

## A Voice in the Darkness

*John 11: 1-45*

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank

you for having heard me. I 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

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In the NFL this year, a big story was when the world witnessed Damar Hamlin, #3 of the Buffalo Bills, collapse on the field after making a tackle. His heart had stopped. For 10 minutes he laid on the field clinically dead. For ten minutes, medical staff and trainers tried CPR to bring him back. Players on both teams, took to their knees and began praying around him. Finally, they resuscitated him. Now he seems to be doing fine. It’s quite the story. Jesus resuscitates his friend, Lazarus, after he had fallen ill and died. For at least four days he was dead. His body lifeless in the tomb. Jesus breathes the words of life into Lazarus’ lungs and suddenly he’s alive again and seems to be doing okay. It’s quite the resuscitation story. So how do we read it?

The story begins with a loved one falling ill and dying. It begins with grief. We know it well. Recall three years ago, the Lazarus story was read over Zoom as we shot the service from the columbarium. During the start of Covid, remember, death’s scent swirling around our lives. We sat inside grief’s bubble and maybe even wondered “If only you were here, Lord.” Remember the chaos of health care workers caring for the sick without proper PPE. Remember doctors having to make the impossible decision of who gets a ventilator and who dies? Family mourning loved ones without the dignity of a funeral. It was overwhelming and exhausting and frightening. It is a stench we never get used to: death. Grief is where it began, and it’s where today’s story begins as well.

But here is what makes the story so powerful for me. Rather than Jesus avoiding the grief, he leans into it, and he weeps. *God weeps!* God’s tears splash onto the sacred soil. Grief’s tumultuous waves curl onto Jesus’ shores. He leans into the holy and human reality of loving what death has touched. It’s part of being fully human with us. In the Greek they are tears of rage. Rage against the forces which rob us of life. Rage against the machine of injustice where to many die early or unnecessarily. Jesus weeps—God weeps—tears of rage and frustration and exhaustion as he leans in to the fullness of our humanity. And it breaks Jesus down, just like it breaks us down.

But the story doesn’t end there, does it? Jesus’ voice rings into death’s dark void. He is the Word which has become flesh, the Word which spoke “Let there be light” in the beginning. So he unleashes a word of “Let there be life!” into death’s tunnel as he shouts, “Lazarus, come out!” Lazarus’ lungs begin filling with Holy Spirit breath. His heart begins to flutter. His ligaments and tendons start firing as we wiggles his fingers and toes. Jesus’ word brings life into the darkness. Lazarus rises. Hope rises. Justice rises. Love...rises.

If you’ve watched *The Crown* on Netflix, it’s a drama about Queen Elizabeth’s reign. One of the episodes covers the tragedy from 1966, in a small mining town in the U.K. called Aberfan. After several days of rain, the mountain of coal they had excavated created a massive avalanche. The avalanche came crashing down on the town’s school with 81 children and their teachers inside. The queen’s husband, Prince Philip, attended the funeral and when he came back the queen

asked him how it went. “Extraordinary,” he said. “The grief. The anger against the government. At the [system]. At God too. Eighty-one children were buried today. [I saw] the rage in all the faces, behind their eyes. But they didn’t smash things up or fight in the streets.” “So what did they do?” the queen asks. “They sang. The whole community sang.” A word of life sung into the darkest of midnights. Love sung into the void of an unmeasurable loss. Love rising through their voices. Love present in their tears. Jesus speaks a word into death’s darkness, because Love finds a way. Love *always finds a way!*

So here we are, three years since the start of a pandemic. So much has changed. We’ve lost beloved friends, we’ve danced with grief. But it’s not the end of the story. It’s part of the story—not a fun part of the story—but part of the story because we choose to love. I visited Jim Sifford this week. He’s ninety-six years young. He lost his spouse, Edith, after almost 70 years of marriage a few months ago. After some small talk we started sharing memories of their life together. The grief glowing in his eyes. But then he said something profound: “Somedays [the grief] is too much, but when I think about all the memories, I’m also happy; and the grief I feel is sad, but it’s worth it.” Grief is the price we pay for loving deeply, and fully, and it is not always, *always* worth it?

Someone once said, “I don’t want to only live a long life, I want to live a wide life as well.” After Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb, Jesus tells the community to help him take off his grave clothes and set him free. The truth is, all of us have the power to be a voice of life in a world consumed with death. Death is a part of the story, but it is not the most powerful part. At least not when Love has something to say about it. And Love always, *always* has something to say about it. And because of that God’s people can take off their own grave clothes and begin to live as wide-a-life as possible. The word of Life for God’s beloved people, Amen.