

Sermon, March 29, 2020

Good morning. I hope you all are surviving this unprecedented and stressful period of isolation and social distancing relatively unscathed. Please continue to follow St. Mark's via Facebook, our webpage or call me. Your council and I are keeping up with CDC and government guidelines to try to determine exactly where we go from here. And when. Most of our elderly and shut-in members seem to be holding up just fine, and they have appreciated my telephone calls and offers to help however I can. I bet they would like to hear from you too. Remember, our church is much more just than a building.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ and serve you in righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever, Amen.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord according to John, the 11th chapter

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." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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."

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. Then after this he said to

the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 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." 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." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb 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, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to 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."

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. 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. 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?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead 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 upward 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 out!" 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." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Some call today, the fifth Sunday of Lent, "Lazarus Sunday." And I understand why, because most years we either read about Jesus raising him from the grave or about a dinner party that followed, hosted by Lazarus and his sisters.

Our Orthodox friends actually add a day to Holy Week, observing this coming Saturday as Lazarus Saturday. While all scripture is sacred to the Orthodox Church, the Jesus stories from the Gospel of John seem especially so.

There are tons of traditions for celebrating Lazarus Saturday, from worship to food. Traditional foods include Lazar-AH-kia, a word that means "Little Lazaruses." They are small spice breads that are shaped like men wrapped in shrouds. You can find recipes for them on the Internet. Youtube will show you how to make them. Between us—they're kind of creepy.

Scholars note that what we call the fourth Gospel is more theology than narrative, yet there is no story more important to it than the story of Lazarus. It was both the seventh and greatest of Jesus' seven signs, or miracles in John.

And it is presented as the last straw in Jesus' growing dispute with temple authorities. It was just after hearing about the resurrection of Lazarus that they started plotting the death of Jesus.

I have always been fascinated by Lazarus. His name in Hebrew is Eleazar—meaning "helped by God." (Well I guess so!) John

presents Lazarus as Jesus' closest friend—or as his sisters put it, “the ONE whom Jesus loved.” So it has always seemed odd to me that the other gospels never mention Lazarus and don't seem to know anything about what many consider to be Jesus' greatest miracle.

Some find the Lazarus story troubling. First of all, there's that disturbing image of a zombie-like figure silently walking out of his tomb while groping at the bandages in which he was bound. Add to that the fact that as far as we know, Lazarus never said a word after Jesus raised him.

Plus, after hosting that dinner party in the next chapter, Jesus' supposed best friend--whom he dearly loved, completely disappears from the story.

If you were Lazarus, wouldn't you have stuck around with Jesus? And said at least SOMETHING—ANYthing-- even if it was only, “Thank you?” Some of the early church fathers speculated Lazarus was so traumatized by his death experience that it forever changed him. We'd call it PTSD. They thought that's why he never spoke again. And disappeared from the story.

But I'm not so sure he did. Because just after Jesus' beloved friend Lazarus popped out of the story in chapter twelve, a supposedly new character popped in, in chapter thirteen. Or was he new? Never identified by name, this character is referred to as “The Loved Disciple” or “The disciple whom Jesus loved.” (Well that sounds familiar, doesn't it?)

This beloved disciple will be the one who leans on Jesus at the Last Supper; he'll serve as a mediator between Jesus and Peter; he'll trick the system to get Peter into Pilate's Court. He'll be entrusted with the care of Jesus' mother.

And most important of all, this loved disciple WILL stick with Jesus all the way to the cross and to the tomb, while the other disciples abandon Jesus or deny they even know him.

Near the end, the loved disciple is also identified as the source of the stories that make up the gospel we call John.

Scholars suspect he served a pastoral role for the early fledgling Christian community for whom this gospel was later written.

There has really never been a good reason to call this gospel “John” anyway. It doesn’t mention an author or source by name.

It wasn’t attributed to John until well into the second century. So I understand why a growing number of New Testament scholars think the fourth gospel should probably be renamed, “The Gospel according to Lazarus.” Not that he wrote it. But that many of its stories may have originated with him.

But Lazarus is not the person in this story that I most identify with this time around. Today I can better relate to his sisters Mary and Martha. Both of whom are quoted today as saying, “Lord, if you had been here...our brother would not have died.”

Every time this story comes up I debate how to read that sentence. Was it an expression of great faith—Lord, if only YOU had been here, our brother would not have died.

Or were they scared and frustrated; disappointed and perhaps angry at current circumstances like so many of us are these days. “LORD IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE OUR BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED.”

I mean c’mon. We told you days ago our brother was sick, but you just dilly-dallied. You’ve healed strangers. Could you do nothing for your own friend? The one you LOVED?

I first remember thinking along those lines when my father died more than twenty-eight years ago now. And sadly many times since, when I have lost beloved friends, relatives and in-laws. “Lord, if you had been here, they wouldn’t have died. So where in the heck were you?” More than a few people I have talked to in the last couple of weeks feel like that. Lord where the heck are you?

We need you NOW. Many are sick. Some are dying. Many are out of work. The economy is broken. Food is getting scarce. Lord, where the heck are you when the people you say you love...need you?

Nothing challenges faith like these times when prayers seem to go unanswered. When we don’t get what we ask for, despite what a good thing it surely would be. Like a job you really wanted. Or when there’s something wrong on the x-rays, or the test results have us concerned. Or how about when families are trying to work through problems together, but it isn’t going well. Jesus loves us too, doesn’t he? Where is he?

We aren’t the first people of faith to ask questions like that. Martin Luther was frustrated with God all the time. Even Mother Theresa, discouraged by a life-long ministry in the arena of endless suffering, once remarked, “You know, in the end, God has some explaining to do.”

Mary and Martha weren’t the first folks in the Bible to whine either. In Exodus, Moses and “the chosen” complained all the time—THEY got angry with God too. Turns out God’s “okay” with that. Ours is a big strong God with broad shoulders and thick skin who can take it. Because God also has a warm heart. And it’s certainly better, and safer, to take our frustrations out on God rather than each other.

The book of Psalms is made-up of poetry and prose of many genres, including the so-called Psalms of Lament. Lament means “complaint.” The Lament Psalms are exactly that—God’s trusting, faithful, chosen people, all frustrated, grumpy and cranky.

“How long, O Lord, will you ignore me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? Look at me, answer me, O Lord my God!” That’s the opening of Psalm 13.

Mary and Martha’s whinings sound tame in comparison. And so do ours. Besides, how could it possibly be wrong for US to be crabby and frustrated with this life now and then, when in today’s story even Jesus wept?

So sure, it’s okay to cry. If he can, we can. And whine. And complain. Because the Lazarus story shows us flat-out that Jesus Christ, son of God will *not* always appear to be there exactly when WE think he should be, doing exactly what we think he should do. But this story also shows that in the end God *does not* abandon us when life just stinks; God *is still* with us. Sharing not only in our joys, but also in our pain, and grief, and these days... fear.

In the end he is still there. Like he was for Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Folks he truly loved... Like us.

Full of hope in the promise of God, The whining Psalm 13 ends with the Psalmist taking a step back, and looking at the bigger picture, saying, “ Lord, I [do] trust in your faithfulness. My heart WILL rejoice in your deliverance. I will SING to the Lord, for he has been good to me...”

Amen