

WILL WE EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN?

John 11: 1-6, 17-29, 32-44

Janet's husband John had been an elder at the church I was leading for decades. He was a devoted family man, kind and generous. He and Janet had a wonderful marriage, they had raised three children together and were now enjoying their grandchildren. John's health was a little compromised as he had suffered a serious heart attack some years earlier. But he took care of himself and seemed to be doing well overall. One day, though, we got a call. John had died. He was out grocery shopping and had just collapsed. It was a massive heart attack and this time, he could not be revived.

How devastating for Janet and the whole family. How devastating for our church. We gathered together to surround and support Janet and the family. We shared stories. There were tears. It was all so sudden. But there was also gratitude and celebration. John would have wanted it no other way. There was even space for laughter. John liked to laugh... The service was a beautiful event in all the ways funerals can be at their best. Janet lived it all – the sorrow and tears, the remembering, the thanksgiving... Her life could never be the same again with the huge hole the absence of John left in her...

Weeks, passed, and then months. Janet continued to come to church and get involved. This was spiritual home for her and she was surrounded by others who had also known loss in their lives. But everything at church also began to mean that much more for Janet. It's as if she tasted, smelled, saw and felt things differently now. One concern many of us had was how Janet would live her life going forward.

Well, in time we noticed something amazing starting to happen. Janet was doing things she just hadn't done before. She was exercising in a whole new way. She lost some excess weight. She was looking different, alive and engaged. She was getting more involved with volunteering, especially the kind that engaged other people. She was also more immersed in a spiritual way with church, especially the worship services and sermons. She joined the choir. She was absorbing it all like food and she had a new kind of hunger she had not known the same before. In a few years she also found love again, with another widower in the congregation. Their wedding was truly something to celebrate for the whole church, and their respective families were delighted too.

They would always have their former partners as forever part of their lives. But this new found love between them was also a gift from God. It was such a gift to be able to celebrate

this marriage with them. The whole church celebrated even as we gave thanks for their former partners who were also part of the communion of saints of our congregation...

So why am I telling Janet's story. Because Janet's story is all about resurrection, resurrection into new life after having suffered the cross of loss. Resurrection from the dead is not just a physical thing. It is a spiritual thing too. What do I mean? Let's zero in on our scripture reading in search of revelatory insight.

The account of the raising of Lazarus is a miracle story unique to this gospel account. As I've mentioned before, John calls the miracles Jesus does - signs. He calls them signs because they point to something. Signs are a lot more than just physical healing, as amazing as physical healing is. The raising of Lazarus is about a lot more than resuscitating someone who has been unconscious and believed dead. Resurrection here is a spiritual thing as much as a physical thing and Jesus wants people to understand this so they can benefit from it. Resurrection is also not just about new life after you die. It's something to be experienced here and now. How do we know this? Because, before Jesus gets to the miracle of resuscitating Lazarus and pointing to this as a sign of resurrection, he has a fascinating conversation with Lazarus' sister Martha. Jesus' most fascinating conversations where he reveals profound truths about himself are often conversations with women in the gospel accounts.

So what does Jesus reveal to Martha? Well, he reveals to her that anyone who connects to Jesus by opening themselves to his love, trusting it and absorbing it, will never be the same. They will experience resurrection into new life. Let me quote his actual words: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." And then he asks Martha whether she believes this. Belief in the gospel is not an intellectual thing. Belief is about trusting something so that you stake your whole life on it. Are you willing to stake your whole life on trusting me and my love and how it can and must transform your whole life Martha? Because if you do, your life - it's priorities, commitments and passions, will possess the kind of life that death cannot terminate. Death now will become a transition. Every challenge, loss or crisis now will become an opportunity to be resurrected into further new life. Do you believe this? Do we believe this? Do we believe this is possible?

OK preacher, if resurrection here and now is possible, how do we set ourselves up for it? Well, first of all, we have to be invested. In our story, not only Mary and Martha, but Jesus himself is deeply and personally invested in the loss of Lazarus. He breaks down and weeps. The Greek word for this emotional break down points to the kind of visceral reaction we get when we face the kind of profound loss akin to being punched in the gut and unable to breathe. Jesus loses it totally when he sees people he cares about crying so bad. He can't hold it together. But this is exactly the kind of love Jesus is all about. When you care deeply

about people you can't just hold it together. You don't. You fall apart. Janet fell apart like this when John died. But what resurrecting power in this capacity to fall apart because you love! You fall apart but then, you're also changed.

