

April 2 2017

Reading from the Bible John 11:1-45 Reading incorporated into the sermon

Sermon *“Dress Rehearsal for Easter”*

The scripture this morning comes from the gospel of John, chapter 11, and it is located on page 980. And it's a long scripture. We're going to talk about it along the way. So let us turn to the end of chapter 12, and we'll read that piece then we'll come back and go through the scriptures. John chapter 12 starting at verse 9

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

If you'd like to turn to chapter 11 starting at verse 1, that's where we're going to start, and I'm going to kind of work through the scripture rather than read all forty-five verses and come back. We'll walk through the scripture together. At the beginning of that I want you to hear a song of Lazarus. If you were in Eastern European countries next Saturday you would hear something like this. (Pastor Becky sang a song.)

If you were in Greece or in the Eastern European countries this coming Saturday you would be hearing songs like this. You would be hearing about St. Lazarus because that is called Lazarus Saturday. And on Lazarus Saturday people would have these traditional liturgies. They would have flower decorated baskets. The children would sing Lazarine carols. And apparently they would go to sing these carols and then they would lay down in front of the people they were caroling. And some child would say, “Lazarus, come forth,” and they'd jump up as Lazarus. And they gave gifts, they would eat holy breads, they would celebrate a very, very dangerous man.

Lazarus dangerous? But we hear that the Scribes and the Pharisees took it very seriously that here was a man walking around who had been dead, as a doornail. Day four, he had been dead, and he was now alive. It terrified them and angered them and they were out to get him. The story is, the tradition is that Lazarus ran and left. He hid out either in France or, more likely, on the island of Cyprus. He lived there for approximately 30 years more. He was probably of an age of Jesus. They were probably contemporaries in age. He was once, according to tradition, visited by Mary, the mother of Jesus. And this man became a very honored saint because he was the one, the only one that we knew and that they knew that had been raised from the dead.

Lazarus, Lazarus... a dangerous man. A plot to kill him. It all began with chapter 11 verse 1:

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. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'

Now, we've all gotten that telephone call, haven't we? I can remember when my mom was so sick. You know, the phone would ring in the middle of the night and my friends would be rushing me to the airport. I'd catch a plane so I could to see her. She wouldn't remember if she saw me that night, but I would know I had been there. We have all been there. It was a tradition of friendship, really of equals. Jesus went there to renew, and recreate, and be honored and be safe without any pressure. Mary and Martha, Martha the doer, Mary the prayer, Lazarus, who we don't really hear much about, except he is the standup person in these stories until this day. But she was right when she wrote the letter to Jesus and said, "He whom you love is ill." He had favorites. Jesus had favorites? He loved this family. They were his family, they were his special, special friends. But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. Rather it is for God's glory so 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.

Two days longer. Well, where he was the Jews had threatened to throw rocks at him, first in Jerusalem and he had gone away to the Jordan. And he had taken a little space for himself. And everyone knew that the powers that be were out to get him. The hospitality of Mary and Martha, the trust. And I'm sure his heart was heavy those two days.

You see, this was going to be a rehearsal, a rehearsal for Easter. It was not a rehearsal for Jesus' sake. Now, Nina knows about rehearsals. And dress rehearsals, they're even more fun and they're usually the worst. We hope for the worst because we hope for better after that. This was a dress rehearsal for the disciples to see what Jesus really meant.

Remember that he had said, "This is for God's glory," with the man who was born blind. The man wasn't born blind to give God glory, Lazarus didn't get sick to give God glory. Jesus was going to use the circumstance to show the glory of God to the disciples, who would sorely need this boost in their faith with the dark days coming.

We're six days out from Good Friday, most likely about that length. It was, somewhat, to throw down the gauntlet. To Jesus say, "Here's the line. Here's the line. I can resurrect the dead just like I said." To declare himself in no uncertain terms capable of doing only what God could do. There was no turning back. Jesus has made a declaration and increasing numbers of him be aligned with God.

He went to Jerusalem and refused a dedication, Hannukah, and at that feast is a question of political winning. And they asked Jesus, “When are you going to show us that you are going to be the Messiah? When are you going to prove it? When are you going to reveal yourself? When are you going to do it, Jesus? Show us.” And what they really wanted is “When are you going to overturn the powers that be? When are you going to step on to the throne? When are you going to vanquish our enemies?”

They tried to arrest him, he escaped. He disappeared into the crowd. Then he went to the Jordan and many had believed him there.

Again, this illness is for God’s glory. And he says then, verse 7: *Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’* Remember, that’s where Jerusalem is.

The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’

Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’ After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.’

The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.’ In other words, “Let’s not chance it. If he’s just asleep let’s let him wake up on his own.

Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ Now get who says this. *Let us also go, that we may die with him.’* Thomas, Thomas the one we call “doubting Thomas,” is the one who says, “Okay, Let’s go, boys. It it’s to death, so be it. We’re on our way.”

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now in Jewish tradition the bodies were generally buried right away. Too hot there. Put in the tomb. But there was a tradition of waiting three days. Three days. Remember the old thing that they used to put a string to pull a bell inside the caskets so people could rouse somebody in case they really weren’t dead in the casket in Victorian England. It was kind of like that. I don’t know whether they’d had circumstances of it but for three days people went and visited the site of the tomb. For three days they went. On day four, they stopped. And of course, when they went to the tomb it was Mary and Martha and the whole entourage that would go with them. Day four was considered the time that the body would start decaying. And there was a tradition that all the sins would be released so he would be pure or she would be pure to go to heaven. Four days.

Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him,

This is the woman of action, she's not sitting around just weeping, Jesus is coming, I'm out here *while Mary stayed at home*. We don't need a whole lot more description, do we?

Martha said to Jesus,

I always thought this must have been really hard for him to hear. *'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.'* Jesus said to her, *'Your brother will rise again.'* Martha said to him, *'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'* Jesus said to her, *'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. Do you believe this?'* She said to him, *'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'*

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

They'd been doing it for three days, remember. *When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'* When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, *'Where have you laid him?'* They said to him, *'Lord, come and see.'* Jesus began to weep.

Now much has been said about this verse, besides being the shortest verse in the Bible. Some people picture this as being a theological sadness that the whole world has to suffer under death, and I'm sure there's a piece of that with Jesus. He does not like it that we suffer. But he himself was suffering. He is human. His friend had died. His two other friends were in abject misery. And Jesus wept.

So the Jews 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?' Cynics.

They're always around.

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. And this is the same word that we heard when he looked with pity on others. Your insides are just twisting, and it's a gut wrenching sadness and compassion.

It was a cave, maybe it was the family sepulcher, and the stone was lying against it. *Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.'* Now ever practical Martha is quoted *the sister*

of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Some people say he said "Lazarus" just in case the others in the tomb would come forth if he didn't use the name, the proper name. Unbind him, Let him go.

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them, there's always a tattletale, went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done, so the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, "What are we to do? 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. But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.

Better for one to die than to have the whole nation destroyed. At the valley of the dry bones when all seemed lost and Ezekiel is asked by God to breathe and make them alive God's powerful spirit brought the dead to life. At a place of death at the tomb of Lazarus, at the tomb of Jesus, we remember it is good that one person died, that the whole people would not die. I am the resurrection and the life. And in Ezekiel it says that God said, "And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, oh my people. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.

On Easter Christ rose. The disciples and Christians throughout the ages recognize the raising of Lazarus as the confirmation of Christ's ability to bring dead back to life. In case we were worried that only Jesus is able to be raised, Jesus gave us proof. Lazarus is the first fruit of all of us who will be raised to life. Alleluia, Amen.