



February 20, 2005
Lent 2

John 11:17-37
Beyond Belief
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This is the second in a series of Lenten sermons on the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Last Sunday I began by telling you Jesus loves you too much to fulfill your expectations. His dreams for you, for our world, are greater than we had imagined. The question we encounter today is: do you believe that? Do you believe Jesus can create hope? Even when it is too late?

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are not the average characters that we encounter in the gospels. This family has a very special relationship with Jesus that is different even from the disciples. They are his friends.

As the text tells us, Jesus loved this family. Lazarus we don't know too much about. Most the time when the Bible speaks about him he's either sick, or dead, or very surprised to be alive again. But Martha, we know all too well. She's the Presbyterian in the group. Martha is a take charge, task oriented, hard worker. Sometimes she works so hard, she forgets to be gracious and loving. Also, as we see in this passage, Martha really knows her theology. Then there is Mary, her sister. Mary is the grown daughter you still worry about. She is not the practical one, but the one who was an art major in college. She's the one who is always giving her money to the seals and whales but never seems to have quite enough for herself. She's smart, but not careful. Mary can make you laugh and cry like nobody else. Again, Jesus loved all three of these people.

Today's passage begins, "When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days." So Jesus shows up, late. Real late. Too late. And as a result, Lazarus is dead.

Lazarus was the name of our hope. It was the one thing we believed Jesus loved as much as we did. Lazarus can be a dream we had for our family, our job, or our city. It can be our commitment to Justice in society. Lazarus can be a view of the world that has been shaped by the Christian Gospel. For Christians, the friends of Jesus, these aren't just personal values. These are things we really believe Christ cares about. We don't expect God to give us everything we want. But remember Jesus loved Lazarus, so we do expect Jesus to save his own dreams.

This means that when Lazarus dies, either in your life or in Iraq, Africa or Indonesia, all because the savior was late, you are not just disappointed. You are in a crisis of faith. That is what it means to lose Lazarus. When he dies, you haven't just lost something close to your heart. You have lost something you thought was close to God's heart. Then the question is: can you still believe in Jesus? Can you believe even after Lazarus is dead?

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she left Mary at home and ran down the road to meet him. "Lord," she says, "if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus

replied, "Martha, your brother will rise again." She then says, "I know he'll rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Fascinating. Four days into her grief, Jesus finally shows up, and Martha starts talking theology with him. It is as if she is struggling to remember what she knows.

I see this all the time. When one of the pastors get a call to come to the hospital ("Come quick. He is about to die.") often the family will talk similarly to Martha. They may not be ready to explore the depths of their broken hearts, so they stay in their heads and talk theology. Often they just want me to remind them of what they already know, what they have rehearsed in church Sunday after Sunday. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord. ... I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

As Martha returns to one of these faith statements, Jesus interrupts her to say, "I am the resurrection and the life.... Do you believe this?" You who for years and years have sat through sermon after sermon, you who can stand and recite the Creed from memory, you who know so much about the faith, hear this. There comes a time, when Jesus interrupts to ask, "Do you believe this?" To be clear, he is asking not what do you believe, but in whom do you believe? "I am the resurrection and the life? Do you believe this?" That is what makes all the difference when your Lazarus dies. When you're in a crisis, it doesn't matter what you know. What you know isn't going to help after Lazarus is already dead. When you're in a crisis, whether you survive it or not all depends on who you know.

Jesus is not a "what." He is a "who." He is not a doctrine. He is not a teacher of doctrine, or politics, or spiritual insight. He's certainly not a ticket for getting into heaven. Jesus Christ is the living Son of God, that's who he is.

Every Sunday is a little Easter when we remember that he has already defeated death. He has ascended to the right hand of the Father where he intercedes on our behalf as our great high priest. Through the Holy Spirit he is continuing his saving work on earth and in our lives. Sometimes in the midst of our worship where we renew ourselves in this great belief, the Holy Spirit will interrupt us to ask "Do you believe this? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life? Do you believe that if a tomb could not hold him, then there is no telling where he will show up again?" This also means that "in Christ" the tombs of loss and grief cannot hold us either. Do you believe this?

Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Before Lazarus dies you may have some belief *about* that. But you will never know if you believe *in* Jesus until after Lazarus is dead. That is when belief matters.

When Mary, her sister, gets to Jesus, she says the exact same thing about how Lazarus would be fine if only Jesus had not delayed. "If only..." But Mary's grief gets worked out not through her theology, but her broken heart. She knelt at Jesus' feet and wept and wept, as if her tears were silently falling prayers.

Seeing this Jesus “was greatly disturbed and deeply moved.” Then he began to weep. This is one of the most hope-filled images of Jesus. He does not maintain objectivity or professional composure. The pathos of how it is gets to him, and he starts to cry. Do you realize the power behind these tears? Jesus, who is God in the flesh, is weeping. This means that God can be moved. “Greatly disturbed and deeply moved.”

He weeps not just for the pathos of how it is, but he weeps because like Martha and Mary and all who in are despair, we have settled into our grief and made it familiar. But now we see that it is God who has joined our tears, and the tears of those we see as well as the tears of those who cry in secret. He enters the tears of a generation of AIDS orphans in Africa, and all of the tears of the families torn apart by the tsunami in Indonesia, as well as the tears of those who grieve the dead in Iraq. Once we see that God is moved with compassion, then the world becomes a very unpredictable place. Who knows what can happen when the incarnation of God weeps?

Can your theology weep? Can your politics weep? Can your work ethic — or your plans for success, or the things you have built — weep for you? No, only a person can weep. But this is no ordinary person. This is the resurrection and the life.

Who knows what can happen when Jesus weeps? I know. Our dead hopes can come back to life. Amen.