

As we continue journeying with Jesus to the cross, we again find ourselves in the wilderness-vulnerable- this time the wilderness of death- not just any death but the death of one of Jesus' dear friends, Lazarus. Again, Lazarus isn't just anybody- as Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, describe earlier in today's chapter of John's Gospel (11:3), Lazarus was someone Jesus loved, and he was ill. "Today's text gathers us around a newly occupied tomb, surrounded by the typical mix of grief and loss, accusation and anger" (Brian Peterson, [WP](#)). In this story, I'd like to invite us to observe and consider Jesus among his friends. We're told that among his closest friends were Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Have you ever considered Jesus as a friend? Some colleagues and I were discussing this question this week, and one said, "I think that sounds cheesy" to which I said, "when I pray to Jesus, I see Jesus as not only my Lord and Savior but also my friend with whom I have a lot to say (and hopefully also to listen). How do you define a friend? What expectations do you have of friendship? I know that I wouldn't be able to navigate the ups and downs of life without my friends- nor without Jesus. Before we enter today's story- several verses before, we find that Jesus doesn't rush to go and see his dear friend as the sisters requested. Instead Jesus waits two whole days before he makes his way to Bethany and while he waits, Mary and Martha watch their beloved brother, Lazarus, die. Upon Jesus' arrival in Bethany, which literally means "house of the poor" and was believed to be a place where poor, needy, and sick people could be cared for, a kind of hospice a little way outside the city of Jerusalem (N.T. Wright, *From Wilderness to Glory*), Martha heard Jesus was on his way and went out to meet him saying, "Master, if only you'd been

here! Then my brother wouldn't have died" (v. 22)! Death. It's a topic most of us in America like to avoid at all costs. When death occurs, we need our friends, especially Jesus. Death is not only real and harsh; it also stings and stinks (literally and figuratively). Death is the greatest of all the 'principalities and powers' that we face. Paul called it our ultimate enemy. Death's extended family also includes sin, despair, brokenness, and division. Sometimes in the world in which we live and in the struggles that we often face, we are in death. Today's Gospel reading in John is a one of the most dramatic and difficult in Scripture. There are many things within this story that are also a mystery. Before we turn to God's word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I find it fascinating that Lazarus never speaks in Scripture. Have you ever noticed? I read a reference to a sermon some years ago where the preacher (Doug Gay) pointed this out. Before reading this, I have never thought about it. We hear from Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, but Lazarus is silent. This preacher went on to wonder if perhaps Lazarus was non-verbal. Perhaps Lazarus had special needs. Perhaps Lazarus had Down Syndrome. Come to think of it, I could believe this could be true as it reeks of Jesus, doesn't it? That his best friend, the man he loved most in the world, would be disabled. That could make sense. "What if Lazarus couldn't scratch Jesus' back in the way that we expect people to scratch our backs, especially a local celebrity like Jesus? What if Lazarus came out of that tomb, didn't make eye contact with anyone, and went straight for his favorite toy? What if Lazarus came out of that tomb and cupped his hands over his ears because the noise from the crowds overwhelmed his sensory

system” ([blog](#))? It wouldn’t surprise me, as Jesus was always and purposefully seeking out people on the sidelines of life, people, who according to society had nothing to offer- people whom society had written off. And Jesus found the kingdom of heaven there. Perhaps this is why Lazarus lived with his sisters? Regardless, it sounds as if his sisters were his protectors, and Jesus was his friend. But there are times when we must confront our God and our friend.

Martha’s blunt truth, “Lord, if only you would have been here, my brother would not have died” is real, as was her confession that followed Jesus’ words, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even if they die. And anyone who lives and believes in me will never, ever die (vv. 25-26). Then Jesus asked her, “Do you believe this” (v 26b), to which she replied, “Yes, Master. I’ve come to believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God, the one who was to come into the world” (v. 27). Her sister, Mary, later, in her grief, made her if only statement to Jesus but on her knees as a sign of respect. **They say that the grief we bear is proportionate to the love we shared.** When did you last cry out, “If only” to God?! I think mine was last week when I heard about the death of a friend from cancer at such a young age with small children. Personally, there are so many questions I have about this story. Questions such as why did Jesus take so long to get to Mary and Martha’s house when he knew his good friend Lazarus was ill? Why does Jesus say that Lazarus was asleep when he was dead? And like those gathered in today’s story ask, “Could not

he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying” (v. 37)?

