

John 11:1-45^{v vi}

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." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." 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.

^v **About the Gospel: John 11:1-45**

John here combines a miracle narrative and a teaching dialogue. The result makes clear the meaning of this last and greatest of Jesus’ signs revealing “the glory of God” (v. 40), God’s presence in the person and acts of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus solidifies the hostility of the authorities against Jesus and marks the transition from ministry to passion.

The note that Lazarus had been dead for four days (burial customarily took place within 24 hours) establishes that he was truly dead, for popular belief held that the soul of a person remained near the body for three days.

Jesus reacts with intense emotion, mingling grief, compassion and anger at the horror of death. He prays for the bystanders, that they may perceive the truth of this sign. As God’s word gave life and light in creation, so now the incarnate Word gives light and life as signs of the eternal life he gives.

^{vi} **Reflection and Response**

Last week, we met Jesus as the light who cured the blind. This week, he is the life who raises the dead. John places this miracle in a sequence of mighty works that aggravated the Sanhedrin to order Jesus’ killing. Raymond Brown writes in *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, “The net effect is the supreme irony that it was above all Jesus’ gift of life that immediately led people to put him to death.” Furthermore, the same Greek word meaning “cry out” (v. 43) is used both when Jesus summons Lazarus to life and when the mob cries for Jesus’ crucifixion in John 19:6. Lazarus comes out trailing his burial cloths because he will need them again someday, but Jesus leaves his garments behind.

In his book *Mystical Christianity*, John Sanford points out more parallels. Lazarus was buried in a cave, the place of sacred events in the ancient world. Christian tradition holds that Jesus was born in a cave. Thus, a return to the cave at death symbolizes a return to God who gives life. Sanford writes, “The world in which you and I are mostly contained, a world in which death seems...ultimate, is not the final reality. The final reality...is the resurrection.”

This resurrection reality is true not only for Lazarus and for Jesus, but for us. God promises us in the

words of Ezekiel that our graves will not stay shut. The letter to Romans assures us that God who raised Christ will also bring our mortal bodies to life.

Cherishing that bone-deep hope does not make it any easier to peer into the yawning black hole of death. If even Jesus wept at the sight, how can we justify a cheerful naivete? He knew that Lazarus' death was not final. Even so, he entered deeply into Mary's anguish. He responds to both women with what they most need: words for Martha, tears for Mary.

Jesus models for us the humanity that does not attain wisdom without entering into life's pathos and pain. He does not avoid tragedy with denial or mindless optimism. He rejects easy detours because he knows that the only way out is through. He trusts that God who seems to take life away will give it back, restored.