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Even Now
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John 11:1-44

[The Death of Lazarus]

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ 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." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

[Jesus the Resurrection and the Life]

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

[Jesus Weeps]

²⁸ 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." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

[Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life]

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² 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." ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ 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."

Preachers as ordinary as I am are planning funerals for fourteen-year-olds. So I thought, *join them. Treat this service, this scripture, in light of the week their town and our country are having.* How are we doing, as a people? As a country? *Overwhelmed with hopelessness?* "Overwhelmed with hopelessness" doesn't really preach that well.

I doodled a few pages before remembering no new words are required. We preach the same sermon at every funeral – for 94-year-olds and for 14-year-olds: Jesus died and rose again, once and for all people, of every time and place.

Knowing full well how we can be when we are at our worst, the same words hold – "Jesus died and rose" – for the hopelessness that overwhelms us now.

So that from within all this sadness and horror, we have this one quiet, powerful, everlasting, deeper-than-deep promise of God: those children fell straight and gently into the loving arms of Jesus. None of which relieves us, who call ourselves God's people, of our collective duty, our shared responsibility, to follow Jesus where and as he leads, to follow his mandate of radical hospitality to welcome and include the people on whom the rest of the world has given up.

How does a 19-year-old boy get so lost in an ordinary American town that killing seems a reasonable thing to do? What if someone had made the effort to love him well? What if a church had loved him well? People like us – people not in the very midst of the crisis and where the pain is terrible but not personal – can take this moment to pull the camera back for a wider view. Kids die every day of human greed and violence. They are shot and sold and starved like animals, usually for money. Usually so somebody somewhere can get a little bit richer.

And by that same wide lens, there we are as well – waking up each day to call ourselves God's own. Christian. Gathering to call ourselves *the church*. Each new day a brand new day to take one person's – one congregation's – measure of responsibility for tending the brokenness that leads to the evil, that results in the horror, of weeks like these this side

of Heaven. And however hopeless we *feel*, friends: We. Are. Not. However hopeless a situation appears: It. Is. Not. Because God is at work.

In our text today, we've come to Jesus' last sign in the gospel of John. His *point of no return*, if you will. He raises Lazarus from the dead, and his enemies commit to his assassination. At the end of John, chapter 11, the Passion of Christ is in motion.

Lazarus was Mary and Martha's brother. We know these three were a household. Maybe it was just the three of them, or maybe they also had spouses or kids. Households can end up in all kinds of arrangements. We know Mary, Martha and Lazarus were Jesus' chosen family, if you will. Theirs was the house to which he retreated. They were the people with whom he could *chill out – be off the clock* for a while. We also know that their house was the last place Jesus got any rest, or was treated with any gentleness, any real human kindness, before his arrest, torture and crucifixion.

So it makes sense to me that, when Lazarus was so sick he might die, Mary and Martha sent for Jesus right away. Assumed he'd drop whatever to get there. Everything they know of him bolsters this assumption. *"We've seen him do more for people he loves less. Of course he will come."* This is faith. Utter confidence in what God will do. *Of course he'll come.*

Except he didn't. Readers of the text get a special view, a split screen of sorts: Mary and Martha in one frame planning their brother's funeral; Jesus sketching out his plan for the human race in the other. We get a theological window Mary and Martha do not. *Jesus isn't ignoring them – he has a plan! He has a **good** reason for not answering their prayers. "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."*

Blah, blah, blah, like Charlie Brown's teacher talking. Nothing anyone wants to hear when their brother is dying. When they are terrified. When they know God could good and well fix this, if God wanted to. They don't want a theological window – they want their brother. They want this horror not to be happening. Grief will do that to a person: make us ask for the unreasonable, the irrational. Grief is like severe sleep deprivation. After a while nothing makes any sense, but you're too tired to care anyway, so . . . *whatever*. Finally Jesus does arrive. Lazarus has been dead four days.

Four days is a long time to be dead in a desert climate where embalming is not a thing. My golden retriever once had a pet squirrel carcass that he played with in our backyard every day for more than a week. When I called him to come inside he'd hurry up and rebury it. Once the dog started smelling like the carcass I made Ben (my son) watch where Cody hid it, to get rid of it once and for all. He carried it to the creek and tossed it in. Cody then had a wet pet squirrel carcass – which Ben then tracked down and told no one what he did with it.

John wants us to know that Lazarus is really and truly, all the way, nasty dead. Buried in a tomb, John says. Don't think "roomy cave." Think MRI machine. I have to have MRI's of my brain every few years. They put an IV in my arm, earplugs in my ears, a white washcloth over my eyes; they bolt my head to a very skinny table, then slide me into a tube barely bigger than the table and me. Then, hilariously, they tell me to stay perfectly still – which is harder than you would think, because I start twitching.

I wonder if Lazarus started twitching when he heard Jesus' voice. I wonder if Jesus sounded close up, like a voice in his head, or far away like the radiologist. I wonder if Lazarus was afraid. I wonder if he smelled terrible to himself. I wonder if it was hard to crawl out with his arms and legs still bound up in linen. And folks thought Jesus rubbing spit mud on a blind man was something. The very people seeing Lazarus wiggling out of that hole are themselves struggling – to believe.

Then Jesus says *Unbind him*. Only about a hundred sermons in those two words in which Jesus does the heavy lifting – resurrection! – then calls his people to do the rest: bring the reborn person home again and nurse him back to strength, back to community, back to hope, back to faith.