Jesus did not answer their question. Rather, in the shortest and I would argue one of the most profound verses in the entire Bible, Jesus demonstrated one of the most important characteristics we can ever learn about the heart of God: “Jesus wept” (v. 35). “We should pay careful attention when the Word himself refuses to speak. Sometimes there is nothing to be said in the face of loss; sometimes tears are our best and most honorable language” (Thomas). There is arguably no other scene in the Gospels where Jesus is as relationally and emotionally connected to people as here. Yet, the reason for Jesus’ weeping is cause for great debate among scholars. Is this a display of grief felt by Jesus over the death of his dear friend? Is Jesus upset because of the crowd’s response? Is he angry that people don’t get it and continue to be unable to believe? Or is he upset because his own death and grave are quickly approaching? Though I would argue no to this last question, as Jesus appears more impacted by the death of his friend and the suffering of his loved ones than his own impending Passion. The gospel writer, John, gives us room here for interpretation, I choose to believe that Jesus is weeping over the fact that he wasn’t there for his friends during their time of need. I believe he is weeping because he sees how sad and grieved all those who loved Lazarus are by his death. Lazarus is the only person that Jesus is recorded weeping over in the Bible. Instead of explaining to them why they shouldn’t be sad if they truly believed or even telling them to dry their tears and watch what

he's getting ready to do, Scripture tells us that Jesus was "disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, and he wept" (v. 33, 35 NRSV). The God of the Universe, in physical form, broke down and cried with his friends. Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen says, "The truly good news is that God is not a distant God, but a God who is moved by our pain and participates in the fullness of the human struggle" (henrinouwen.org). Jesus is God with us- God with skin on. When our heart breaks, God's is the first heart to break, and likewise, when we weep, God weeps, too. The most accurate revelation of the divine we will ever have is found here standing at the grave of his friend and crying. This is perhaps both Jesus' humanity and divinity showing up?! Just as death breaks our hearts and stirs our souls, so does death grieve God. I so drawn to Jesus here because he, in his empathy...in his feeling *with* people (not *for* people- that is sympathy) gives me both permission to weep and to live in the midst of death. Through his tears, Jesus calls us into the holy vocation of empathy (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus). There's a big difference between empathy and sympathy. Just ask a friend which they would prefer from you. Empathy connects us to people. "I'm so sorry you're so sad. May I sit here with you?" Whereas, sympathy can sometimes disconnect us like when we prematurely take a redemptive turn in talking with someone who is grieving. An example is when we drop an "at least..." or a "here's the lesson or the testimony" when it isn't that time yet. Notice Jesus doesn't say any redemptive turns or cliches or any words for that matter; he simply weeps and is present with them. Jesus doesn't rush to getting Lazarus out of the tomb. He simply and profoundly is God with them and us, weeping and praying. "There's a way to say: **"This is real. This**

**is hard. And also...."** I want to live in that space between 'this is hard' and the 'also.' I want to be a full human, someone who can be sad and hopeful simultaneously (Jeff Chu, Sarah Bessey's Field Notes, 3/25/25). This is what Martha and Mary both do in today's story. They both are real in their approach with Jesus, like good friends would be, and yet they also recognize and believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Like I mentioned a few weeks ago, the flowers may have all been cut, but spring is coming or "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." And no matter how much it hurts, we have to go through Friday in order to truly experience Sunday. Death stings. It stinks (v. 39). No perfume or pat answers or clichés or "at leasts" can remove this (workingpreacher.org, Ginger Barfield).

Everything in today's story points to and testifies to Jesus as God's Son to whom God has given life (John 5:25-26). Hearing this story, many of us may think of Jesus' own death and resurrection: a tomb, a stone, grieving women, linen wrappings and face cloth. This is not the resurrection of Jesus, for death is not forever defeated for Lazarus. It is the temporary recovery from death for Lazarus. Preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "It's as if in the raising of Lazarus, before Jesus defeats death for good on the cross, he just gives it a really good slap in the face first" ([link](#)). The literal raising of Lazarus is a sign that death will NOT have the last word in our physical, embodied lives. We will be raised! "Jesus calls Lazarus out, like the good shepherd calls his sheep and gives them life (10:3; 27-28). This is what Jesus does for all those who believe in him. Jesus raising Lazarus does not negate the promise of the day that is coming when all those in the tombs will hear his voice and come out (John 5:28), **but it is not primarily about that claim.**

The gospel truth does reign. We have our hope not on things on this earth but in the power of the cross of Christ and the resurrection of those who are his children. **The truth revealed here is that Jesus is the one in whom there is life (1:4), the one who even now calls us out of all the shadowy and binding places of death (5:25). Jesus is life itself; Jesus himself is resurrection's defeat of death. Jesus is the place where death ends and everlasting life begins"** (Peterson). Jesus breaks into our present and transforms our lives...now just as much as he does in our death. **On both sides of the grave there is life for us because Jesus has been set to call us out by name. "Lazarus, come out! (Langknecht, [WP](#))."** Before now I have never given much thought to the fact that Jesus started the process of raising Lazarus but the community together participated in unbinding him, restoring him to life. But what Jesus did had some people believing and others plotting even more to kill him. In John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is *the* precipitating event that leads to Jesus' own arrest and crucifixion. Essentially, Jesus trades his life for his friend's (Thomas). The cross draws closer, friends, and so we continue our journey with Jesus. It's Friday, but Sunday's coming! "Yes, resurrection is around the corner, but in this story, the promise of joy doesn't cancel out the essential work of grief. When Jesus cries, he assures his friends, Mary and Martha, not only that their beloved brother, his friend, is worth crying for, but also that they, his friends, are worth crying with. Yes, we are in death, but we serve a God who calls us to life. Our journey is not *to* the grave, but *through* it. The Lord who weeps is also the Lord who resurrects. So we mourn in hope among friends" (Thomas). Thanks be to God! Amen.