

John 11:1-45

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.

4/10/2011 Sermon

By: Susi Kawolics

I have to admit, if it weren't for the lectionary, this would probably not be a passage I would choose to reflect and preach on. I, like perhaps many of you, have heard this read most often at memorial services. I remember one in particular: When my friend Stephanie died in her forties, this was one of the readings at her funeral. I felt it was almost cruel, to hear the story of one who was brought back to life after four days of being dead. It seemed to nearly mock the grief, the anger, the very experience of those who were attending the service. Sure, this story had a happy ending for Martha and Mary. Their loved one was brought back to life. But what about us, and our loved ones? Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus, so he did what he could to restore them. But doesn't he love us as well? Where is Jesus' miraculous power over death when we need it in our lives? And if we know that this kind of miracle no longer happens, what's the point of the story for us today?

I think we can probably all relate to how Mary and Martha felt when Lazarus became ill. They were in a crisis situation, their brother was sick and dying, and they needed Jesus. They called to him for help. When we get bad news, especially from a Doctor about our loved ones, we also turn to Jesus for help, trusting that our prayers will be heard, that he will be there for us.

In our scripture, when Jesus finally does respond and come to Bethany, it's too late for him to help, for him to save Lazarus. The first thing Martha says to him is: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And then he hears the same thing from Mary: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And the Jewish friends and neighbors who were gathered also say: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Clearly, Jesus blew it. Here were some of the people he loved most in the world, and he had really let them down. They needed the presence of their beloved friend, they were counting on him to be there for them, and he wasn't. He stayed away two days longer after he heard how sick Lazarus was. The word for *stayed* in this verse is sometimes translated to mean "he tarried." He took his time, not coming when they called him, and then it was too late.

We also count on those we love to show up when we need them. How do we feel when someone we count on, someone we love, doesn't come? It makes us angry, and we feel betrayed. As Christians, we also have faith that Jesus will come, will be there for us when we call on him. And perhaps there have been times when we've cried out, when we've longed and begged for some kind of sign of that he is present with us, for some kind of assurance that he actually hears us, that he is coming. But sometimes, all we get is silence. We feel as if Jesus is taking his time getting there. We get only a sense of absence and abandonment. Our Psalm today puts it so well. "Out of the depths I cry to you O God." I would guess we've all experienced times when we've been at the bottom, in the depths of darkness and despair, and have cried out to God, wondering just how far away God is. Why is God not coming? Why can't God get here in time?

For Martha, Mary, and their friends, when Jesus finally does come, they all express their feelings to him – their feelings of anger, of disappointment, of perplexity at why he didn't come sooner. And Jesus doesn't rebuke them. He has three different reactions to the people in this story.

The first person Jesus encounters on his way to Bethany is Martha. After she tells him that if he had been there, her brother would not have died, he reacts with the statement: "Your brother will rise again." When Martha responds: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," Jesus goes on to say "I am the resurrection and the life." What does that mean – the resurrection AND the life?

Jesus is saying that he is not only the resurrection, that he not only promises new life after death, but that he also promises new life here and now. Jesus is the one who makes living today, who makes this life worthwhile. Yes, he did come so that we could believe in the promise of eternal life, in his promise of salvation. Martha and Mary already believe this. But he also came so that we could have abundant life now.

All of us have experienced life when it hasn't been abundant. We've had dreams, hopes or plans that haven't come to fruition. Many have had relationships that have ended, job or career losses, financial difficulties, health issues. The life we once knew, or the life we expected to have, has died. But, even today, Jesus is still in the business of bringing life in midst of these devastations. When all is lost, when all seems dark and dead, Jesus promises to bring about something new.

Sometimes the new life can be even better than the old. Some losses can be the turning point for a new and more fulfilling life – a new partner, new job, new home or community, even a new way of thinking that is more life-giving than the former.

But sometimes, the new life is not better, just different. With God's help, however, it can become one where, in time, our grief over our loss is made bearable. Even though in today's gospel, Lazarus is brought back to life and his sisters rejoice, but their lives do not go back to being what they were. After this healing, some of those who witnessed it begin to believe Jesus. But others go and report Jesus to the authorities, and this is the incident that causes them to begin to plot Jesus' execution in earnest. They also begin plans to kill Lazarus. New life does not necessarily mean everything will be wonderful, but it does mean that our lives can have more meaning and purpose because of our belief and trust in Jesus.

Jesus also has a reaction to Mary's confrontation. She says the same thing that Martha does, but his response to her is different. It's not so much the verbal response that strikes me, but rather the emotional one. When he sees how distraught she is, he actually weeps. He is so moved by the emotions of his friends that he weeps with them. For me personally, this is a very moving and reassuring response by Jesus. Even though he knew what the ending was going to be, he was still present to the emotions of those he ministered to. He was able to empathize with them, to be right there with them in their pain, in their sadness, in their suffering.

We, like Jesus, know and believe in what the ultimate ending of our stories will be - that the ultimate end of our lives will not be an end at all, but rather will be eternal life. That in the end, we will be held in the arms of God, and all suffering and pain will be over forever. And yet, we still feel loss and grief when a loved one dies. From the deepest place in our heart, we cry to God. The depth of sorrow is not denied, even though we know the one we love has gone to be with God. It does not mean that our faith is lessened when we cry, when we grieve. If anything, Jesus' tears show us that Jesus is right there with us in our grief. Our God, made incarnate in the person of Jesus, is with us in the depths of our sorrows, as well as the height of our joys. Our

God is not a remote God, but rather a tender God who is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything that causes us sorrow and suffering. Jesus is with us in our anger as well – not reprimanding, but simply being with us, just as he was with Mary and Martha. We can bring to God everything we feel – anguish, confusion, anger, betrayal, perplexity. God understands, and abides with us, staying close through it all.

Martha and Mary are not the only ones who have something to say about Jesus' failure to come and heal Lazarus. The community of their friends is also puzzled by his delay. They reason if he could bring sight to a blind man he didn't even know, he could surely have healed such a good friend of his. And Jesus has a response for them as well. After he restores Lazarus' life and calls him to come out of the tomb, he tells those in the gathered community to unbind Lazarus, to take that last step in freeing him from death. So while it is God who brings Lazarus back to life, the work is not God's alone. The community is called to participate in this work of bringing new life.

We may find ourselves on both sides of this. Sometimes, we may have been the ones who need the community to help restore our lives. Those of us who have experienced a difficult loss, or a debilitating illness, or who have discovered a dark secret about a loved one and must face a future that is no longer the way we had anticipated it would be, we need a community to surround us and uphold us. Those who have confronted addictions, who are trying to die to their old life and start a new one, they also know the need for community. They know that even though it is God who will bring them new life, they still need support, and love to live this new life.

As members of the church, we become the tangible Body of Christ for those who are facing a new life. The church community is called to be a place where people can come to grieve their deaths, their losses, and to be surrounded by those who gently unbind them, let them cry, and lead them to new life. The church is called to be the tangible presence of the grieving, compassionate, abiding God in peoples' lives.

Jesus says he is the resurrection and the life, and he continues to bring new life to our world today. But it is through his death on the cross, through the crucifixion that he is lifted up, and lifts us as well. Knowing and trusting in Jesus means that we can face death and grief, that he understands, and suffers and weeps with us, and also brings us hope in the promise of resurrection.

May we trust in his abiding presence, and draw strength from his compassion. May we believe and hope in the new life he promises, and also be those who bring that life to the dead places in the world.

Amen.