

This is the second in a series of Lenten sermons on the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Last Sunday I began by telling you Jesus loves you too much to fulfill your expectations of salvation. His dreams for you, and for our world, are greater than we imagined. The question we encounter today is do you believe that? Do you believe Jesus is our hope, even when it appears too late?

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Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha are not the average characters we encounter in the gospels. This text, and other passages, make it clear the family has a very special relationship with Jesus. They are his friends, whom he loved.

Lazarus, we don't know much about. When the Bible speaks about him, he's either gravely ill, dead, or very surprised to be alive again. But his sister Martha, we know all too well. She's the Presbyterian in the family—a take charge, task oriented, hard worker. Sometimes she works so hard she forgets to enjoy loving. Also, as we see today, Martha knows her theology. Then there is the other sister Mary. She's the grown daughter you still worry about. Not the practical one, but the one who's always giving her money away to the seals and whales. She's smart but driven by her heart. Mary can make you laugh and cry like no one else.

Today's passage begins, "When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days." Although the sisters had asked Jesus the healer to come because "Lazarus whom you love is ill," Jesus showed up late. Too late. And Lazarus was now dead and in a tomb.

Lazarus is the name of the thing we thought Jesus loved as much as we did. Lazarus can be a dream we had for our family, church, or our work. It can be a commitment to justice, or a view of the world shaped by the Christian Gospel. When Lazarus dies, you haven't just lost something close to your heart, you've lost something you thought was close to the heart of the Savior. We don't expect to receive everything we want, or even everything we pray to receive. But remember, Jesus loved Lazarus, and we do expect Jesus to save what he cares about. So when Lazarus dies, it is both a grief and a theological problem.

When Martha heard that Jesus was finally coming, she left Mary at home and ran down the road to meet him. "Lord," she says, "if only you had been here my brother would not have died." Jesus responds, "Your brother will rise again." And then she says, "I know he will rise again on the last day." Four days into her grief and she is restating the theological truth she knows. That's more common than you may expect.

When a pastor gets a call to come to the hospital because someone is dying, typically the family will talk similarly to Martha. They are not ready to explore the depths of their grief. And they are not looking for the pastor to explain why bad things happen to good people. Not yet. In the midst of the crisis, they just want the pastor to remind them of what they know, what they have rehearsed in worship every Sunday. So, the pastor leads them in reciting, "The Lord is my shepherd ... yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou art with me." Or maybe, "...I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting..."

But as Martha returns to one of these faith statements Jesus breaks in to say, "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?" For those of us who for years and years have sat through sermon after sermon, who can stand and recite the Apostles' Creed from memory, and who know so much about the faith, there comes a time when Jesus interrupts us to say the real question is not what we believe, but in whom do we believe? "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

When you are in a crisis, it doesn't really matter what you know. What you know isn't going to save you. When you are in a crisis whether you survive or not all depends on who you know. And in whom you believe. Jesus is not a what. He's a who. He is not a doctrine, philosophy, ideology, a type of politics, or a means to an end. And he is not the sacred legitimator of your own desires. Jesus is the living Son of God. That's who he is.

Every Sunday is a little Easter when we remember Jesus has already defeated death. He ascended to the right hand of his Father where he intercedes on our behalf as our great high priest. Through the Holy Spirit, he is continuing his unfolding salvation in the world and in our lives. And sometimes during our worship when we are going over all of this again and again, the Holy Spirit grabs hold of our souls to ask, "Do you believe this?" Do you believe that if a tomb could not hold Jesus, then there is no telling where he can show up again. And do you therefore believe the tombs of loss and grief cannot hold us either?

Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Before Lazarus dies you may have some belief about that. but you will never know if you believe in Jesus until after Lazarus is dead and your dreams and expectations have been buried. That's when faith matters. Not faith in a doctrine, but faith in the Savior who works in ways beyond our belief.

When Mary gets to Jesus, they don't talk theology. They just cry. She initially says the exact same thing to Jesus about how Lazarus would be fine, if only Jesus had not delayed. "If only..." How many of our honest prayers begin this way?

In contrast to Martha, Mary's grief gets work out not through her beliefs, but through her heart. She knelt at Jesus' feet, and wept and wept, as if her tears were silently falling prayers. We're told that seeing this Jesus was greatly disturbed and deeply moved. Then he began to weep.

This is one of the most hope-filled images of Jesus. He does not maintain objectivity or professional composure. Blessedly, he doesn't say to Mary, "Well, what I hear you saying is..." No, the pathos of how it is overwhelms him as he joins in her tears. Do you realize the power behind these tears? Jesus, as God in the flesh, is weeping! God can be moved—"greatly disturbed and deeply moved." This is why we pray.

God joins our tears, the tears of those we love, the tears of the homeless mother and her children, the tears of Ukraine and the Middle East and at our southern borders. And once we see that God is moved with compassion, then the world becomes a very unpredictable place. Who knows what can happen when God is moved to the point of tears? Can your theology weep? Can your politics weep? Can your work ethic, your plans for success, or your money weep? No. Only a person can be moved to tears. But this is no ordinary person. This is the resurrection and the life.

Again, who knows what can happen when a Savior weeps? The Gospel knows. It proclaims our dead hopes can come back to life. Amen.