

The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
April 2, 2017  
John 11:1-45

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### Jesus' Passion

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the embrace of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lazarus is raised from the dead in our story from John this morning just two weeks before Easter. I suspect that the church, in selecting this reading, is trying to offer spiritual food. But I often wonder what type.

There are many possibilities that get a lot of play in sermons and bible studies:

- "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." (v.25-26)—words directly from the mouth of our Lord.

- "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (v.26)—words of confession from Martha's lips.

- Even Thomas takes an interesting tack: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Traditional views of the story lead us into the wilderness of death and Jesus' so-called "Passion," referring to his suffering and death that death itself may die. There are certainly elements in the text that are reminiscent, or more accurately, foreshadowing of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection—for example, Jesus crying with a loud voice and rolling away the stone from the tomb. Or calls to recognize this Jesus and who he is—the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Or discipleship, following where Jesus has led the way, dying with him, that we may rise to new life, knowing daily the resurrection that is soon to be celebrated.

All make good fodder for sermons. All are faithful to the text. But as you may have guessed by now, I hear in the story a more basic truth, one that embraces all of these and at the same time leads us to a more intimate understanding of our Lord. It is this: Jesus' passion. No, I don't mean that in the way I have already mentioned; it is the traditional liturgical way of referring to Jesus' own suffering and death. What I mean is the particularly notable depth of feeling that Jesus displays in this passage, perhaps more so than in any other single story in the New Testament.

Listen again to selected passages that appear within these 45 verses:

v. 11 - After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

v.v. 32-33 - 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, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

vv. 34-36 - 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!"

v. 38 - Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.

v. 41, 43 - So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

This story of raising Lazarus certainly is not a resurrection story, concerning as it does the mere restoration of life that is temporary; Lazarus would yet die again. The resurrection to life eternal that is celebrated at Easter is an event that has little to do with the mortal functioning of the physical body. The resurrection refers to the eternal life we share as of the moment we share in the death and resurrection of our Lord, and that is already true for us at our baptism.

The story, I'm suggesting this morning, is at least as valuable to us as an opportunity for us to look intimately into the mind and heart of our Lord. This is an amazingly human depiction of Jesus. And this list of verses reveals a broad range and a deep intensity of emotion. There is in this story drama, pain, compassion, and love. It is a story about Jesus' great passion for people and for life. It is an extended reflection on chapter 10, verse 10—one of my favorite verses in scripture.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

We see here Jesus capacity for friendship, for true caring about another person. We see his utter anguish at the loss of this friend, Lazarus; and his great disturbance of spirit and deep feeling. We see even our Lord's tears of grief. We hear Jesus' gratitude to God for the healing that comes to his friend. And finally, we hear the powerful and dramatic commanding voice of our Lord as he instructs Lazarus to rise from his tomb: "Lazarus, come out!"

The Jews, in verse 36, speak what I suggest this morning is the kernel of the story. "See how he loved him!" Jesus' passion, his compassionate and self-giving love, is the gospel for us today. Such is meant to be the pattern of our own living.

A pastor writes: I talked to a woman the other day who explained her situation. "Yes," she said, "I've been away from church for a long time. But you know, it goes deeper than that. I've not really had much of a spiritual life for a good number of years now. I don't know why. I used to be on fire for the Lord, I couldn't get enough of church. I read the Bible all of the time and prayed all the time too. I found ways to serve Christ every single day. But I guess the 'newness' of it all wore off and I just lost interest."

But then she said, "I feel something stirring in me again. Could it be the Holy Spirit? And I feel like I want to come back and start walking on my spiritual journey again."

She put into words what all of us experience if we enter into a relationship with the Lord. Life circumstances put roadblocks in our way, through loss or doubt or misunderstanding. What we learned about God or scripture doesn't seem to fit any longer. Or we grow beyond the dogma that was intended to help but has become troubling. There is unlearning and transforming to do. There is a need for a resuscitated life in the Spirit.

