

Sermon for Pres House, 3/29/2020, Fifth Sunday of Lent

Lazarus: A Glimpse of Resurrection

So we've come to the fifth Sunday of Lent. I've been feeling - and I imagine this is true for some of you - like it's been really easy to forget we're in Lent right now. A few times over the last couple weeks I've looked up, like, oh, that's right, Lent is going on. As Erica said recently, I don't think any of were planning to give up quite this much.

Here in March 2020 we're in a time of waiting, fear, and mourning - much like the Holy Week we're soon approaching, which brings a lot of pain and doubt for Jesus and his followers. Many of us are also in a time of increased focus on family, loved ones we live with, friends we're in touch with to counteract loneliness - silver linings during quarantine. Much like Holy Week, which sees Jesus and his friends brought closer than ever. And across the world, medical workers are trying to stem the fatal tide of coronavirus, while places like Madison are seeing huge outpourings of mutual aid and neighborly solidarity. Death into life - much like Holy Week, which culminates in Jesus' ultimate triumph over death.

Grief and fear, love and hope, all at once. This somewhat paradoxical cocktail of emotion is what we find in Lent and Holy Week, in this time of pandemic and quarantine, and in today's story of Jesus raising Lazarus.

Death into life: what a poignant story to come back to, now more than ever.

I'm worried about the virus spread and about my asthma which puts me at high risk. I miss seeing friends face to face and pretty soon my partner and I will have to start getting creative with canned food. But I'm also grateful for the long unbroken stretches of time with my partner, after an incredibly busy winter. I'm very tentatively hopeful about the way this pandemic is calling up conversations of universal basic income, and caring for the most vulnerable, even if it is too little, too slow, as always.

Grief, love, and hope. How do we sit in this swirl of emotions and validate each one without letting it consume us? I believe we can find some guidance in the strange yet poignant, supernatural yet very human scene of Jesus bringing his friend Lazarus back from the grave, while sharing in mourning with Mary and Martha and their community. And while I've necessarily prefaced by talking about coronavirus, I want to focus on the story from here on, and let the resonances with our current crisis simply percolate through into our hearts.

Out of all four Gospels, the Lazarus story only appears in John, which is surprising and a little disappointing, because it's such a great preview of what is to come on Good Friday and Easter. It's like a sneak peek of his own impending triumph over death, the grand finale of his physical life. It's the foreshock of the earthquake that is his resurrection. Jesus knows this, and so does the author of John: in this Gospel, it is decisively this final miracle which prompts authorities to

arrest Jesus - in this version, they even consider putting Lazarus to death too - again - because the whole affair shows clearly who Jesus is.

Atheists, like myself a few years ago, love this story because it's so ridiculous, so impossible that someone could be raised from the dead. So I have to touch on it briefly. Do I actually believe this literally happened, death stench and all? I don't know. I don't think that's the point. I believe when Jesus of Nazareth lived he did amazing, incredible things. And most importantly, he left us with an elusive yet fierce grace and hope for how incredible transformation is possible in our world.

We will never be Jesus, probably, but with the help of God and our holy spirits we can look at the areas of our world where death and decay are happening, and breathe life and radical love into them.

Alongside big cosmic implications for Jesus' divinity, this scene also showcases his humanity. I find it especially consoling right now to remember that Jesus cared for his friends and cried with them, that grief and sympathy are not irrelevant in the great scope of the world.

I believe we can balance this paradox of emotions we're in: on one hand the large-scale effort of worrying about, and breathing life into the world. On the other hand, allowing for quiet time of grief, patience, care, and closeness to ourselves and our dear ones.

This story raises a lot of questions, though, and I want to address those as we sit with how to manage this balancing act.

First of all, when he hears that his friend Lazarus is dying, **why** does Jesus wait two days before doing anything? For that matter, **why** doesn't he save Lazarus from dying in the first place, and spare his family the pain? Then when he arrives, if he knows he's about to resurrect Lazarus and prove his divinity, **why** does he cry? And **what** does all this tell us about Holy Week?

So Lazarus lived in Bethany, with his sisters, Martha and Mary. There's a lot of women named Mary in the Bible - so there's disagreement among scholars as to whether this Mary overlaps with Mary Magdalene, who is present at the crucifixion and resurrection. But two sisters Martha and Mary are mentioned several times.

The Gospel of Luke mentions Martha and Mary having Jesus over for dinner. In that scene, Mary listens rapt to his teachings while Martha prepares food, peeved that her sister isn't helping. We can see how these sisters might be the same as in today's story: Martha is still a little accusatory and headstrong, as she goes out to greet Jesus first and challenge him for dawdling, though here, she has become a firm believer in his divinity. Mary, meanwhile, has a slightly more emotional relationship to Jesus as a disciple and friend.

And shortly after Lazarus is raised in the Gospel of John, Jesus returns to have dinner with the three siblings.

It's unclear why two sisters and a brother live together in their own house, all unmarried, with the women seemingly in charge. They're a fascinating Biblical model of an alternative family dynamic, if you're ever looking for that. Suffice to say Jesus doesn't question it, and loves them all as true friends.