And this brings us to part two of the journey to resurrection here and now. We're not only invested and affected personally by the cross of loss, but then we have to be open and willing to take steps to new life. We must discover the gift of faith. Mary and Martha are not only torn up about their brother, they're willing to believe in what Jesus can do. They're willing to take steps according to Jesus' instructions, as wild as they may be. They follow Jesus' instructions. They have Lazarus' body dug up. It's an awful business. But then something totally miraculous happens. We know what the story claims has happened. Lazarus is alive. He is untangled from all the wrapping and washed. He is alive. He is risen into new life again.

Ok, but what about Mary and Martha and all of us. We're not dead. So what does rising into new life mean for us here and now? Well, we are living through something that none of us has ever lived through. The fear of the spread of Covid-19 and it's threat to the health and well-being of people, has required major changes, restrictions and limitations to be imposed on us all. Nothing will ever be the same again however soon we overcome the spread of the virus. For many, though, other than trying to hold it together and dreaming of getting back to life the way it was, this time is simply one to be survived and passed through, period. But what if we saw this time, like any time of extremity, struggle and loss, as a time where we are thrown into a cross-awaiting-resurrection time? What if how we endure this time and how we absorb it, can also be an occasion where we are opened into a whole new way of looking at life, living life and directing our lives? What if we took this time to evaluate all our commitments or lack of them, all our preoccupations and pursuits, all our petty and not so petty conflicts, all our relationships and things that bind us to others one way or the other?... What things have we put off dealing with? What things have taken up our energy, time and investment? How well have we used what we've been given? How well have we developed our capacities and opportunities? I can keep asking questions because all of them are relevant to each and every one of us at times like this.

Do we simply let life happen to us and weather the storm as best we can? Or do we bend into it and discern a whole way forward with time. What Janet's story and that of Mary and Martha reveal to us is that we cannot fabricate or create our own meaning and purpose. Resurrection is something that has to happen to us, just like the cross is something imposed on us against our choosing. Crises and challenges will come to all of us whether we like it or not. So how do we prepare ourselves to be in the best possible inner state of being so that resurrection may happen to us?

Our gospel story offers us some revelatory guidance here. Think about what Jesus does and how he works with where Mary and Martha are at. The first thing is that they're all invested. They're all committed. It's all about the loss of Lazarus. Jesus weeps terribly. Mary and Martha are in pieces emotionally. It matters what's happened to Lazarus. They are focused and attentive and will do whatever it takes with Jesus for any hope of new life. Unless we, too, are so invested and committed to learning in this time of Covid-19, learning, seeing and emerging in time into new insight, wisdom and possibly new directions in our lives in all kinds of ways, all kinds of pursuits and commitments, all kinds of relationships... Unless this matters to us and we bend into this time of waiting, pondering and surviving with our minds and our hearts... Unless we do this, resurrection most surely will not come. We may not break down crying, although if we absorb even a little the distress and worry all around us, we can't be left indifferent. The world has become that much more a fearful, unstable and uncertain place, even here in Canada where we can feel protected from so much afflicting our fragile planet. Life can never be the same again. The question is, how are we going to bend into this change discerning life-giving passion and direction for our lives as citizens of this planet?

Finally, Jesus not only asks for investment and commitment, but he also asks for faith, faith in what he is about to do, faith in what can seem so wildly unreal. What if we are being called to have such faith too? What if through this gospel story, God is challenging us to have faith in an altogether new way of being in our society and our planet? I believe this is exactly what we are being called to do. We are being called by the circumstances before us to drink it all in deeply, live it through, and then open ourselves and commit ourselves to a whole new way of being on this planet, with each other and with our lives. It's urgent, it's real, and God is in it, calling to us to listen, learn and move forward on our journey of transformation.

I expect most people will, in time, just go back to a lot of what life was like and turn off the urgency to change. It can all be so stressful after all. But there may be a few of us who are ready to engage the stress and urgency to change by welcoming change into our own lives, finding new life in it, new purpose and passion and even joy. Like Janet, like Mary and Martha with Lazarus among them again in a whole new way, nothing will ever be the same again. But they and possibly we, may be equipped to face the crosses of life in a whole new way. We will not be afraid the same. We will have learned even more deeply how to bend into the storm and await resurrection beyond it... With God, all things are possible; Amen.