

## **Lent 5A 2017 sermon**

### ***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.*

Today’s Gospel story begins with Mary and Martha sending a message to Jesus that their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus loves, is ill. But rather than setting out immediately to go to Lazarus to heal him, Jesus intentionally waits where he is for two days. **Then** he tells his disciples, “Lazarus is dead. For *your* sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may *believe*.”

*Believing* is a central theme in John’s Gospel; so it is important that we try to understand what John *means* by “believing.” It is a critical question, for ever since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation (500 years ago), “what you believe” has become the criteria for whether or not you are “saved.” But the Reformers could not agree on what the “right” beliefs *were*. Over and over again, they split over matters of “belief” – holding different intellectual concepts and doctrines about God and Jesus and salvation. And that trend of Christian churches splitting over “beliefs” tragically continues to this day. Yes, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who *believes* in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (*John 3:16*) But what does it *mean* to **believe** in Jesus?

Those of you who have heard me teach and preach over the past 19 years know that the New Testament Greek word which is often translated “believe”<sup>1</sup> can *just* as validly be translated “trust;” *and* you know that I have a strong preference for using “trust” rather than “believe.” For we have a tendency to think that “believing” is something that is done with our minds; it is “intellectual assent” to some idea, as in, “I believe in evolution,” or “I believe [or don’t believe] that human beings contribute to global warming.”

But I don’t think Jesus came into our world in order that we might “think the right things” about him and God (though that can be important). Rather, Jesus came that we might *put our trust* in his – and his Father’s – love, and thereby open

ourselves to the flow of divine life, spirit, and love. *Mistrust* and fear cause us to throw up our defenses and batten down the hatches of our hearts, minds, and souls, lest we be hurt. Only when we *trust* do we allow our hearts, souls, and minds to be open and vulnerable to God and our neighbor, allowing the flow of divine life and love – the flow of God’s Spirit – into us, through us, and out from us.

Today’s Gospel story dramatically shows us the vulnerability of the God-made-flesh, God’s Son, Jesus. Remarkably, this is the only time in John’s Gospel when we see Jesus being **emotionally** vulnerable; for in John’s Gospel, Jesus displays no agony in the Garden of Gethsemane *or* on the cross. We are not even told that he is angry when he drives out the money-changers from the Temple.<sup>2</sup> But *here*, when confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus, whom he loves, and seeing Lazarus’ sister (whom he loves) weeping, Jesus becomes “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,” and he starts *sobbing* – to such an extent that those who are standing by remark, “See how much he loved him!”

In the last verse of today’s Gospel story, John tells us that “Many of the Jews... who ... had seen what Jesus did, believed in him [trusted in him].” I wonder: When John refers to “what Jesus did,” is he referring to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, which proved his great power, or to Jesus’ weeping, which proved his great vulnerability and love? Which was it that made “many of the Jews” trust in him?

In her powerful commentary on the Gospel of John, New Testament scholar Gail O’Day writes: “The Gospel’s various literary techniques have a common... goal: to open up the world of the Gospel story to the world of the reader’s own experience... so that readers can discover the presence of God in Jesus for themselves.”<sup>3</sup> John Shea echoes this when he writes: “[Lazarus’] story is not his alone, but the story of all who become ill. [The name] Lazarus means ‘God helps’ and Bethany means ‘the house of the afflicted.’ Therefore, ultimately this [story about Lazarus of Bethany] is a story of how God helps those in the house of the afflicted—not just Lazarus but also his sisters Mary and Martha and, as it turns out, even some Jews from Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup> And even you and me. This story is not just about something that happened 2000 years ago; it is a story of Jesus being “greatly disturbed in spirit” and weeping over *our* afflictions, our griefs, our deaths (physical and otherwise), **today**. It is a story of God powerfully entering into our lives, which at times seem dead, stinking, decaying, bound – and raising **us** from the dead, not just after our physical death, but here and now, amidst our **little** deaths of divorce, empty nests, the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, loss of our health – you can name your own house of affliction. But Jesus will never enter our lives forcibly; he will only do so if we open the door to him. Which is why *trusting in him* is such a foundational message of John’s Gospel. For only when we trust can we let down our defenses and be open and vulnerable to the flow of God’s love, God’s Spirit into us, through us, and out into the world.

Which brings up a final observation: Lazarus' restoration to life isn't complete until **others** unbind him. It would have been an easy matter for Jesus himself to unwrap the burial cloths from the one he loved; but he chose instead to involve the community in the dead man's resurrection. Which means that you and I are called – in fact, the word in the Gospel is a *command* – to participate in the resurrections of people all around us who are bound in all sorts of little deaths: poverty, neglect, disabilities, physical and mental illnesses, addictions, being alienated because of race, religion, sexual orientation, country of origin, being stuck in their own downward spiral – self-inflicted or not – from which they **cannot**, of their own will or power, climb out. It is Jesus' fervent desire that these loved ones of his be unbound.

But the hands that unbind them must be yours and mine. As Teresa of Avila said: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Today's Gospel shows us that God in Christ is constantly wanting to bring life out of death. But he cannot do so in **us** unless we trust and are vulnerable; and he cannot do so in **others** without our willing participation in his resurrecting Spirit.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> *pisteuo*

<sup>2</sup> John 2:13-17

<sup>3</sup> Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 494

<sup>4</sup> John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 145