

**Reading and Reflection**  
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**John 11: 1-45; 47-50; 12:1**

We are about to read what I consider a hard story: the story of Lazarus. It brings with it so many questions: “How? questions, Why? questions, What if? questions, and “If only” musings. It takes place in the springtime, which should be a hopeful, cheerful season. But it’s dark, this story. We follow it through twists and turns of love, of misunderstanding, of threat. We follow Jesus in a time of decision and crisis. The story calls to us, and does not give us any easy answers. Here is how it begins:

*A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany, became sick. Bethany was the town where Mary and her sister Martha lived. (This Mary was the one who poured the perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was sick.) The sisters sent Jesus a message: “Lord, your dear friend is sick.”*

*When Jesus heard it, he said, “The final result of this sickness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory.” Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he received the news that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was for two more days.*

Today we are one step closer to Easter, two weeks away in the middle of April. We are one step closer to Jerusalem, we are two miles away in Bethany. Today we look down a tunnel of time and space and are confronted with this story. We are drawn into the lives of a particular family in a particular crisis. But to start it says, “He stayed where he was.” Jesus did not hurry to this beloved family. He lingered by the banks of the Jordan, relatively safe and sound. If Jesus loved this family – Mary, Martha and Lazarus – so much, how could he use them as a sort of test case for this sign of God’s power? How could he wait with his disciples in the hinterlands until it was certain that Lazarus would be dead? And we, in the meantime, wait, not understanding, hoping that the message was a false alarm.

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”*

*“Teacher,” the disciples answered, “just a short time ago the people there wanted to stone you; and are you planning to go back?”*

*Jesus said, “A day has twelve hours, doesn't it? So those who walk in broad daylight do not stumble, for they see the light of this world. But if they walk during the night they stumble, because they have no light.” Jesus said this and then added, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up.”*

*The disciples answered, “If he is asleep, Lord, he will get well.”*

*Jesus meant that Lazarus had died, but they thought he meant natural sleep. So Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, but for your sake I am glad that I was not with him, so that you will believe. Let us go to him.”*

*Thomas (called the Twin) said to his fellow disciples, “Let us all go along with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!”*

We may all die with him. Strangely, now, we are called to places of death and danger. We leave the safe places with Jesus, who wants to return to the threats of Judea. We are willing to go, like Thomas, to go where people are grieving and despondent and angry. We go where we ourselves

are touched by that grief and resentment. Nowhere else will the power of God be so plain. That's where miracles might begin to happen. But in the meantime, the fear, the distress, clutches at us.

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days before. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Judeans had come to see Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother's death.*

*When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died! But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for." "Your brother will rise to life," Jesus told her. "I know," she replied, "that he will rise to life on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord!" she answered. "I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."*

"If only you had been here." Yes, I know. All the "if onlys." We could have done things differently. Someone else could always have done something differently. We could have sent for you earlier. We could have made it more clear how dire the illness was. But, with Martha, we struggle to believe in good outcomes. Even now, God may give us something. And on the last day, when the trumpet sounds, my brother will rise. I am struggling, Jesus, to trust that you have something to offer now, then, always. How will you come into this world, our world, with something new?

*After Martha said this, she went back and called her sister Mary privately. "The Teacher is here," she told her, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up and hurried out to meet him. (Jesus had not yet arrived in the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.) The people who were in the house with Mary comforting her followed her when they saw her get up and hurry out. They thought that she was going to the grave to weep there. Mary arrived where Jesus was, and as soon as she saw him, she fell at his feet. "Lord," she said, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died!"*

"If only you had been here." Yes, I know, I know. The same words, but Mary has always been more ...emotional. She is dramatic, she does not reason with theology, but throws her body into a pose of entreaty and despair. This will not be a conversation: it's a confrontation. The grief is so raw that no words will reassure. Jesus, we have to enter into her pain.

*Jesus saw her weeping, and he saw how the people with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved. "Where have you buried him?" he asked them. "Come and see, Lord," they answered.*

*Jesus wept. "See how much he loved him!" the people said. But some of them said, "He gave sight to the blind man, didn't he? Could he not have kept Lazarus from dying?"*

"See how much he loved him." Why does he weep at the tomb when he seemed so clear in his purpose and God's purpose in raising Lazarus? The air is thick here with love and strong feelings: we heard "Lord, he whom you love is ill." The loving disciples try to dissuade their teacher from going back to dangerous Judea. It is clear that Jesus loves the sisters who come to meet him, and that he is moved by their grief. He weeps himself on the way to the tomb, so that even skeptics say, "See how he loved him!" We have a complicated Messiah here: a man who loved his friends, yet possessed a divine certainty of God's power to overcome death. A man disturbed,

almost angry at what death has done. But, a relentless Messiah. The place of illness, death, weakness, love, grief, and danger: that is the place where Jesus goes to show us the power of God.

*Deeply moved once more, Jesus went to the tomb, which was a cave with a stone placed at the entrance. "Take the stone away!" Jesus ordered. Martha, the dead man's sister, answered, "There will be a bad smell, Lord. He has been buried four days!"*

*Jesus said to her, "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believed?" They took the stone away. Jesus looked up and said, "I thank you, Father, that you listen to me. I know that you always listen to me, but I say this for the sake of the people here, so that they will believe that you sent me." After he had said this, he called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave cloths, and with a cloth around his face. "Untie him," Jesus told them, "and let him go."*

A cave and a stone. The stone blocks his way. The stone blocks the way to glory. We get a shiver of premonition here, remembering that another stone will need to be rolled away, on another spring morning. The story of Lazarus is heard in the light of Jesus' own death and resurrection. So many of the same elements are there: the weeping women, the days in the tomb, or cave, a stone rolled away, the burial clothes. We are being prepared for something here. The difference is that we understand that Lazarus will die again: his body has not become immortal through this miracle. But Jesus' resurrection is of another order. If Lazarus' raising was a skirmish in the conflict of good and evil, Easter will be the final victory. It gives all the chance to live in the light. Maybe all of us are being called out of tombs. Not actual caves, with actual stones for doors. We are being called from living towards death to living towards life in the light of the resurrection. We are being called away from mere survival, away from the mere prolongation of life, into a startling new place. Like Lazarus, we hear Jesus' voice, naming us and calling us out. Then he says, "Unbind them, and let them go." It is the reality of the experience in the tomb that gives meaning to this command. Not only new life, but freedom, too.

*Many of the people who had come to visit Mary saw what Jesus did, and they believed in him. But some of them 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.<sup>8</sup> 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."*

*Six days before the Passover, Jesus went back to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, the man he had raised from death.*

Many believed. But "it is better to have one man die." Here is the unwitting prophecy of sacrifice – seemingly expedient for the leadership, but part, it turns out, of a cosmic plan. Now we have some understanding of Jesus' puzzling delay when he gets the message that Lazarus was ill. He says, "This illness... is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." We may think that he is referring to the glory of a miracle. But he is actually speaking of the glory of the cross. It becomes clear, after Jesus leaves Bethany, that this final sign is the last straw. It is an act of defiance, because it leads the authorities to seek his arrest and death. It is the raising of Lazarus, the blatant, public display of God's power over death, that is the immediate cause of the

crucifixion in this Gospel. The disciples had an inkling that traveling to Bethany will be dangerous. They were right.

This story is a call story. A call to reflect on whether we can live through deaths of all kind into fullness of life. A call towards naming our tombs of despair. A call to the struggle against the powers of death and darkness. A call to sympathy with grieving brothers and sisters. A call to resist. A call to walk the next two weeks and next two miles towards the cross and towards the quiet garden on Easter morning.