

April 2, 2017
John 11:1-45

Who is this raising Lazarus from the dead?

It is getting darker in the gospel of John. Jesus, the light of the world, is drawing closer to the cross and the mood of our story has darkened noticeably. There is talk of Jesus being under a death threat. We hear that he might get stoned if he goes near Jerusalem. But that's the direction that Jesus is headed. He must go. He has to go. And Thomas, doubting Thomas as we call him, has no doubt about it, "Let us go," Thomas says, "so we may die with him." Darkness is descending. Death seems to be our destination.

But Jesus knows this. He knows where all of this is headed. And that to get to the resurrection, he MUST go through death. To reveal God's glory to the world, he must go through the cross and the grave. That's been Jesus' journey from the very beginning. And with laser-like intensity, that has been Jesus' focus in the Gospel of John. While everyone else wonders what the heck is going on with Jesus, Jesus knows, he is glory bound. Others just don't get it. They don't see. They don't understand. The disciples ask: "Hey Jesus, are you hungry?" Jesus

answers: Yes, I'm hungry to do the will of God. They ask: "Jesus, do you need a drink?" He replies: Let all who are thirsty come to me. I am the living water. Mary and Martha ask: "Jesus, Lazarus is sick; could you please come?" Jesus responds: He's not that sick; just wait, because God's glory is about to be revealed. Jesus has the end of things in mind. But to get there, to get to that glory, we must go through the grave. Going to Bethany will put Jesus one step closer to that. After some delay, he goes. And when he arrives there, he finds death; he finds a very dead Lazarus and two very upset sisters who are very disappointed with him. See, Mary and Martha and Lazarus were Jesus' friends. It says in the scripture that Lazarus was 'the one Jesus loved'. That Mary was the one who will wash Jesus' feet with perfume. We hear in Luke's gospel that Jesus ate with them frequently and taught at their house. They were close friends. So when Jesus arrives late, Martha is understandably ticked. You can tell because the first words out of her mouth, are not 'thanks for coming' or 'it was his time,' but 'If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died.' And, Mary, equally upset, criticizes Jesus with the same words: 'If you had been here,

Lord...’ They are both angry. They are both hurt. They both expected more from Jesus. They expected him to stop their brother from dying. But the path to the resurrection goes through the grave. And as hard as it is for us to understand, Jesus seemed to know that-- glory-minded as he was. It was on purpose that he did not come to Mary and Martha when they called for him. On purpose, he stayed where he was for two more days. He remained there, it says in our reading. That word in Greek, *emeinen*, is a favorite word in the gospel of John. It means to remain or to abide. As in Jesus will abide with his disciples and they are to abide in him and together they will abide in the Father. But instead of abiding with Mary and Martha and Lazarus, Jesus was abiding somewhere else. He remained where he was. He did not come in time to stop death. And so the sisters are left to wonder, as are we are left to wonder, why and how and if you had been there, Lord...

Jesus does not stop death. And that’s hard to take in. It is disappointing and hurtful. Maybe you have felt that way before, disappointed and sad that God didn’t arrive in time. God did not answer your prayers. Or appear with a miracle. There was no rescue. No Chicken Soup for the

Soul moment when everything turned out all right. God, it seemed, had decided to remain elsewhere. God didn't stop the accident; or heal the sickness; or put a hand in front of death and say stop. And you wonder why and how and what's wrong with God. And you know you aren't supposed to think it, but you do. You are angry and disappointed. Because all of those things that God was supposed to do, God didn't do. If you had been here, Lord, if you had been here and remained here; if you had been abiding with me, with us, you could have stopped death. That's all we really want from God. We want God to stop death. To put an end to our grief and pain; to make it so we don't feel that emptiness anymore. We are human beings after all. We know how fragile life is and how we make it through the day by the slimmest of hopes and the thinnest filaments of faith. We don't really know what will become of us and those we love. We just cope with that constant fear that the end will come. But the end is where our story is headed. It's where our story with Jesus is headed. To get to the resurrection, we have go through the grave.

So today, our first job is to acknowledge that death is our destination. It is hard to talk about death, even in church. Especially in church. Where we are all about new life and new creation. It's the good news we need in a world of bad news. But we don't get to the resurrection without going through the cross. So, let's talk about it. Let's talk about the fact that God does not stop death. Jesus does not stop death, not for his friends or those he loves, not even for himself. Let's talk about death, even if it scares us. Even if we cry. Even if we get mad. Even if it means we are shouting at Jesus, like Mary and Martha. It's OK for us to talk about death because it's something we will all go through.

