

April 6, 2014

## Scripture

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

## Sermon: The Death of Lazarus

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We learn very quickly in this story that Jesus has a deep affinity and love for Lazarus, and for his two sisters Mary and Martha. He has stayed in their home and eaten at their table and no doubt talked at length about life and faith and the meaning of his ministry. And then one day when Jesus is traveling further north, Lazarus becomes ill, and word is sent to alert Jesus. When Jesus receives this troubling news, the story develops into a remarkable tapestry of faith in the face of uncertainty, assurance in the midst of distress, and a profound foreshadowing of Jesus's own agony, death, and resurrection.

In this story we get a particularly revealing portrait not only of the breadth and depth of Jesus's emotional life and relationships, but also of the very character of God. In the story of the death of Lazarus, we see as vividly and poignantly as we do anywhere in the New Testament, the inner and personal struggle of Jesus himself. The story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is the other most closely related passage. In both stories we see Jesus embody the pain and grief of human life that comes in the face of great trouble. We see in these passages that what *we* know of sorrow, loss, and death, he also knows.

Life has taught each of us that the decisions we face and the choices we make have consequences, and that sometimes the choices are all hard ones. We also know that, for each of us, at some critical moment, the horizon of life will collapse upon us, and we too shall breath our last. This story of Lazarus reminds us that Jesus knows what we know of life's complex and darker sides.

And so this is a story of high drama. As it begins Jesus learns that his dear friend is ill and on the verge of death. Lazarus's sisters are reaching out to Jesus, hoping that somehow he can help. But Jesus pauses, and lets two critical days slip away. What must Mary and Martha have thought? Why does Jesus not come?

On the one hand Jesus seems to say that this delay will, in the end, glorify God, but the story as a whole suggests that Jesus is also grappling internally with a disturbing turn in the direction of events. For Jesus knows there are dangers and losses that lie ahead. He waits, and his waiting has immediate, negative consequences for people he loves who are living through real anxiety and grief as Lazarus dies. Jesus is not resisting the steps he knows he must take, but nor is he the least bit cavalier about it. He seems to be embodying more fully than ever, both human dread, as well as the call and pull of God towards the heart of death itself.

It is, after all, one thing to admit, in a kind of abstract sense, that each of us will face death one day. We know the truth of it rationally and intellectually. But it is quite another to get the

news that the illness or injuries we face are not treatable, that we shall in fact die from this specific circumstance, that time is short, and that nothing can change the outcome.

This is what Jesus knows, not so much for Lazarus, but for himself. Jesus can see the cross rising on the horizon, and the horizon is collapsing upon him. Under that weight, the mind and body tremble. And even Jesus pauses. For as Jesus steps towards Lazarus, he steps ever closer to his own fate, and his actions on behalf of Lazarus set in motion the forces that rise against him. Jesus hears the news of Lazarus, sees the terrain out in front of him, and for two days prepares himself for what is to come.

Then, he goes. Grief and the death of his friend await him in Bethany, but he goes. The disciples warn him that enemies plot his own demise, but he goes. He himself can see the cross in the distance, but he goes. And he goes because he sees not only the cross, but some promise beyond it.

Arriving in Bethany, he interacts first with Martha. In that brief interaction, Martha sees it too. Some veil is lifted from her eyes and even in her grief she sees in Jesus more than most. Even in her confusion, some part of her believes, senses, recognizes in Jesus ...hope, not just for Lazarus, but for the world. She senses that some new future, a future that contains the hope of the world, is breaking in upon them in and through her friend, Jesus. She runs to get her sister, Mary.

Mary, the one who will anoint Jesus with expensive oil in chapter 12, falls before Jesus and weeps. Jesus is literally overwhelmed with sorrow, and he himself begins to cry, so much so that those around him see in his tears his deep love of Lazarus, and his compassion for Mary and Martha. But Mary and Martha see in his tears a compassion for the world. They know that something profound is happening.

Jesus turns to the tomb, and John reminds us again that Jesus is deeply troubled, even as the stone is rolled away from the tombs entrance. Remember, John writes this story in the light of the resurrection, wanting us to understand that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in and through him God's new creation is bursting upon the world, and yet he insists upon including these portraits of Jesus troubled and weeping, emphasizing that Jesus knows what we know about love and life and loss and death.

He calls to Lazarus, "Come out." And Lazarus emerges, bound and tied and covered, but now alive. Jesus says, "Untie him, and let him go." Imagine what shock and joy and laughter must have erupted at that moment, and in the hours and days that follow. Tears of sorrow become tears of amazement and joy for this family and these friends.

The result of all of this is two fold. On the one hand, some who witness this extraordinary moment, and others who hear about it, are themselves freed with Lazarus from the bonds that tie them up in knots and blind them to the presence of God in the rhythms of everyday life. Some in that moment feel their own breadth catch as they contemplate what this means for their lives and for the world. They see that Jesus, even and perhaps especially in his sorrow, is so aligned with God's intention for the world, that the power of life itself, reflected in him, is set free and cannot be constrained even by a tomb.

The new creation vibrates with anticipation. Mary and Martha and Lazarus and those about them feel it in the ground on which they stand. I hope you feel it in the power of this story. For whether we weep in joy or sorrow, this story announces without embarrassment that our tears are God's tears, and that when tears of joy and sorrow streak across our faces, it is God who laughs and weeps with, in and through us. There is no separation, no distance, between us and the love of God for us. God is as close as our tears.

On the other hand, there are others, and even, dare I say, aspects of you and me, who don't see it or feel it, whose confidence wavers, whose doubts rage back. Some, even some who witnessed the raising of Lazarus, turned not to Jesus but to Caiaphas, the high priest. With him, they shall plot the death of Jesus.

The Gospels, in fact the whole of the Christian witness, reminds us, that truth be told, we play all of the roles in this story. We not only rejoice in the life of Jesus, but we also, in the end, betray and desert him. Sometimes we just go back and forth chaotically between these poles of faith and doubt, good and evil. I suspect most of us know something of each extreme.

But here is the thing: Jesus went to Bethany, raised Lazarus, and turned to face the cross precisely for those of us who betray, abandon, and desert him. Through the warmth of God's tears, Jesus reaches out and snatches even us from our own worst selves.

That is the point of the whole story. It is not God who throws us into the darkness of the tomb; we do that. It is God who throws back the stone, reaches in, and pulls us out.

Amen.