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John 11:1-6, 17-44

Ascension Lutheran Church
March 29, 2020

Reflection: A Dress Rehearsal

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen

Let us pray...God of honest emotions, God of cathartic tears, it would be sadder if in these days we didn't need a good cry, a release from the body, a moment to name how it feels. We thank you that these tears are not tears of weakness but of witness. They speak to a God who wept as we do, and showed human love is divine. Amen

For Jesus it was the words of a messenger, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Jesus heard the words and yet stayed in the place where he was two more days. Lazarus and his sisters are three of the best friends that Jesus can count. They want him to come right away, but he does not. He waits two whole days, which is hard to imagine, and then he travels a day or two more, so that by the time he arrives in Bethany he has missed the funeral by four days. This is not news to him, however. He knew it before he ever set out, and does not seem very worried about it, but his confidence is wasted on Martha.

Lord, she says to him, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. There is great love in that greeting and great blame. She knows Jesus is a lifesaver, only where was he when she needed him? She and Mary have just buried Lazarus way before his time with no help from their dearest friend, and any of you who have lost a loved one know what she is going through. If only I had made him go to the doctor sooner. If only I had not left, her alone. When you lose someone you love, you can drive yourself crazy thinking of all the ways it might have been avoided—the "if onlys" can become too much to bear. For Martha, Jesus is the one who could have made the difference, only he was not there and now it's too late.

We deal in death. We deal in pain and darkness. That is what it is at times to be human. We deal with the loss of loved ones and the pain of dreams unrealized. We deal with disappointment and disaster as if they are old friends who visit too often. We believe in the power of the resurrection, but we deal with the tangibility of disappointment. We live within the limitations of our human abilities and the pain and death, seems to overwhelm us at times—because the disappointment, and pain, and death is the reality we live in, sometimes one after another and sometimes all at once. We look for just a little bit of light to shine on our downtrodden hearts and offer us some peace in the midst of the storms—calm in the midst of the chaos. That's all we want at times. Just a breather—a moment to gather ourselves up and step forward before we are hit in the face by the next struggle in our lives. That's all Mary and Martha wanted. In the midst of their pain, they wanted to see Jesus.

They wanted just a moment with their Savior as their brother was dying. Some words of peace or at the farthest hope a miracle. We look for them, especially, in the lowest valley of our pain. Come on God—just one little miracle. A blink of your eye can change everything. Just will it to be done and it will be. From death you bring life O God. From the grave you are able to call us back to life. That is all we want God. It is not so much to ask. You called Adam from the dust of the earth and Eve from Adam's rib. Look, God this one is already put together. There isn't any work here. Just open his eyes, breathe life back into his lungs, and let his heartbeat with the rhythm of your power—with the life that gushes from your open hand. And yet there is nothing.

Lazarus is dead. There is nothing. Mary and Martha, faithful to Jesus and his teaching, are devastated that Jesus did not come sooner in order to heal their brother. They can see only darkness. Their tears and their lamenting are seen and heard by the other villagers. Their emotion is as dense as the smell that will not go away. It is a time of incredible grief. These are the times that tell us of the power of darkness. Times of

darkness so overwhelming that we can see nothing. A darkness so thick that it confines and closes and shields all light from our vision. It is this darkness, that so consumes, we cannot move or work or love or laugh or live. It is in this darkness that God rushes in like a violent wind. Rushes in and reaches us with open hands and lifts us out, no tears us from the grasp of that darkness and pain.

When Jesus arrives, he finds that Lazarus has already been dead in the tomb four days. He greets Martha and shares with her the power of his presence. “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? And Martha tells him she does. I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. But even in Martha’s confession there is still a darkness, a bitterness that will not go away. Even though she believes, she still stands at the foot of the tomb knowing that her brother lies dead within its walls. It is as if her own heart has been placed into the darkness along with her brother’s body and although she knows the words Jesus speaks are true—she cannot step out of the shadow of her brother’s tomb. He is dead after all. And there is no turning back after one has died. At least not until the Messiah, until Jesus comes again. Or so she believes.

