

John 11:1-3, 17-45

Narrator: ¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,

Women: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

Narrator: ¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus,

Martha: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

²³ **JESUS:** “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ **Martha:** “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

²⁵ **JESUS:** “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Martha: ²⁷“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Narrator: ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary,

Martha: “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”

Narrator: ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Mary: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Narrator: ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

³⁴ **JESUS:** “Where have you laid him?”

ALL: “*Lord, come and see.*”

Narrator: ³⁵Jesus began to weep.

³⁶ **ALL:** “*See how he loved him!*”

Narrator: But some of them said,

Men: “**Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?**”

Narrator: ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, with a stone lying against it.

JESUS: “Take away the stone.”

Martha: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

JESUS: ⁴⁰“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Narrator: ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward,

JESUS: “God, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.”

Narrator: ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice,

JESUS: “Lazarus, come out!”

Narrator: ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

JESUS: "Unbind him, and let him go."

Narrator: ⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

I am going to begin with my conclusion, so get ready, I am going to start with what I believe is one of the points being communicated in and through the Lazarus story of resurrection – **this story is our assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death¹**, a power which is able to call us out of our stinking tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life. That is it. That is what I am going to say in a few different ways of the next fifteen minutes or so – because of the importance of that message for us who seek to live by hope and love, I am going to say it a lot: **This story an assurance that there is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death.**

Because of how difficult it can be, in our culture that tries to deny not only death, but aging itself, to let that message sink deep into our bones, I am going to repeat myself even more than usual this morning: **This story is our assurance that there is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death.**

Because I was reminded so vividly and honestly during our trip to Iraq this past year of the reality of my own fear of death, I am going to say it to myself, just one more time: **This story is our assurance that there is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death.**

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor uses this line in her article "Can These Bones Live?" *The Christian Century*, 1996.

This story of Jesus and his beloved friend Lazarus, it lifts up the humanness of Jesus in the most poignant of ways – Jesus is moved by the death of a friend who he loves, he is moved to tears by the grief and pain of the others around him – he is moved to tears by his own grief. And, at the same time, we see the divinity of Jesus in the most outrageous way imaginable – he brings someone back to life who has been dead four days. According to Jewish custom, this meant that Lazarus’ body had begun to rot and that his soul had already departed. We hear this in the words of the story, when Martha doesn’t want the stone removed from her brother’s grave because “there is already a stench.” We see this in many of the paintings of this scene – people covering their faces from the foul scent of decomposition coming off of Lazarus’ once dead body. It is not the same type of clean and magical scene we will get in a couple of weeks at Jesus’ resurrection – no angels or neatly folded grave clothes. There is weeping; there is the smell of death; and the grave clothes are still clinging to the one who has been raised. So, the soul of Lazarus has departed, but then Jesus calls it back.

I have been thinking about death a lot this week. And so with a few particular circumstances of death already on my mind, when I first read the passage for this week, my initial thoughts were more of annoyance and anger: why Lazarus and not someone else? Why is this the one person who gets raised from the dead? Why do these grieving people get a reprieve from the loss of a loved one who dies young? This is one of the problem with miracles, whether in Jesus’ time or our own, they seem so inconsistent: why does a miracle happen for some and not for others? Why does a tornado jump one house, only to destroy another? Why does one person miraculously go into remission from cancer while do not? This is one of the difficult things about miracles – some get them and others do not. And I am not sure what to do or say

about that other than if we get too focused on this point, on why Lazarus and not someone else, we lose sight of the deeper purpose of Jesus and Lazarus: **our assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death.**

Jesus, we are told, had crossed the Jordan River and was a few days journey from Bethany – a suburb of Jerusalem, when he gets word that his beloved friend Lazarus is ill. And yet, having the power to save his friend’s life, he waits two days before going to him – two days before getting to the bedside of his sick and dying friend. Many Bible commentaries ask: Why the delay? It could be that Jesus did not realize the severity of the illness, or it could be so that he could perform his most dramatic miracle yet. Or, it could have been fear and uncertainty.

In the verses just prior to this, Jesus has narrowly escaped a religious death-squad in Jerusalem, we are told in the tenth chapter of John’s gospel, that Jewish leaders “took up stones again to stone him.” And that they tried to arrest him, but he narrowly escaped. So he fled across the Jordan – far away from Jerusalem and those wanting to put him to death. He has just made it out of Jerusalem with his life, when he gets word that his friend is dying just two miles from Jerusalem. Just two miles from that death squad. So, it could be that Jesus knows returning to be with Lazarus and Mary and Martha – that this will likely mean his own death. Will he trade his life to be with his friends, will he trade his life for that of Lazarus? I do not think this is an exaggeration, for the disciple Thomas, upon news that Jesus will be going to Bethany says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” And so perhaps it takes Jesus two days to pray, to work up his courage – two days to discern if this is the time, if he is ready to face death: not Lazarus’

death, but his own. I wonder if it takes him these two days to be renewed is his own **assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than his fear of death.**

Last Sunday I shared briefly about the young Mennonite man MJ Sharp, who was kidnapped in the Democratic Republic of Congo along with one other United Nations Peace Worker and four local Congolese citizens who were working with them. Early this week MJ and his co-worker were found dead, buried in a shallow grave. In an interview, after learning this news, his mother shared about a conversation she had had with her son about his international peace work, he told her, "Mom, you know I don't have a death wish. But I want you to know also that I'm not afraid to die."

His parents said "somewhere in his growing up – in church, in his family – he caught a vision and passion for peacemaking – for resolving conflicts without the use of violence." His parents did not try to dissuade their son's work for peace and reconciliation. It made me think of the question we ask parents during child dedications, the one of which I said at Ira's dedication, is the truly hard one, "Do you promise to gladly surrender your child to the ministry God has in mind for them, even if it might take them to the ends of the earth?"

All I can say is that MJ and his parents must have truly known of Lazarus and Jesus, they must have known the deep **assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death.**

Martha approaches Jesus, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” For those familiar with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief, I think this would be part of the *bargaining stage*. Jesus tries to reassure her about Lazarus, telling her “your brother will rise again.” Martha knows this, she believes in the resurrection, but this does not take away her pain, it does not take away that fact that she wants her brother here with her now. But Martha is thinking about only a future resurrection, about a future power at work in our world, but Jesus says that this power of resurrection and life, that it is here now – it is at work in our world now.

A power at work in and through him – a power that is even stronger than death.

To my utter shock and shame, this week I read that in *2016 our country dropped 26,171 bombs* – in the last year of Obama’s presidency the country which I call home dropped more 26,000 bombs in 365 days.² *That’s three bombs every hour, 24 hours a day.* The majority of these air attacks were in Syria and Iraq, but US bombs also rained down on people in Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. *All those are majority-Muslim countries* in which all adult men are considered to be combatants; seven countries where, in fighting the war on terror, we have been the instruments of terror. And things have of course continued under our new administration, in March month alone, we dropped over 2,000 bombs just on the city of Mosul

² According The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/america-dropped-26171-bombs-2016-obama-legacy>

(just twenty miles from where Jenna and I spent a few days last year) in seeking to take back the city from ISIS.

How do we work for an end to our infinite war, a war which we sometimes forget is even raging on? I am not sure of the details, but I am convinced peace cannot happen without believing in the deep assurance of Lazarus' story – for we will continue to see threats and enemies everywhere without the **assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death.**

To this message which I have been repeating since the second sentence of this sermon, I say, **“Lord, I believe, but help thou my unbelief, because I still do not want to die.”** I believe that, in the mystery of God, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “Jesus has power to raise the dead, only I do not want him practicing on me.”³ I want a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will stop the seeming randomness of miracles and just grant them to and all who ask. I want a God who will not only rescue me from death, but will delete it from the human experience and find another way to operate. But what I have – what all of us have – is a God who resurrects us from the dead, who puts an end to death by working through it instead of around it—creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair—a God who works resurrection each day for those with eyes to see – a God who showed us by the way of Jesus that the only road to Easter morning runs smack through Good Friday. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says to his grieving friend Martha. Not "I will

³ In her sermon “The Dress Rehearsal.”

be the resurrection" but "I am"—right here, right now—resurrection and life for anyone willing to believe that it might just be true. It is not a safe story, it might not even be the story we want, but it is a strong one, with power to lead us through the graveyard and out the other side. For our lives change, but they do not end.

And so, may the odor of Lazarus emerging groggily from the tomb rekindle that deepest part in us to remember that **there is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death** – a power which is able to call us out of our stinking tombs and into the fullness and sweet mystery of life. May we be a people who live and who die, by this power, that healing and hope might flow through us into the world. Amen.