

Lazarus (John 11:1-44)

By Patty Friesen (June 28/15)

John 11 begins, “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.” How interesting that the village of Bethany and Lazarus himself are introduced through Mary, the one who anointed Jesus with perfume, even though that incident doesn’t actually happen until chapter 12. It tells us that Mary is made famous by her action and everything else in the village and her family revolve around her. Archeologists have found an old tomb in Bethany with the names of Mary, Martha and Lazarus engraved on it. It appears that they were buried together in the same way that they had lived together.

Verse 3, “So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he replied, “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. 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.” Here Jesus, the one who has been healing people throughout the gospels, refuses to go see his friend when he is ill. Why does Jesus wait? Sometimes in a health crisis of a loved one who lives far away, it is difficult to know when is the right time to go visit but in Jesus’ time, messages were difficult to send and the severity of the illness is precipitated by the fact that the sisters send a message to Jesus, asking him to come.

Jesus waits two days and then tells his disciples, Let us go to Judea again. The disciples reply, Rabbi, the people were just trying to stone you there and you want to go

there again? Then he told them, “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 says, “Let us go also that we may die with him,” foreshadowing that they risk death by following Jesus into his death trap. But while they think Jesus will be the cause of their death, they will discover that in fact, he is the one who will give them life.

Verse 17, “When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.” This means Lazarus must have died soon after his sisters sent the message to Jesus. One day for it to arrive, Jesus waits 2 days and then another day for him to travel. “When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary stayed at home.” This is a strange role reversal that Mary is the one staying at home while Martha goes to Jesus when it has been Mary who has been at Jesus’ feet most of the time.

Martha greets 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.” Martha chides Jesus for his absence but expresses a half hope that he could still do something for them. Jesus toys with her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha replies with platitudes, “I know he will rise again on the last day.” Jesus says, “No, I mean now, I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they died, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me, will never die. Do you believe this?” Martha replied, “Yes, Lord, I believe.” When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary. When Mary heard it, she got up quickly and went to meet him. The mourners who were with her in the house, followed her because they thought she was going to the tomb. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet

and repeated Martha's words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary is often portrayed at Jesus' feet. She is the most devout disciples that Jesus has and now he knows how much he has grieved her.

Verse 35, Jesus wept. The shorted verse in the Bible encapsulates the essence of God with us in Jesus who knows our grief as we know it. The people 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?" That is the eternal question isn't it – if Jesus can heal – why then doesn't he?

Verse 38, "Jesus again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave and there was a stone lying against it." A strong foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and resurrection. Jesus said, Take away the stone. Lazarus come out. And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said, Unbind him and let him go.

The story ends abruptly here – we are left to imagine the shock and joy as Lazarus mumbles, Hey get me out of here! The narrative goes on to say this miracle upset a lot of people and they began plotting Jesus' assassination. In fact, they also planned to kill Lazarus again because he had come back to life the first time. He could tell them to go ahead and kill him again because he had already died and it wasn't that bad.

The tension in John's gospel increases between the life-takers and the life-givers until Jesus himself is crucified and raised again. The resurrection is the final word on who has power in this world – while dictators, police and soldiers may have the power to take life – God alone has the power to restore it. This is a rich intimate picture of Jesus' encounter with the death of a loved one and his grief. In Joyce Rupp's book, Praying our

Goodbyes, she says there are stages to our encounter with the death of our loved ones – recognition that they are truly gone, reflection on what that means for the rest of our lives and reorientation to our new life without them.

Even though he knows it, Jesus doesn't really recognize Lazarus is gone until he gets to Bethany. His pious words about the purposes of God fade away as he comes face to face with what this death means to Martha and Mary, especially. This is the heart of the story – when Jesus finally breaks down and shares in Mary's grief. By the time he gets to the tomb, he is angry and ready to wrestle with death, commanding the stone be rolled away and for Lazarus to come out, and commanding the people to unbind him and let him go.

We are all wrapped up and need unbinding when it comes to the death of our loved ones. We don't know if we are coming or going and the season of grief is full of paradoxes and confusion. It is a dangerous time and people who are in grief are often in vehicle accidents themselves because we are so disoriented and unfocussed.

Rachel Nafziger Hartzler, a widowed seminary student said, "In those early months I walked in grief. I couldn't say I walked *through* grief because I didn't know if I would ever get to the other side. Grief was complicated by so many other difficult tasks like dealing with mountains of paper work, legal matters, financial issues, income taxes, health insurance, making a new will, writing deceased in all the blanks when I filled out forms. I was so occupied with details I couldn't even begin to reflect on my future as a single woman." Rachel talked about rituals that helped her with her grief. As Mary anointed Jesus' feet for his burial, Rachel wore black for a year and burned many candles. We need physical, tangible actions to help give form to the emotions we feel as

we walk in grief. When Mennonite seminary president Marlin Miller died, the chapel was draped in black for 30 days. Every year on the anniversary of my dad's death, my mom buys flowers for the front of her church and then puts them on his grave.

After death, there is no return to life as usual. After September 11, President Bush said we should all return to normal. Are we not permanently affected by death? There is no normal after death nor should there be. We are permanently changed in our perception of the world. Priorities shift, relationships take on new meaning. Things were permanently changed for Jesus after Lazarus' death. He was reoriented to his own death. The death of our loved ones makes us acutely aware of our own mortality. We know what the inside of the tomb looks like. We know what awaits us eventually. Life feels even more fragile and precious. A poem of death and resurrection by Rachel Nafziger Hartzler...

It has been a year of Lent, of giving up one thing after another.
Only this Lent will not be followed by Easter when I resume doing or eating what I have given up for I am giving up a life, with Harold's companionship and friendship.
But now I know a different kind of Easter.
With faith restored, I look forward to bright new days, even knowing that clouds will appear and storms will come again.
But having survived a year of deep sorrow and grief, insurmountable difficulties,
I have hope that I can face whatever comes my way.
My life will cycle through more days of Lent and Good Friday will come again, but it won't last forever. For now I know that the hope of Easter follows a season of grief and in the resurrection, is the promise of life after death.