

"Friends, Grief, and Resurrection"

John 11:20-44

The story of Lazarus opens with Jesus some distance away from the holy city, he and his disciples tucked away in one of John the Baptist's riverside lean-to oases, Jesus, laying low and letting the people come to him in one of the spots where they had all come to listen to the Baptist some years before. And John's gospel tells us that, once word got out, "*many came to him*" there, not skeptics wanting to trip Jesus up, but real seekers climbing down, out of the Judean and Samaritan hill country and into the almost tropical Jordan River bed, looking for the Savior the Baptist had told them would come to finish what John had started.

And it was going well, "*...many believed in him there,*" John the Apostle tells us in his gospel. But then came a troubling message from Bethany, a little village atop Mt. Zion, a couple miles east from the Jerusalem city walls. A family dear to Jesus, two sisters and a brother, and the brother, Lazarus, was critically ill, and his sisters wanted Jesus to know, hoping against hope that Jesus could do something to see Lazarus through an illness that seemed certain to take him otherwise.

And Jason Justinger told us last week that Jesus didn't immediately stampede down the Jordan Valley to Bethany, instead he carried on at the oasis with the people who were there, two more days, and only then did he turn to his disciples and tell them, we'd better go back there. Which made no sense to anybody there. They were likely too late to do much for Lazarus, but there was plenty of time for all of them to go back and get themselves killed by the people Jesus had spent a whole season managing to infuriate.

Of course, Jesus knew they were too late. Told them on the way that Lazarus was gone, and then stunned them saying, "*...for your sake, I'm glad I wasn't there, so that you may believe.*" Thomas was willing to go with him, that's why they called him "*the Twin*." But Thomas wasn't optimistic about how this was going to end. Thomas was a little short on faith, but he had loyalty to burn. So Thomas followed Jesus down the Jordan River valley, and the rest of the disciples followed Thomas.

Word reached Bethany that Jesus was on the way, just as Lazarus' heartbroken sisters were working through the first stage of Old Israel's elaborate grief ritual, sitting Shiva for a whole week after your loved one was buried. Martha and Mary were host to the whole village and an uncountable number of friends and family from the holy city only two miles away. Contrary to how they had ever acted before, it was Martha who slipped out to find Jesus, leaving Mary to handle the guests, smiling through her tears to a whole courtyard full of people trying to do what was kind and find the right things to say.

Martha, meanwhile, bravely faces Jesus just outside of town. "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" she starts out, "*but even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give to you.*" Heartbreak in the first sentence, faith in the second. Jesus can only spare her five words, "*Your brother will rise again.*" Leon Morris guesses that Martha had already heard a ton of that. But again her answer is faithful: "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*" It is what any faithful Pharisee would say. But the last day just seems so far over the horizon when you're missing your loved one right now.

So Jesus throws a new card on the table, "*I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me shall live though he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?'*" And Martha looks Jesus in the eye and tells him who he is: "*Yes, Lord. I have believed that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who comes into the world.*" It is an extraordinary answer from the woman Jesus rebuked in Luke 10 for spending too much time in the kitchen. Mary may have sat at Jesus' feet, but Martha clearly had at least one ear turned toward what Jesus was teaching in her courtyard.

Having passed her final with a broken heart, Martha sends "*secretly...privately*" for Mary, who comes to Jesus in no state to take any sort of final. She falls at his feet, grabs his ankles and says exactly what her sister had said, probably not an hour before, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" But Mary gets no farther than that. The whole house had emptied out when Mary flew out the door heading for Jesus. It was likely Mary's neighbors and friends and family who get her up off the ground and hold her, all of them weeping, and Jesus was left standing by himself outside the circle.

But, of course, Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God, so the overwhelming sorrow of Mary, and the frantic surge of family and friends and strangers all trying to do for Mary what Jesus could have done if they had all calmed down for a second, none of this upsets the perfect calm and control we all imagine God's own Son would have. Right? Wrong. John tells us that Jesus was "*moved in spirit...deeply troubled*". He asks them, "*Where have you laid him?'*" They said to him, "*Lord, come and see.*"