Author and pastor, Barbara Brown Taylor, calls the death and resurrection of Lazarus – the dress rehearsal. A few weeks from now– we will stand at the foot of the cross – looking on from a distance – believing that our Savior has died and along with the drops of his blood seeping into the ground – so will go our hope for a time. This pandemic experience for all of us, I believe, can feel like a dress rehearsal towards resurrection. I am still holding on to the words from John, Chapter 1: the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. And although the death and resurrection of Lazarus gives us a roadmap in many ways for the unfolding story of the road Jesus will travel to the cross, I recognize that for myself, and for all of you, there is no dress rehearsal for the continued journey of the coronavirus. How you cope is how you cope. We do not get the luxury of considering our options – the pandemic has brought us to this moment. How you are living is how you are living. For all of the pain and difficulty of self-isolation, no one criticizes your hairstyle. No one can give you a disapproving stare for staying in your pajamas all day. If you do not brush your teeth until noon or do not shower until dinnertime – for this time, it is your business alone – well except maybe for any family members or roommates who have to avoid you in the confines of your home.

When they arrive at the tomb, there is a stone sealing the entrance. I wonder if in our homes it feels as a stone has been placed across your doorways. Jesus tells them, “take away the stone.” And Martha, says to Jesus, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus says 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 looking upward says, “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 out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

You can almost imagine Martha and Mary as their eyes bug out of their heads. “What did he say?” One might lean over to the other. “Did he just yell at our brother to come out of the tomb?” No, we must have heard him wrong.” But then into the light of day the first bandaged foot carefully steps and Mary and Martha rush to the side of their brother, who, once dead now stands alive. It is a miracle! Not just a healing, not a blind man seeing, or a deaf man hearing. No this miracle astounds even the greatest of skeptics gathered. Lazarus, dead four days, stands living and breathing at the door of his tomb. Jesus commands the people, concerning Lazarus, “Unbind him and let him go.” The people, still in shock over this resurrection get to the work of removing the grave clothes and bandages binding Lazarus. It is a miracle. A resurrection miracle.

A tearing of Lazarus from the grasp of death. With words only God can speak—"Lazarus come out!" A resurrection miracle occurs. But it is more than just a resurrection. With the raising of Lazarus, Jesus offers us an opportunity to see what the future—what the Kingdom of God come into the world will be like. We have never seen such power as we see in the raising of Lazarus. God in Jesus Christ breaks into the world with all of the power of the one who created the world. And we are the ones who receive sight after being blind for so long. No longer does the darkness hold shadow and fear. We are finally called out of the darkness. As if Jesus could call each of us from the darkness of our lives. Lazarus come out. John come out. Jennifer come out. Mark come out! C.S. Lewis once wrote, "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one."

I wonder if the end of this pandemic which we believe has brought us to our knees, will in turn provide us with the clarity of God's promise of resurrection joy when the governor of WI rescinds the "safer-at-home" order and we are allowed to step back into our lives. I wonder if fear will keep us at six feet from our friends, or if we trust in the promise of God's word, "do not be afraid."

As Christians we already know the end of the story. We are standing two weeks outside of Good Friday. We know what is coming. We know that there will be death. We know that there will be pain. We know that there will be darkness. We know what it tastes and feels like this darkness. The salty flavor of our tears. The dry parched feeling in our mouths. The lumps in our throats that won't go away. This is death. And it has many names. Mom, dad, sister, brother, husband, wife, friend, grandpa and so on. This darkness overwhelms but it does not have to consume. Yes we stand in the darkness of Lent but we get a vision, a ray of light into the gloom by way of Jesus and his stop at Bethany.

Today, Jesus raises a dear friend from the grave. Today Jesus shares with us a vision of the kingdom. Today, Jesus tells us to take away the stone. Ready or not. Today, we get a glimpse of what will come. Lazarus come out! The words shake us to the core of who we are. Today is only the beginning of what will be. When Jesus asks his servants to take away the stone that rests in front of your grave and you hear your name called by your Savior, will you be ready? Are we ready to take away the stone? Whether we are or not...Jesus is! Today he shows us how important we are. Today, with the raising of Lazarus, our eyes are opened to the possibilities of our future with God. Today we find Jesus taking away the first stone and calling forth one who was dead back to life. Today Jesus calls your name and mine. Today he invites us to find favor in his sight. Today Jesus looks into our darkness and with the simple words of his voice calls us out of our own hand made tombs. From the grasp of darkness and the sting of death, Jesus calls and we cannot help but follow the sound of his voice from behind the stone, from darkness into the light. Amen.