.<sup>iv</sup>

I know Lazarus rising gets the spotlight, but what comes before (and after for that matter) is important. The space is not to be rushed. The time for grieving, in all its messiness and with all the emptions, is important. Only by entering into our grief, only by acknowledging the love behind the grief will we be on the path to transform the grief.

I have not been able to find the originator of this quote, but I read recently, “grief never ends but it changes. It's a passage, not a place to stay. Grief is not a sign of weakness, nor a lack of faith. It is the price of love.”



We have a promise, Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life, and the promise is meant to call us forward through whatever we may face. And Jesus can handle it all, even the messy parts. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*, 86.

<sup>ii</sup> Colin Murry Parkes, "Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life"

<sup>iii</sup> <https://chapelboro.com/town-square/right-as-rain-grief-is-the-price-we-pay-for-love>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/03/31/lent-5-the-lazarus-blessing/>