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April 2, 2017
The 5th Sunday in Lent
John 11:1-45

Don't Rush to Resurrection

It is tempting to jump to the end of this story. It's tempting to want to sum it up in a sentence or two: Dead guy isn't dead. Jesus is responsible. You may be tempted to think to yourself, "I'll never get those five minutes of Justi reading to me back. She didn't even try to make it more interesting by having parishioners act it out." This is the antepenultimate (I had to ask google what the thing is before the penultimate) time I'm preaching and this is just about my favorite scripture, so indulge me; all of the verses are important. I take my cue from the late great Pete Seeger who, when Bruce Springsteen suggested cutting some of 'This Land is Your Land' because it was a cold day in January and people had been standing outside for a long time, said, "No, we're going to sing all the verses." And I've adopted that as a personal creed since then.

There's a reason the writer of the 4th gospel is slow to get to the punch line and that postponement of the main event is important for us to understand the story in depth. This is the final story from John that we will get in Lent, in fact, it's the last Sunday in Lent. These stories we've heard over the course of Lent have been about showing us, not telling us, what it's like to encounter Jesus – both the possibilities and the danger.

And there is danger in this story. If we skip to the end, skip to the resurrection, we miss the danger overshadowing this story. It is dangerous for Jesus to go to Bethany where authorities are on the lookout for him. This is not just a joyful story; it is also about the cost of resurrection.

We begin with the news of Lazarus' illness and the possibility of his death. While the disciples see this event as dangerous for them (because of the authorities out to get Jesus) but also sad, because Lazarus, Martha, and Mary are their friends. Jesus on the other hand, views this event from an entirely different angle. Lazarus' illness is tied up with the experience of the presence of God, God's glory. And though it is not apparent to anyone just what Jesus is talking about, we the readers have a better idea. In the telling of the author of John, Jesus, God's incarnate self, shows up in the ordinary stuff of life: wine at a wedding, water at a well, a lifelong disability, and now the illness and death of a friend. He's not being callous; for John's Jesus, it's not about the actual event, it's about what we see come out of the event – namely an encounter with God.

And when he finally does arrive, the first person he meets is Martha. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Sometimes I need to tarry at this verse for a while – a day, a month, sometimes longer. "If you had been here my brother wouldn't have died." "If you had been there" sounds like something we could say or maybe do say all the time in the face of loss and grief – the grief that we all face at one time in another in our lives, that we all will face AND the grief we see around us in the world. Both accusation and lament are in her words and we do injustice to what she has gone through when we hurry past them.

In a moment, Martha reaffirms her commitment to Jesus and her faith in his identity as the messiah. But when she states that she knows her brother will live again on the resurrection on the last day, she is merely repeating what would have standard Jewish teachings on the resurrection. She hasn't grasped that Jesus is saying something different: He is the resurrection; it is happening; it is available right now!

And Mary has the same response. She too is angry? Sad? That Jesus did not come faster. Despite an interest in what Jesus has to say about this event, the writer of John continues to lay before us the suffering, the overwhelming grief of this particular family. The writer lingers over the weeping. And in response to this weeping, Jesus himself is disturbed and troubled. The power of death has a strong hold on us; it is despair making.

And now we come to the actual raising of Lazarus, which only takes up a couple of verses. Jesus commands the stone be pulled away, he prays to God, and he calls Lazarus' name. The man who comes out is still in his funeral wrappings and the crowd is called upon to unbind him.

What is not included in this passage and what is important to know is that this miracle, the raising of Lazarus, is the precipitating event that leads to Jesus' arrest and death. The other gospel narratives place the breaking point for the authorities in Jesus' time in Jerusalem and the overturning of the tables in the temple. John's gospel does something else with that story. As I said at the beginning of my sermon, there is danger in this gospel and the biggest danger is that this saving act will cost Jesus his life. Jesus' crucifixion and death hovers like a dark cloud over an ostensibly joyful story.

The church is called to be Jesus' body here and now. What should we take from this teaching? That we cannot rush to miracle, that we cannot gloss over pain and death. I am and always have been an optimist, a bit of a cheerleader. I find myself giving pep talks and trying to get people to see the bright side. But that optimism covers deep wells of anxiety. I worry about you, me, and all of us, about my abilities and limitations and yours. I find that if I can convince other people that everything is going to be okay, I can ignore my own feelings of dread.

But that is not what it means to be a Christian. Christians follow Jesus into the heart of pain, into the heart of hurt. We are called to look honestly at the broken places and not turn our heads or avert our eyes.

We can do that because hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is based on faith that there is no place no dark, so forsaken, so broken that God cannot renew it and remake it. God's presence will come, but not in the way or in the form we would like or expect.

We are called not only to have faith in God's presence, but to bring it ourselves, to be the ones who bring new life into places that seem dead. We are called to cut away the bindings and release new things, new ministries, new people into the world. We are called to cross boundaries that seem uncomfortable to unwelcome and to roll away the stone barriers that keep us from people and places that are hurting.

The good news is that we don't have to entirely get it or have perfect faith to start doing the work. Martha doesn't get it; Mary doesn't get it. But they cry out to God, they expect God, and they roll away the stone for God.

What we might want to get our heads around is that this is dangerous work. We'll have an opportunity to explore the danger next week and throughout holy week, but the powers of the world do not like it when people are not afraid and when they start breaking boundaries and rejecting categories. Being a Christian should feel more dangerous than it does.

Perhaps you are like me, afraid to face the world of hurt and pain, afraid that this time God won't show up. Maybe being hopeful instead of optimistic would mess with one's sanity. Maybe like me you are thinking that this Lent you could be playing the part of Lazarus and that

it is we who are in the tomb and it is we who hear our names, calling us to come out, to loosen our bindings, and be set free to live life abundantly in the world.