I think, the moment the sisters speak to him, Jesus is allowed in the circle and he finally weeps with them all. In the Greek, it is a gentler verb than the sobbing that had seized everyone else when they found Mary on the ground at Jesus feet. Jesus "*shed tears*" is the translation Leon Morris suggests. It's the only time that verb appears in the New Testament. They led Jesus to a middle class tomb, a whole lot simpler than the hand carved tomb where Jesus would be buried later in the season. It was a cave with a boulder wedged into its mouth. At the sight, John tells us again that Jesus was "*moved within himself.*"

He told them to take the stone away from the mouth of the cave, a prospect which horrified Martha. She shrills a little at Jesus, and he turns and says, I think just to her, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?*" Now nowhere is it ever recorded that Jesus told that to Martha. She might have been expected to read it between the lines when he said "*I am the resurrection and the life...*". Who knows? Jesus next looks up into heaven and thanks the Father for always being there whenever he prayed. He adds, by way of explanation, that he is praying like this so that the people around him would understand that he was "*sent*" by the Father to do things like this. The point being that power from God belongs to those are sent by God, led by God. Only on those terms does Jesus command dead Lazarus to return to the living.

"*Lazarus! Come out!*" he shouts in a voice loud enough to startle the dead. And they all see poor Lazarus, trying to wind his way out the cave with his head in a cloth bag and his arms and legs wound in linen strips. "*Untie that man so he can go home and have dinner.*" Jesus says in so many words. I don't know which impresses me more, that Jesus had the power to make a dead man live, or that he wept for the people he loved only moments before he did it. The truth is...I want a Savior who can do both. When the day comes, I want to hear my name, and return to the living, and I want to be greeted by a Savior who understands what tears are. And the beauty of this story is that in Jesus we get both, power to save and a heart that can weep for us.

Mid-Week Devotional

"O Death, Where is Your Victory? O Death, Where is Your Sting?"

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality..

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting."

1 Corinthians 15:51-55

In John's gospel on Sunday, we heard Martha confess to Jesus about her deceased brother what she must have learned in synagogue as a girl: "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*" But exactly how we are glorified on Resurrection Day is "*a mystery*", a matter not explicitly taught in Old Testament scripture. Decades later, in his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul would fill in the blanks with an air of some excitement: "*Behold!...We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*"

Woven between the lines of Paul's teaching is the notion that he and his readers might very well still be alive at the moment of Christ's return. And the essential notion of the mystery is that, alive or dead, on that day none of us will pass into eternity as we are. The trumpet sound, "*the voice of the archangel*", will signal the passing of the fallen world into history (the voice: 1 Thessalonians 4:16; John 5:25-29; the world: 1 John 2:15-17). The dead will rise first to meet Christ in mid-descent from wherever they were laid, fresh and alive and "*clothed*" in Spirit-sustained physical bodies that can never die again.

Then those who are still alive will also be transformed from their flesh and blood existence into heavenly bodies to rise to Christ in their turn and accompany him back into the this world which was always rightfully his and which he will make entirely new in its turn (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 21:1-8). In the same moment that our flesh and blood bodies are clothed by the Spirit and transformed, our characters will be transformed to conform perfectly to his (1 John 2:28-3:3). For those whose destinies are bound up with the world, it will be a time of great mourning but to those who are identified with Christ, a time of great rejoicing (Matthew 24:30,31; Colossians 3:1-4).

In this age, death seems to have the last word in each person's life, but Paul goes on to assert that at the final resurrection death will be rendered mute and harmless. The passage Paul quotes from is from Hosea, a song in which that prophet decries the faithlessness of Ephraim, the tribe that led the way into the iniquity that caused the destruction of Israel's northern kingdom (Hosea 13:14). Paul's quotation here is puzzling because the point of Hosea's song in Hebrew was that the Ephraimites would not be spared the death their sin deserves, while the Greek Old Testament reads Hosea as promising them life despite their many sins.

But Calvin reads Hosea and Paul both as asserting that God holds the power to make death certain or harmless depending on where one stands with him. So Paul has reframed Hosea's words for Christians bound who are bound for resurrection: "*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*" Because once Jesus returns, death will cease to be a factor in the lives of those who belong to him. Christ's death on the cross in our place spares us the condemnation God's law would otherwise have demanded, and the power Christ provides by the Spirit frees us from the sin that held us in bondage when we lived by the flesh alone (Romans 8:1,2). It follows from this that we begin to experience resurrection power the moment we give our lives to Christ. Our bodies will die, but God is already working to complete us "*in the resurrection on the last day.*"