

Fifth Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): "The Raising of Lazarus, the Death of Jesus, and the Resurrection of Us All"

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

March 28-29, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

It wasn't fear of contagion that made Jesus' closest friends warn Him against traveling to Bethany, where another close friend, Lazarus, lay close to death. They weren't afraid He or they would catch whatever sickness Lazarus had. They worried and warned about the religious leaders who'd wanted to stone Jesus to death a short time before. Why get within lobbing distance of those murderous enemies? Why intentionally enter the lion's den? The disciples' fear was **not** catching, though. Jesus was set on going to be with Martha & Mary, intent on helping Lazarus, just not yet.... One author calls it "the strange tardiness of Jesus Christ."¹

That delay becomes a real issue, because in the meantime Lazarus dies. When Martha hears Jesus is **finally** approaching their home, she runs out to greet Him with a gut punch:

"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." (John 11:21)

We can count on good ol' Martha to say what everyone else is thinking.... Later at the tomb she's the practical one who cautions Jesus about the smell of rot that will escape if people follow through on His command to roll back the stone. At the end of her conversation with Jesus she'll go back to the house and tell her sister Mary that the Lord is looking for her. We don't know if Jesus **really** asked for Mary or if that's just big sister Martha pushing her shy sister out the door to get the love and care she needs.... But Mary will say the same words to Jesus that Martha had:

"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." (John 11:32)

I'm thinking that very sentiment had been voiced so many times by so many people since Lazarus died four days earlier that they all sounded like crime witnesses who had rehearsed their testimony. In unison they could have said:

"Lord, if you had been here Lazarus would not have died."

Some in our current-day may be thinking, "Lord, if you had been here, COVID-19 would never have existed, or at least would not have spread." "Lord, if you cared, my loved one wouldn't be at such high risk." "Lord, if you were close by and not far away, my business wouldn't have had to close, my paycheck would still be coming, and I'd have the insurance I need to cover the sickness I fear."

Martha is sad, Martha is mad, Martha is confused, but Martha is hopeful anyway:

"... even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." (John 11:22)

Jesus answers:

"Your brother will rise again... 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."

(John 11:23, 25-26a)

That's a great promise. It might make us think death is de-fanged so it mustn't bother Jesus much. Au contraire! **Twice** St. John tells us that Jesus is "greatly disturbed" (John 11, 33, 38):

*When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was **greatly disturbed** in spirit and **deeply moved**.* (John 11:33)

To be *greatly disturbed* is to be outright **angry**. "Shuddered" is the literal meaning of the word translated *deeply moved*. Death so **enrages** our Lord that He **shakes** with ire.

The Message paraphrase puts it this way:

33-34 When Jesus saw [Mary] sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, a deep anger welled up within him. He said, "Where did you put him?"

34-35 "Master, come and see," they said. Now Jesus wept.

Shortest verse in all of Scripture: 2 words: *Jesus wept.*

The Greek point of view was that Deity/God/Higher Power had the quality of *apathy*: passionlessness, above-it-all-ness, emotional distance, downright disinterest. That is NOT an accurate take on **our** God. The message that Mary & Martha sent to Jesus was:

*"Lord, he whom you **love** is ill."* (John 11:3)

When Jesus cries at the tomb, onlookers exclaim:

*"See, how he **loved** him!"* (John 11:36)

And they were right. Repeatedly throughout the Fourth Gospel we hear of *the beloved disciple*. Oceans of ink have been spilled about just who that was. But ultimately *the beloved disciple*, the follower Jesus loves, is each one of us. "See, how He loved Stella!" "See, how He loved John!" "See, how He loved Tom!" See, how He weeps with the loved ones of those who have died most recently....

Our Lord called Lazarus back to this life; He sometimes calls others back to this life as well, not literally out of the darkness of the tomb, but back from serious illness miraculously reversed, up from the depths of depression or another debilitating mental illness, extracted from the hell of addiction. "*Unbind [Lazarus] and let him go,*" said Jesus to onlookers way back then. "*Unbind God's children and let them go,*" says Jesus to us now, calling us, beseeching us, deputizing us to unlock whatever chains encircle our brothers and sisters and are within our reach.

The greater gift our Lord gave Lazarus, Martha & Mary, was His own death and resurrection, paving the Way for Life after life that death can't touch. That is the gift He gives us as well. But first: He sees our suffering, He feels our pain, He shares our sorrow, He weeps with us at the deathbed and at the graveside of our loved ones. He became so angry with death, He shuddered so terribly, that He shattered death with His own death.

We're one week away from Palm Sunday, building up to a Lenten crescendo with this weekend's Gospel about the death and raising of Lazarus. It sets the stage for our Lord's death and resurrection. A few verses after the end of today's Gospel St. John adds:

So from that day on [the religious leaders] planned to put [Jesus] to death.
(John 11:53)

His death is life for us. His risen life in which we share through Holy Baptism offers us and our loved ones abundant life now and everlasting life in the world to come.

It's only **human** to wonder sometimes about "the strange tardiness of Jesus Christ." It's only **human** to say, "Lord, if you had been here my [loved one] would not have died." But it is **divine**, and it is **possible**, by the grace the Holy Spirit provides, to trust that our Lord weeps with us in the midst of our personal Good Fridays, and the Father will raise us up in the fullness of time, in this world and in the next. Amen

¹*Interpreter's Bible* (p.639).

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham