"Lazarus, Come Out!"

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John 11:1-45

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

Today's Gospel story is about friends and family; it's about grief and joy; it's about death and life; above all it is about the power of God. It is one of the most significant miracles in the Bible: Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. This remarkable story is told only in John's Gospel. It leads directly to the decision of the Jewish leaders to put Jesus to death. It sets the stage for the events of Holy Week. It is not a coincidence that we are reading this story on the final Sunday before Palm Sunday.

"Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha." This is the same Mary and Martha that appear in the Gospel of Luke, where Martha was "worried and distracted by many things" (Luke 10:41) while Mary "sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying" (Luke 10:39). Now we learn that the two sisters had a brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus calls "our friend." They live in the town of Bethany, which was close to Jerusalem; John says it was "some two miles away." If you start in Jerusalem and head southeast, over the crest of Mount of Olives, you will come to Bethany. You can't make that journey directly today; the great barrier wall that separates Israel from the West Bank is in the way. You have to go a long way around. Today the Palestinian city of Al-Eizariya stands where the ancient village of Bethany once stood; it is a city of about 23,000 people, and the name of the city literally means "the place of Lazarus." You can visit the tomb of Lazarus here.

Lazarus was ill. Deathly ill. Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." "But," John says, "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." The illness of Lazarus is like the blindness of the man in John 9 whom I talked about last week; they both provide an opportunity for Jesus to reveal his glory. So Jesus does *not* go rushing off to help his friend. He allows Lazarus to die. Lazarus *had* to die, for the miracle to happen.

Jesus waits two days. Once he is certain that Lazarus is dead, he travels to Bethany with his disciples. The region of Judea, where Bethany is, has become dangerous for Jesus – a growing number of Jewish leaders are *very* angry at him. Some of them think he should be put to death for teaching what they think are blasphemous things about God. The disciples aren't at all sure it's a good idea to go there – Thomas in particular thinks it could lead to the deaths of *all* of them – but Jesus says, "we're going." They arrive four days after Lazarus's body has been placed in a tomb. Mary and Martha are receiving many guests who are offering their condolences. Martha hears that Jesus is coming and rushes to meet him. She greets him with these very accusatory words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would

not have died." Jesus *could* have arrived in time. But he didn't. She's hurt, and she's angry. Jesus says to her: "Your brother will rise again." Martha replies: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." She's talking about what is called the "general" or "universal" resurrection, the belief that God will raise all the dead on a day in the future that the Creator will choose. Many Jews in the time of Jesus believed in the general resurrection, and it remains a central tenet of Jewish faith to this very day.

But Jesus says to Martha: "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." These words may be familiar to you; they are often read at memorial services. With these words, Jesus declares that he possesses *full authority* over the power of death. Christianity, like Judaism, affirms that *everyone* will be raised. The apostle Paul said "there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous" (Acts 24:15). Our classic creeds, like the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, affirm the "resurrection of the dead" and the "resurrection of the body." This is equivalent to one of the traditional thirteen principles of Jewish faith: "I firmly believe that there will take place a revival of the dead at a time which will please the Creator, blessed be His name." But Christianity differs from Judaism in that we affirm that *Jesus* holds the power of resurrection. *He* is the resurrection and the life. Eternal life is in *his* hands.

Martha believes that Lazarus will be raised in the general resurrection on the last day. She also seems to believe that Jesus has the power to do something *sooner* than that. She says to him: "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." She also expresses her complete confidence that that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." She has *faith* in him.

Martha summons Mary. Mary kneels and greets Jesus with the very same words that Martha had uttered: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She too blames Jesus for fact that her brother is dead. She is crying; her friends are crying; even "Jesus began to weep." Or, in the King James Version, simply "Jesus wept" – the shortest verse in the Bible. So much *power*, so much *emotion*, in a mere two words. Even our Lord and Savior, God incarnate, can be moved to *tears*. His humanity is in full view. Remember this, when you are suffering, or grieving. Jesus weeps when we weep. This is not a God who is aloof from the cares of the world. This is a God who cares – *immensely*.

They arrive at the tomb. "It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it." Jesus tells them to remove the stone. Martha objects. It's been four days. It's going to smell *really bad* in there! Jesus pulls her aside: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" She had expressed her faith in Jesus, she had even implied that she believed he could do something about this tragic death, yet now she is less certain. *Can he really do this?* Martha's faith is mixed with some degree of doubt. Which makes her relatable, right? For aren't we *all* some curious mixture of both faith and doubt?

The stone is rolled aside. I wonder what the crowd was thinking. *What's he going to do? Are we really going to see the glory of God?* Jesus looks up to the heavens and prays: "Father, I thank you for having heard me." It's a prayer of thanksgiving. "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." He has two goals here. The first is simply to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. But the second, *which is more important*, is that everyone witnessing this event would *believe that Jesus comes from God.* He wants people to understand that he is acting with the authority of God. He is not setting himself against God, nor is he claiming power from God without God's permission. No, God has given him *full authority* to do what he is about to do. "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 demonstrates that he *is* the resurrection and the life. The power he wields *exceeds* the power of death.

Starting in the earliest centuries of the church, Christians have tried to capture this moment in art. Here is a sixth-century mosaic in Ravenna, Italy. Here is a painting by the Italian artist Duccio, in the early 1300s. This is a Byzantine icon from about the year 1400. Here's a Russian icon from the 15th century. This painting is by Michelangelo, in the early 1600s. Here is Rembrandt's version, about 20 years later. Here is one by the English poet William Blake, in 1800. This one is by the French artist Léon Bonnat, in 1857. Here's one by the Danish artist Carl Bloch, in 1875. This one is by Vincent van Gogh, in the late 1900s. And this is from a Christian community in Cameroon, about 50 years ago. All of these artists – and many more – have tried to capture this glorious moment when *Jesus overpowered death*.

John says: "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him." But not *all* the witnesses believe. Some of them report this miraculous event to the Jewish leaders. They call a meeting. "What are we to do?" they ask. "This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." Caiaphas, the high priest, says: "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." God had revealed to him that "Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God." So "from that day on they planned to put him to death." It is the beginning of the end.

The Jewish leaders also begin plotting to kill Lazarus, "since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus." But they do not succeed. His death is not recorded. Early Christian traditions maintain that he lived a long time after this. There are two primary legends about him. One version says there continued to be plots against him after Jesus was raised from the dead. He fled Judea, traveling by boat to the island of Cyprus, in the Mediterranean Sea. He became the first bishop of a city called Kition, and after thirty years he died and was buried for a second – and final – time. That city is called Larnaca today. Eleven centuries ago, a tomb was found in Larnaca bearing the inscription: "Lazarus friend of Christ." If you're ever in Cyprus, go to Larnaca and visit the Church of Saint Lazarus. Another legend says that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were all forced to leave Judea; they were put into a boat "without sails, oars, or helm." But God was with them, and their ship made it all the way across the Mediterranean Sea to Gaul, which is now modern France. They separate and start preaching the Gospel. Lazarus goes to Marseille, converts many people, and becomes the city's first bishop. But when the Emperor Domitian launched a persecution against Christians, Lazarus was captured and beheaded. His body was buried in a city called Autun. If you're ever in the region of Burgundy, go to the Cathedral of Saint Lazarus in Autun, where Lazarus's relics are said to be enshrined.

I have no idea whether either of those stories is true. What is certain is that Lazarus eventually died. Again. He did not get to escape death entirely. None of us gets that privilege. There will come a day, for each of us, when we take our last breath. But *there is no reason for us to be afraid of death*. Why not? Because *Jesus is the resurrection and the life*. Jesus *has power over death*! The grave couldn't hold Lazarus, and it couldn't hold Jesus, and *it won't hold you or me*. As Jesus said: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." We will experience a resurrection. Jesus will summon each of us out of the tomb. We will receive a gift of *glory*!

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