Even church talk about of being "saved" can be a roadblock for some. And the intent of the word is not well expressed in that English translation. The Greek word from which "save" comes is also the root of words meaning to heal, preserve, do well, or be made whole. According to gospels that have been discovered in only the last century, a number of early Christian communities thrived without "savior" language at all/ Both being "born again" and being "saved" suggest static achievements. But the first disciples were called the people on "the Way," suggesting just the opposite: transformation, transition, and change—a dynamic way of life.

Or what we might call "passion"—a Jesus-like enthusiasm (which, by the way, means literally "to be filled with God"), a Jesus-like passion for others—for friends like Lazarus, for healing, health, wholeness, and abundant life.

Megan McKenna, a fine storyteller whose stories enrich our "Living the Questions" sessions, speaks of storytelling in this way (a paraphrase): "Most people read for information, for confirmation of what they know, or for comfort in what they believe. Storytelling has the opposite intent. It is for unlearning and transformation."

At our session last Tuesday on "Creative Transformation," someone commented that this is exactly what Jesus does in his storytelling. Think, for example, of the parable of the Good Samaritan. A Pharisee puts Jesus to the test, asking "Who is my neighbor." And Jesus tells him a parable about a Samaritan whose neighborliness outshines that of the so-called righteous people. The parable is told so that the Pharisee might unlearn everything he knows about what a good neighbor is, what a good neighbor looks like, and how a good neighbor acts. And Jesus is intent—passionate!—about transforming that Pharisee by the renewal of his mind.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” Paul writes in Romans 12:2.

Unlearning, creative dislocation, suffering, brokenness—all of this may lead to passionate spiritual renewal. After all, we turn to the more common association of “passion” with Jesus next Sunday—Palm Sunday or Sunday of the Passion. And we learn from that great story that suffering and brokenness may be turned into something of great beauty—fuller humanity, deeper spirituality, wisdom, strength, and renewed life.

Psychologist Ken Wilber writes: “Transformative spirituality, authentic spirituality, is revolutionary. It does not legitimate the world, it breaks the world: it does not console the world, it shatters it. And it does not render the self content, it renders it undone.” (“One Taste,” p. 28)

The church spends considerable time and energy on maintaining itself, perpetuating traditions, and teaching doctrine. There is perhaps not enough effort and storytelling with the intention of unlearning, shattering, and transformation

Richard Rohr suggests that “Belonging systems do not necessarily lead to transformation and in fact, they often become an inoculation against transformation—or a total substitute for it. Just the fact that I am accepted or “belong” according to the church rules, I can assume that I know God or have met God. I think we’ve confused the dating service with the date.” (lecture, “Authentic Religion: Membership or Transformation?,” Anaheim, 2001)

I really like that metaphor. Church as dating service for our relationship with God. We need to recognize the profound difference between the dating service and the date, between the church and the core importance of getting to know God in Christ. Of course, maintaining and tradition and doctrine have their places. But in today’s story, Jesus’ passion for Lazarus and Mary and Martha call us to far more. It beckons us to unlearn what we imagine are the limits of God’s grace. It calls us to know God more intimately, to be transformed by compassion, to share a passion for life, to deepen our empathy, and to live graciously.

The core of the gospel invites us to be saved not in some once-for-all, one-and-done, static way. Jesus desires with every fiber of his being that we be saved in the sense of healing, wellness, wholeness.

Retired Episcopal John Spong says that the true marks of discipleship are being whole not religious; being real not pious; being loving not moral and righteous, and being inclusive not hateful of others who may seem different. Not righteousness but compassion, not being right but being loving. That begins to get at what John and Jesus are trying to do with this story of Lazarus—to unlearn unloving ways and to be

passionate in our exercise of grace, mercy, forgiveness, peace, and justice.

In short, the gospel invites, exhorts, calls, yearns, and militates for abundant, fully human, life. It was this kind of life that Jesus sought to restore for Mary and Martha and Lazarus. It is this kind of living that our Lord desires passionately for each and all of us.

This morning, you have a rare opportunity to look squarely into the loving eyes of Jesus as he weeps for you—his friend, yearning as he did for Lazarus that you have new and passionate life and have it abundantly. You may well hear the voice of Jesus too, crying with a loud voice, "Come out!" Live! Serve! Love! Celebrate! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.