

L5A 2023 John 11:1-45

Today John enlightens us with another lengthy story that is unique to his version of the gospel. You may be extra familiar with just a small part of this story as it's one of the suggested gospel readings for Lutheran funerals: the part that begins with Martha saying, *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died...* and ends with Jesus' proclamation, *I am the resurrection and the life*. That's a good couple verses for funerals, and heaven knows that people in deep grief don't really want to listen to this whole passage, but it is a missed opportunity: I wish we would more often read the part that includes verse 35: *Jesus began to weep*—or if you prefer the King James, *Jesus wept*. If you are a trivia buff or if the pastor who confirmed you made you memorize scripture verses, you might think is the shortest verse in the Bible, but it's not. 1 Thessalonians 5:16 says *Rejoice always...* which, in the original Greek is shorter. But word count aside, isn't it odd that we are instructed to *rejoice always*, yet we read that God incarnate *began to weep*. What do we make of that?

Part of me wants to ask Jesus, *Well, what did you expect?* He gets word that Lazarus is ill, and he does nothing. For two whole days. Only then, when Lazarus is good and dead, does he set out for Bethany. The disciples would have prevented him from going, because the religious authorities were already after him, and they had the right idea; when the Pharisees hear that Jesus raised Lazarus, that's what makes them decide to have Jesus killed. Still, they go, with Thomas, whom everyone loves to remember as the doubter, leading the disciples to follow Jesus, even to their own death.

Jesus first encounters Martha, who greets him: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*. With no description of her tone, we can't tell if this was simply a lament, that she thought it was tragic that Jesus didn't make it in time, or if it is an accusation, that she's angry at Jesus for taking so long. Jesus assures Martha that Lazarus will rise again—which is true, but does not seem to be the answer she was looking for. *Yeah*, she says, *I know all about the resurrection; [but that doesn't do me a lot of good now.]* Jesus wrestles a declaration of faith out of her, but we still don't hear that she is comforted. So when Mary greets Jesus with the exact same words, he doesn't engage her in a theological lesson, he simply asks her to take him to see where they have buried Lazarus, and then, he begins to weep.

Jesus was telling the truth when he said that Lazarus would rise again, both at the resurrection, as Martha said, and even in this life—though we assume Lazarus eventually did die again; if not we'd have a Dan Brown book about him by now. But even though Jesus knows Lazarus will live again, in both eternal and earthly life, Jesus still weeps—because Lazarus, the one whom he loved, suffered an illness severe enough that he died; because Martha and Mary and their friends suffered in their grief. Jesus knows the life that's coming next, but in that moment, they all are grieving death. And so, Jesus weeps.

This story foreshadows Jesus' own death and resurrection; that's why we read it at this time of year. When Jesus tells the disciples that he's glad he wasn't there before Lazarus died, because this way they'll believe, we don't know exactly *what* he's hoping this sign will make them believe: this is the last in a long line of Jesus' signs, so if they've been paying attention, they should already believe that he acts with the power of God. When he speaks to the Father outside Lazarus' tomb, it seems to be more for the crowd to believe that God sent him than for the disciples to believe that. Perhaps he is hoping that, when he dies, the disciples will believe he will rise; or that after he is resurrected, they will believe it's really him standing alive among them again. It's not an easy thing to believe in life when death is all around. For that matter, the exact opposite is true: it is not easy to face the reality of death in the flush and fullness of life. What more life could abound than Jesus raising Lazarus, yet the restoration of that life causes the religious authorities to put Jesus to death. This story encompasses both life and death, hope and despair, because we experience both life and death, hope and despair.

That Jesus raised Lazarus for more of *this* life is a pretty good sign that the hope to which we are called, the life to which we are called, the resurrection, healing, and restoration to which we are called are not just about what happens after we die; if that is all we are to hope for, Jesus could have left Lazarus in the tomb and left Martha with her hope of resurrection at the last day. Jesus meets us in this life, walks with us in this life, and calls us to make this life more loving, more just, more merciful, more abundant—for ourselves, for each other, and for all of creation. Because Jesus lived this life, God is well-acquainted with our human experience, all the reasons we have to rejoice and all the reasons we still have to grieve. May we see the God of life even when death surrounds us, and may we take comfort knowing that when we weep, Jesus weeps with us.