Recently I was introduced to the idea of the Death cafe. It was created by Jon Underwood who wanted to start a casual discussion group to talk about death. These groups are popping up all over the world in libraries and coffee shops. There was one in Midway not too long ago.

Underwood saw the need to talk about death. And at a recent death cafe in San Francisco, a mother brought her 7 year old to talk about the death of his great grandmother. A parent opened up about the death of his son. A daughter came to talk about death because her mother wouldn't:

What, are you trying to get rid of me?, she told her. Underwood says these gatherings open the door of that dark closet where we stuff death. He says “this is about acknowledging that we're going to die.” That we've got limited time. And that we should think about how will we live in the time that we have.”¹

Death is something all of us will go through. And it will be sad and difficult. But it was sad and difficult for Jesus too. When he finally gets to Bethany, he asks to see where they have laid Lazarus' body. And they invite him to come and see, and Jesus weeps. This death tears him up inside; that's what verse 33 means, the words about being greatly moved and deeply disturbed in spirit. It means Jesus comes apart; he loses it. So it's ok for us to lose it too. It's ok for us to come apart because that's what you do when you love. When you love, your heart is exposed and it can be broken. And in Jesus, God so loves the world. And Jesus' heart is broken. He weeps for Lazarus. He weeps for his friends Mary and Martha. He weeps for himself. For what might have been and what

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/08/173808940/death-cafes-breathe-life-into-conversations-about-dying>

should have been. For that terrible feeling that he could have done something but he didn't. That death is the direction that all of this is headed.

And I wonder if Jesus weeps because he can see his own death from here. This here is what they call foreshadowing. Because Jesus knows where all of this is going. He knows that death is where all of this is headed for him. That soon that tomb will be his. That stone rolled across the entrance will be his. That linen burial cloth will be his. That lifeless body will be his. That smell of decay will be his. The emptiness and loneliness of death will be his. But you can't get to the resurrection without going through the grave.

Death is where it's all headed. Death will happen. It must happen. That's the second point for us to contemplate today. Death HAS to happen for Jesus. In the fourth century, the church was trying to figure out what it believed about Jesus. And with a brand new Christian Emperor, Constantine, that whole figuring-out process was an empire-wide obsession. The Nicene Creed is the result of that centuries-long discussion. Some said that the Son of God shouldn't die. That he

couldn't die. He was the son of God. And death was too humiliating for him. No, Jesus only APPEARED to die. Because how could God die?, they said. But the archbishop of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus, said, hold up a minute. If Jesus is really human, then he must, MUST really die. Because, he said, 'that which is unassumed is unhealed.'² If Jesus doesn't take on our death and our decay, then our death and decay can't be transformed by him. If he doesn't go through death to get to the resurrection, then we can't get to the resurrection through death. Jesus MUST die so that God can reach us. Wherever we are, God can be with us, even in death because God has gone before us.

Jesus MUST go through death to get to the resurrection. He must go to that nothing place where there is no life. Because in that nothing, that's where God starts again. From that nothing, God creates life. In the beginning when all is formlessness and void, God says the word and the world springs forth. And into the void of the grave, Jesus says the word

² For a good discussion of this: <http://www.apostolictheology.org/2014/12/the-incarnation-unassumed-is-unhealed.html>

and Lazarus comes forth. That's what God does. Our God calls life out of the places where there is no life.

But to get to the resurrection, we must go through death. Jesus must. We must die, too. And that's what baptism is all about. It is dying. Dying to this world. Dying to ourselves. Dying to fear and anxiety and what if I don't have enough and what if they don't like me and what if I don't make it and what if I fail? In baptism, we let ourselves fail. We let our ambition end. We surrender and turn ourselves over to God. To get to the resurrection, we must go through death. So where is that death for us? What do we have to die to? What do we need to die to?

In early church sanctuaries, the baptismal fonts were not beautiful hand-made piece of furniture like this. They were much more like immersion tanks. But they were in the floor of the sanctuary. Because the person being baptized was being symbolically buried. Literally, they were going beneath the ground, dying to their old lives and then rising to a new life in Christ. And that is our baptism, yours and mine. It is dying with Christ, so we may rise again with him.

To get to the resurrection, we must go through death. And it is a hard, terrible journey we take with Jesus now; as he approaches Jerusalem and the darkness descends and he heads off into glory. Jesus does not come to put a stop to death. But he will stop it from being the end. But he will bring us through it. To new life on the other side. He will call us by name. Lazarus, come out. The grave is not where you are meant to stay. Lazarus, come out. Death does not have the last word. I do. Lazarus, come out. Rise. Come to the table. Eat the bread of brokenness and drink the cup of salvation with me. Lazarus, come out. Abide with me for I will always abide with you.