So when Lazarus grows ill, Mary writes to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

Something about the brevity of this note - the fact that Mary doesn't even need to name Lazarus - makes it feel so personal. How many of us, right now, can imagine that sinking worry we would feel if we get that text or call from someone we love: *He's sick. She has a fever. They have a cough.*

So *why* does Jesus stay where he is for two more days?

His explanation: "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."

That is, waiting until Lazarus is dead gives Jesus a chance to prove his divinity by raising him.

If this were *anyone* but Jesus, this would be a terrible excuse. Can you imagine how spineless you'd have to be to say, "I'm gonna wait until this situation gets worse, really bad, so I'll look like more of a hero for fixing it."

I don't think Jesus wants us to do that. He's certainly a special case with special rules. My modus operandi with Jesus isn't to ask "why does he do that?" but to say, "OK, this happened. What can we learn from it?" Jesus knew that in raising Lazarus he could show his followers something truly incredible: a glimpse of the resurrection. A sign of his power over death.

So I don't think we should ever intentionally wait for things to get worse before acting. But I think Jesus does this to remind us: when things do get really bad, past what we think is the "point of no return," it's not over yet. Life can still emerge.

But while Jesus' explanation makes sense knowing the whole story, we can understand why Martha and Mary both greet him with the same sentence: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

So why *doesn't* Jesus show up earlier, maybe just in the nick of time to save Lazarus from the brink of death? Maybe this would have showed his power over death, but skipped all the heartache?

But Mary, Martha, and their neighbors are focusing on the *what ifs*. How many of us do that when something goes wrong: *what if this hadn't happened? If I had just been in the right place at the right time. If I had just asked for help earlier.*

It's tempting to dwell on these thoughts, but a good therapist will tell you this thinking is a trap: we cannot live in the past. Bitterness grows, and we do not act.

On my college application several years ago, I was asked my favorite quote, and I wrote down a piece of advice from one of my favorite mystical leaders - Gandalf from the *Lord of the Rings*. For those who don't know the dialogue by heart: Frodo confesses "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened."

Gandalf responds: "So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

God would have us think like Gandalf here. I do not subscribe to the belief that God creates misfortune intentionally in our lives to test us. It is not our task to fixate on what has happened and try and figure out why, or wish it were different. When we are handed sorrow and death, our task is to grieve, and then make life. To look at the present and love deeply. To look at the future and imagine how it could be even better.

There's a time for triumph, a time for gratitude, a time for grief. We just have to be mindful of keeping a healthy balance. Which brings me to my next question.

Why exactly does Jesus cry?

He knows he is about to make things right, but that doesn't take away the sting of seeing his dear friends Mary and Martha sobbing. He loves them, and he is human. Jesus weeps in solidarity with his friends, and because crying is good. It's a vulnerable, cathartic expression of how much we care. Being someone who cries a lot, and cares somewhat aggressively for my friends, I take a lot of comfort in this scene.

As I was writing this, I came across an article in the Harvard Business Review called, "That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief," published last Monday. The author reminds us, it's normal to be feeling grief right now. We're cut off from our everyday rhythms, and lives are at stake everywhere in the world. We don't have to hide from that. By naming it as grief, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable with each other, we can loosen its grip on our bodies and can focus on the silver linings, on life.

A few days after this heart-wrenching scene at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus goes back to Martha and Mary's house to have dinner with all three siblings. This is the day before Palm Sunday, probably less than a week before Jesus will be dead on a cross, and yet here he is, doing something as normal as going to a friend's house for dinner. I take a lot of comfort in that.

I know we can't safely visit friends right now, not physically. But the emotional connection counts for a lot, especially now, and we're lucky to have video chats and phone calls.

During this dinner, Mary of Bethany shows once and for all that she loves Jesus and understands his importance like few others. She opens a bottle of unbelievably expensive perfumed oil, pours it over Jesus' feet, and kneeling down, uses her long hair to rub in the oil. It's an immensely intimate and somewhat scandalous scene.

The disciples who came along for dinner protest that the perfume could have been sold and the money used for charity - that's what Jesus stands for, right? But Jesus defends Mary: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Mary knows the significance of anointing Jesus in advance of his crucifixion, marking him as holy and herself as a devout friend. There is a time for it all, Jesus says: we should care for our communities, care about the big-picture, world-saving questions, and sometimes we should also spill generous quantities of time and love on the people dearest to us.

Palm Sunday is a week from today, and Easter a week after that. Soon, Jesus will be riding into Jerusalem to cheers and shouts of Hosanna, soon after that he will be breaking bread with his friends for the last time before dying on a cross. He will lie in a tomb for two days before rising and appearing mysteriously to his disciples, who are afraid. It will be a disorienting, unprecedented time.

And before it all, the Gospel of John gives us this story of Jesus raising another man from the grave, weeping and mourning, then celebrating.

We are in a disorienting, unprecedented time with the novel coronavirus pandemic. The weeks are still going by, even if each week feels like a month. It is overwhelming to make sense of just how vast this global crisis is, just how much loss is occurring. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. To help in the ways I can, to love in the ways I can.

It is sobering and helpful to remember that between the Crucifixion and Resurrection there is grief, darkness, uncertainty. We do not know how long our present grief and uncertainty will last, nor do we know what life what will come out of it.

We do know that in our friendships and our worries, in our rage and our love, the holy one walks with us through it all. We are not alone. Amen.