



Saint Peter's Episcopal Cathedral

Sunday, March 26, 2023
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Sermon – Jesus is Calling

John 11:1-45

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

If you were one of the Apostles, who were there with Jesus in our passage today, you would have had to have thought that a journey is coming to a close. The signs are all there in John's Gospel. In the verses just before what we heard this morning, you would have read how the people were basically saying to Jesus that the time to be clear had come, and, even more than that, you would have seen Jesus agree. You would have read how the people were now saying to him that they needed the parables to end and for him to "speak plainly" to them, and to tell them whether he was the Messiah or not. And Jesus agreed and he told them that he and the Father are one...and most people responded to his clarity by picking up stones to stone him.

The thing was that there was no more time for telling people "my time has not yet come." The conclusion was coming now. They had to understand. It had been three years of ministry and, I'm sure that, if you had been there with them, you would have seen it too. You would have recognized that something was about to happen. The words seemed to be changing. At least that is how John, who was there, seemed to remember it. He didn't say that directly, but all you have to do is start with the Gospel passage we heard this morning and then read on. He tells us about Lazarus and Mary and Martha. Right after this story John tells about Mary anointing Jesus' feet at dinner with the raised Lazarus there at the table with them; anointing him with expensive perfume, maybe some of the same perfume that was left over from Lazarus' burial preparation.

John continued and, reflecting back 60 years or so, begins telling of how the story ended, with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and then everything that followed from there. The direction of the remembering was all leading towards something.

Thomas, who throughout the past couple of thousand years has been known as the Great Doubter, seemed to know it also. When Jesus said that they were going back to wake Lazarus from his sleep, he didn't say let's get down there and get it done because there are appointments on the schedule that we have to get to. He talked about the end. He talked about the ultimate commitment. He seemed to know that something was coming to an end. And so, he said to the rest, over the objections that another trip to Jerusalem would not be a good idea because they just tried to stone Jesus, "Let us all go and die with him."

You know, for three years Jesus had been calling people. Fishermen from their boats and their businesses. A tax collector named Levi who became Matthew, Nathaniel, sitting under a fig tree. And from that, from that beginning, it was an ongoing, steady stream of calling.

He called individuals, and he called the whole world as a collection of human individuals, he called us all to humility. It was a different message than what they had probably heard most of their lives. It is fairly contrary, I think, that most people are taught in our day. Jesus told them that the first had to be last and that the last would be first. He told them it was all about service instead of being served. "Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord and, through that, you will be lifted up," he told them all. You will be lifted up. Your neighbor will be lifted up. Humanity will be lifted up.

And he called them in that humility to love, but not just to any love. He invited them instead to Godly Love. Over three years Jesus had been calling people to Love in a deeper and more powerful way. Love your neighbor, but not in order to get something out of it, not in order to serve your prestige, or your business, or your ego and community status. Love them as you would want to be loved by them, the way God would Love and have everyone loved. In honesty. In Truth. Within God's will and ways.

Set the standard. Set a new standard. Actually, re-set things to the original standard. Love people in a way that uplifts them and brings them to abundant life with treasures that fill souls, not necessarily those that fill your barns or soothe your personal feelings.

He tells us to, he calls us to, seek the Kingdom of Heaven first, and through that everything else of true importance will come to you. It was a call to embrace the kind of Love for others that only comes by first embracing the Love you have from God, and for God, so that you are able to know and love others fully and properly.

Three years. Three years of calling out to people, calling people to follow Him. Follow him so that we too can be fishers of men. We too can be gatherers of people. We too can be leaders pointing the world to God.

He called people to be light... to be the light for others to see through your life and your deeds so that everything you are and do would publicly glorify God.

He called people to possibilities, telling them that all things are possible with God.

He called Peter out of the boat, the prostitute out of her sin, the rich man out from his idolatry, and everyone out of their selfish disbelief.

He called the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, the blind to see, and finally the dead to live.

Which brings us back to Lazarus.

It seems to me that the story of Lazarus is perfectly placed on this fourth Sunday of Lent as we are leading up to Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter. Jesus had spent three years calling people to more, and in the action he took at Lazarus's tomb that day, he encapsulated all the other calls within one amazing act. With the stone moved away, he called into that dark place, and called Lazarus out of death into life.

It was what he had been doing in so many different ways for all people for three years. And it is what he has been doing ever since. He has been calling us out of death, into life. The stone has been rolled away from the world and he is calling out into the darkness, calling out for us to come out. He is calling us to accept an invitation out from where we are into where he is. And that is what we need to understand as we come to the conclusion of Lent in just two weeks. Jesus, through the Spirit, is calling us. He is showing us the way out of death and into life and is calling us to follow.

You see, Lent is more than a church season. It is a forty day opportunity for decision. It is a time for us to turn away from self-aggrandizement and to embrace humility in the presence of God. It is a time to leave those things that divide the world from God and each other and come into a place where God's Love reigns for all people. It is a time to leave the limitations of the hard walls of a cave, of a tomb, and to re-embrace the amazing realities of Heaven.

Lent is a time for the lame to decide to accept the invitation to walk, the deaf to accept the invitation to hear, and the blind to accept the invitation to see in a more profound way.

Jesus is standing outside calling into the world, out to the people, to join Peter on the water, the prostitute in her new life, the rich man in his new type of wealth, and everyone in the belief that Jesus and his Father are indeed one and that they have come into the world to show us all the way into the type of life that for so long has been drained from our imagination.

Watch carefully over the next couple of weeks, because, at the end, all people will be brought to a decision point. The time has come. They knew it. Jesus knew it. And we need to see it too.

Will we take up our crosses and, through that, embrace the path through death into the life of Easter? We will need to decide to respond to Jesus's call and come out and join our brother Lazarus in a new life.

Amen