

## Too Little, Too Late? (John 11:1-45)

Some of the hardest times in our lives raise the question Mary and Martha ask of Jesus. Their family had a level of special intimacy with Jesus, yet they knew him to be more than a friend. His public title might have been the Teacher (John 11:28), but they addressed him as Lord. They called him Lord even as they confronted him, calling his absence into question. They believed in him wholeheartedly and believed he could have healed their brother and prevented his death.

In every Gospel, Jesus brings someone back to life, prefiguring the power of God that will be shown in his resurrection. Death is not the final word, and we can take comfort in that ultimate truth. But how do we reconcile that belief—as Martha did in her confession that Jesus is the Messiah—with our grief and disappointment when things go terribly wrong, when

we suffer crushing and seemingly unnecessary losses?

On a summer Sunday morning, a young family arrived for worship at a Congregational church in a country town in New England. The mother, thin and pale, wore a scarf over her head. The two children had never been to church, but they seemed happy to come up front for the children's message with friends they knew from school.

Their mom was a beloved volunteer at that local elementary school. She remained determined to do the things she loved, with the children she adored, despite the stage-four cancer threatening to kill her. Bringing her family to church might have been the only way she came close to admitting the situation was beyond her control. It was her husband who reached out to the pastor for support, even as the end came, she fought against death.

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Her funeral filled the little church. People stood in the back of the sanctuary and along the sides. Many families brought their children, classmates of her second grader and kindergartner. Knowing this would happen, the pastor arranged the service to include a message for children. In it, she told the story of Jesus and the time he cried for his friends. She encouraged the children to share stories about their friends' mom with each other, and with their parents. She explained that some of those stories might make them cry, and some would make them smile, and both of those things were fine. She told them that it was OK to be mad, and it was even OK to be mad at God.

Lazarus came out of the tomb, called by Jesus, and the Gospel story moved on, with new believers won and religious authorities provoked. What remains for us are the potent images of Marth's challenging Jesus on the road, of Mary's kneeling at his feet, of Jesus' weeping over his friend. Why didn't God

prevent this? Why did someone down the street get a miracle but we

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didn't? Where is Jesus, for us, when we are grieving? This story lets you know that it is OK to ask.

This story of the raising of Lazarus continues beyond these verses, but it is worth dwelling on these scenes before the event. Jesus and his disciples are staying on the other side of the Jordan. They have left Jerusalem because the religious leaders who opposed him threatened to stone and arrest Jesus. They are hiding out, or at least regrouping. While there, Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, send word to Jesus that Lazarus is ill.

Jesus loves this family, and they love him.

According to John's Gospel, Jesus has stayed with them in Bethany before. It's clear that they support Jesus' work. Later in the Gospel, Jesus will visit them again, and Mary will engage in an

extraordinary expression of love by anointing Jesus' feet. And yet, as close as they are, he decides not to go to them immediately upon hearing of Lazarus' illness. When he finally arrives,

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both Martha and Mary confront him, separately using the same words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They sent word, and his response was delayed. They cried out from their depths, and, like the psalmist, they waited with their whole being at Lazarus' bedside, praying for mercy.

When Jesus is confronted by this crying out of the depths, he cries too. Why? Perhaps it is too much to see his beloved friends suffering under the power of death. Perhaps even his knowledge that not only Lazarus but all these fragile people before him will one day be resurrected doesn't lessen the grief of the moment. Perhaps he too feels the pain of losing Lazarus, even knowing it is happening for the glory of God and will soon be over. In this scene we see

Jesus at his most human, and in this moment, he suffers with us, even as he knows that the suffering will pass.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha comes to meet him. Though she confronts him by saying that Lazarus

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would not have died had he been there, she affirms her faith that Jesus can ask anything of God and God will give it. Does she believe Jesus can raise her brother from the dead?

It doesn't seem like it. When Jesus goes to the tomb and asks that the stone be removed, she objects, worried about the smell. Lazarus had been dead for four days—in Jewish tradition, this is beyond the point when resuscitation is possible. But Martha does believe in resurrection, the understanding of bodily resurrection on the last day as informed by Ezekiel's prophecy. She also believes that Jesus is the Christ coming into the

world. As readers, we bear witness to Martha's understanding of death, life, and resurrection transforming in real time. Yes, Lazarus will rise again on the last day. This was already part of her theology. Yes, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised to redeem Israel. This was already part of her theology. What was not part of her theology until that moment, was that Jesus Christ is currently the resurrection and

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the life. Her beloved friend—the man standing before her who has stayed in her house—has taken resurrection into himself and transformed what resurrection means. We live eternally in Christ now and in the last day.

This is too mind-blowing to grasp immediately, but it is through the raising of Lazarus that Jesus demonstrates that God is the source of resurrection and the source of all life, and therefore the one who overcomes all death. Just as God commands breath into the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, God,

through Jesus, commands Lazarus out of the grave—so that we know that Christ is Lord.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The death of Lazarus gave Jesus the opportunity to reveal himself as the resurrection and life. There were seven purposes for Lazarus' death. And note that each of these purposes is also applicable to the death of the believer. **1<sup>st</sup>**, to glorify and to proclaim that Jesus is the

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Son of God. **2<sup>nd</sup>**, to show Jesus' great love. **3<sup>rd</sup>**, to show the necessity for *waiting upon God* in great crises. **4<sup>th</sup>**, to teach the need to grasp opportunity. **5<sup>th</sup>**, to show Jesus' great power over death. **6<sup>th</sup>**, to help strengthen the disciples' belief. And **7<sup>th</sup>**, to stir the disciples' courage and loyalty.

So, what are the lessons we can learn from this Scripture reading in John?

This scripture reading of Jesus raising Lazarus teaches that Jesus has absolute power over death, serving as the “Resurrection and the Life.” It reveals that God’s timing is not human timing, often allowing suffering for greater glory. This passage highlights the importance of faith, compassionate love, and that death is not the final end for believers. This passage also serves as a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death and resurrection,

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reinforcing the promise of eternal life for all who trust in him.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the beautiful story of Lazarus and the many lessons I can learn from this amazing passage of Scripture. Thank you that sickness, sin, death, and hell, which is the inevitable result of all who fall short of your glory, has been

conquered forever through the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. Thank you that just as Mary and Martha's period of misery was turned into laughter and joy, so our night of weeping has also been turned into a morning of joy with peals of singing, through faith in Christ, our Redeemer. Thank you that because he lives, we will also live. May we sing forth your praise and glory in the eternal ages to come. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**