But let's back up, back to when Jesus finally shows up in Bethany. Shows his face to Mary and Martha – his best friends, remember – who cannot imagine why he is so phenomenally late. I want to offer Mary and Martha as two ways faith gets humanly embodied at times of overwhelming hopelessness. The difference between the two ways of faith are nuanced, and yet profound in their functional difference. Each determines the course of life for the believer, the course of life together for a community – and the quality of life for those touched by such a community.

Only one, however, leads from life to life to more life. And thus, only one is *gospel faith*.

One way of faith – what I'm calling *If-Only faith* – is embodied by **both** Mary and Martha. *If only you had been here, Lord, our brother wouldn't have died.*

- ❖ Faith rooted in the idea (where did we get this idea?) that what God had done for others God will do for us. *God made a blind man see; could he not have healed their brother?*
- ❖ Faith that assumes that what we have seen and heard is all there is to see and hear – of God, of God's mercy and goodness and generosity and grace, that what we haven't seen ourselves God can't or will not do.
- ❖ Faith that flows inevitably to disappointment when God does not respond in the way that we expect, and so we assume God has not responded at all.

Is that what it means to make God in our image? To confine God to the limits of imagination? If we cannot think it, God cannot do it. The sisters have never known that a four-day-old dead body could rise. *If only you had been here*, they lament, because they haven't the faith to pray anything else.

They cannot get outside of their own heads and hearts. When Mary gets to Jesus, she says the same: *If only you had been here, Lord; if only you would do for us what you did for others; don't you love us, Lord? How come for them and not for us, Lord?*

Martha has a second sentence though, and that other, gospel kind of, faith: *Even-Now* faith. "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." She tacks on *even now*, this nuanced, altogether other kind of faith.

I can't imagine Martha knew what she was asking. Had Jesus asked her what she wanted, I expect she might have said, *"Not this. I want this not to be happening."* She's the one who questions opening the grave, for how bad it was going to smell. She believes

in the future resurrection of the dead. She believes he is the Messiah. And still, she doesn't see this coming. She fetches Mary. They go through the conversation again.

Jesus cried – another twenty sermons in that verse. One little tiny one here: he is about to watch a crowd of people see a dead man walking for the first time in history and it not change them a lick. That's worth crying over.

He cried. He prayed. Then he yelled, "Lazarus, wake up and come out of the grave!" I picture it like a grown man being born from the side of a hill. Only there's no midwife to help pull him out. I picture it taking awhile, with lots of scratching and grunting and dust, while a crowd of people gets more and more twitchy and nervous, trying to make sense of what they are looking at. If she'd known what Jesus was about to do, Martha would have torn the rock away herself.

But I don't think she did. I don't think she knew what she was saying when she said, "*even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.*" Those were just the only words she had for what she couldn't see but suspected in her heart of hearts, because of having been so near him for months and months and months. That knowing him germinated in her the sense, the faith, that more was going on here than could be seen and heard, and that he could be trusted even now, even in the darkest, scariest, saddest moments. Moments for which she had no words, just the urge to ask and trust that she didn't have to know precisely what God might do to believe that God cared about them, about what was happening to them, and that God would do what God deemed best.

Friends, this is not a story of resuscitation. Lazarus didn't stop breathing for a few seconds. This is a four-day-old corpse. Of course his opponents didn't believe for a second Jesus really did it. They believed he had convinced others he'd done it. Which made him all the more dangerous to the order of things. What if death has no sting? What if the threat of death has no power over the people whose bodies the Empire needs to control? Curing blindness is one thing. This, however, is positively intolerable.

Resurrection is not good news all around, friends. Folks who don't fear death, for whom the threat of death contains no sting, really muck up the wheels of economic imperialism, not to mention social, political and religious control of the masses. Currency loses its value really quickly. This Mary is the same one who will dump out an entire jar of expensive perfume (a working person's wages for a whole year – \$35-\$100K, by today's measure) to anoint Jesus for his burial.

Even-Now faith includes all the same grief and anguish, of course. Martha was as heartbroken as Mary. But she was not hopeless. She was not overwhelmed in the face of the unknown, because knowing Jesus was enough. His nearness, her history with him, his love for her gave her cause enough to say some words of faith she herself did not quite understand: *Even now I know.*

Have any of you a story of receiving from the Lord what you'd have never known to ask for? Solutions and resolutions to situations that, had they turned out as YOU hoped, would have turned out far worse than what God chose to do? Amen?

Anybody ever screwed a situation up or made it even worse, because you couldn't leave well enough alone; could not keep your mouth closed? your hands to yourself? Amen? As an "extremely helpful person" myself, it can be a hard lesson – this *even now* strain of

faith. All it really asks of us is patience – waiting to see what God will do in situations where we can do nothing.

Discernment matters, of course, and courage. And humility. And patience. But overwhelming hopelessness is for folks who don't know better, who don't believe better, who imagine God can't do something we never saw God do yet. Is that who Jesus taught us to be? Is that who Jesus has called us to be? I think not.

Friends, if the people of the living Christ give in to overwhelming hopelessness, this world is *done for*. No wonder the Lord weeps.

But we are not them. We are Christ's own people and church. Death itself is what's *done for* – along with the heavy lifting there. We've only to live out this life in hope and courage.

I'll end with this prayer by Thomas Merton. He sums up *Even-Now* faith pretty well. I expect you've heard it. You are now going to hear it again. Let's pray.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always; though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." Amen.