

Sermon for Lent 5A
Sunday, April 2, 2017

Text: John 11:1-45

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We've just heard the second longest passage in our lectionary. The longest will be read/chanted next week—the Passion of Jesus Christ according to Matthew. But today's reading for the 5th Sunday in Lent describes a pivotal event leading to the events we will hear about next week on the Sunday of the Passion, also known as Palm Sunday. In the past, the 5th Sunday in Lent was designated to be the beginning of the Passion of Christ and was known as the 1st Sunday in Passiontide. This story of the Raising of Lazarus, which appears only in the Gospel according to John, was the straw that broke the camel's back for the religious authorities who wanted to be rid of that troublemaker Jesus of Nazareth. It was the event that led Jesus straight into Jerusalem and straight up to Golgotha. But, this story of Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus is also a story of incredible love that juxtaposes, places side-by-side the reality of Jesus' humanity and his divinity.

The relationship Jesus had with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was one of deep friendship and profound love. It was Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus with oil and wiped them dry with her hair. We can presume that his visit was one of many visits Jesus made to this family. I can only imagine the profound anguish Jesus must have felt when he received the news that his dear friend Lazarus was at the point of death. And it doesn't take a rocket scientist to feel the desperation that Mary and Martha felt when they sent word to Jesus begging for his help. But what's always been disturbing to me about this text is the next part when Jesus seems to blow them off. Clearly he knew what he was about to do. Clearly he knew that he was going to demonstrate the mighty power of God and his own divine nature through the dire situation involving Lazarus. Clearly he knew the risks he was taking to his own life in this action, because he was already on the Jews' hit list. The story tells us that he stayed an extra two days! He wanted to make sure Lazarus was dead dead, but euphemistically, he insisted that Lazarus would merely be asleep.

What's so great about this story happens when he finally arrived in Bethany, four days after Lazarus had died. First, Martha met Jesus on the road where he told her that he is "the resurrection and the life." Those powerful words we hear at the beginning of our own Burial Office in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Upon hearing this, Martha proclaimed the main purpose of this story: to proclaim to the world that Jesus *is* the Messiah and that he is the key to eternal life. And in the midst of all this build up to show Jesus' divinity, he shows us his most human side. Jesus wept. John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the Bible. (I don't know why the NRSV says, "Jesus began to weep." The Greek text simply says, "Jesus wept.") He wept. He showed himself to be vulnerable, he showed his most human of emotions. And from the depths of his most human self, he launched—he catapulted—his most divine self and raised Lazarus from the dead. This was a foreshadowing of the same act he would do on the cross—from the depths of his humanity he would die, and from that catapult his divinity onto the world through his resurrection.

At least once in our lives, every one of us has come face-to-face with the death of someone we loved. I can remember the night I stood in a hospital room watching my own father slip away into death after he was taken off life support. It would have been wonderful if Jesus—or a medical team—had come into the room and resuscitated him, but that was not to be. Indeed, in the Gospel story, Jesus merely resuscitated Lazarus, who would eventually die a physical death for good. But the good news is that in the midst of death, we believe and know that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. We believe and know, like Martha, that "all will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Beside this, we are also reassured that in the midst of our lowest moments, God is present with us to be alongside us, console us, and get us through it. And even when death is staring us in the face, we, like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus did, can look forward to the final resurrection on the last day, when we will finally dwell with God in his kingdom for ever. Amen.