

## “Called to life”

*John 11:1-6, 17-27, 38-45 (March 26, 2023)*

As we begin this morning, I’d like you to think about your closest friends. The ones you dearly love. The ones you’d miss the most if something terrible happened and all of a sudden they weren’t there any more. Jesus had friends. There were twelve disciples. Peter, James and John were foremost among them. They were close to Jesus, certainly.



Photo by Andrewrabbott,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jesus,\\_Mary,\\_Martha\\_and\\_Lazarus,\\_St\\_Botolph\\_without\\_Aldersgate.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jesus,_Mary,_Martha_and_Lazarus,_St_Botolph_without_Aldersgate.jpg)

But in today’s passage of scripture we meet three others – all members of a single household, and all of them friends with Jesus. I’m talking about Mary and Martha, the two sisters who welcomed Jesus into their home.

Remember how Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, eager to learn, while Martha attended to the practical tasks of hospitality? Mary, says the Gospel writer John, was the one who anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. It was a tender moment of gratitude and a fragrant expression of her love.

These two sisters, Mary and Martha, had a brother named Lazarus. And he too was close to Jesus. There was a loving bond between them.



And now, we’re told that news came to Jesus, the kind of news that no one wants to hear. The sisters sent a message: “He whom you love is ill.” No need to mention names. It’s not the kind of news that anyone wants to get. Your friend is ill, Jesus. Seriously ill. And the implication is that Jesus should come immediately.

He’s not going to die, says Jesus. “Rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Those are cryptic words, aren’t they. What does Jesus mean?

By the time he arrives in Bethany, the place they call home, we’re told that Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. Which is to say there’s no doubt of his mortality. And no chance of his resuscitation.



Death is part of all our lives. As a pastor, I have sat with people who are near to death, in hospital or at home. But there was one encounter with death that haunts me.

And now, I’m going to caution you. The story I’m about to tell is a disturbing one. And the reason I tell it is because it holds together two things: The beauty of life. And also the presence of death that can assert itself unexpectedly. And both these things, life and death, are part of our human experience.

It was a beautiful sunny, summer day. And my daughter, who was visiting with us said, “Dad, why don’t we put the canoe in the river.” The thought of spending that time together was very appealing. So we did.



We put the canoe on the roof of the car, drove to a launching site in Rotary Park, and eased out into the water. We paddled upstream, past River Landing, underneath the Sid Buckwold bridge, round the corner, towards the Canoe Club.

Ahead of us, I could see a man dive off the dock into the river. It was unusual because he was fully clothed. He swam out into the river, stopping twice. He seemed to be standing on the bottom as we canoed past. It was strange.

Then we heard a splash, and turned around. The man was gone. We stopped and waited for him to surface. We waited and we watched. We looked everywhere. Another paddler joined us. She called the police.

When an officer visited our home the next day, she was very supportive. They had found the body. And they had found a note as well. This person had intentionally taken his own life. There was nothing we could have done, she assured us. But I still wonder.

Do you see why it haunts me? The day was beautiful, the situation idyllic. But suddenly something terrible happened. Death asserted itself.



Death, in our world, takes many forms. There is physical death. But there is also despair and loneliness. Did this man have a friend? What put him in such a dark and hopeless frame?

crime famine drugs death  
despair anxiety violence  
war addiction hunger  
depression poverty  
racism suicide  
disease  
bullying

Death is all around us, stealing away from us the fullness of life. We see it in the anxiety of a teenager, the escapism of an addict, the injustice of systemic racism. Death is found in the violence of street gangs, and the international violence of war. It's in famine and disease. And in our in apathy and resignation.

Death is one of two realities in this morning's passage of scripture. But listen, something is about to change that worldly pattern. There will be an intervention, what I call a great disruption. And here's how it comes about.



I told you the sisters, Mary and Martha, had sent a message to Jesus. And now, as he arrives at Bethany, Martha goes out to meet him. Emotions are raw. Martha is hurting. "Lord, if you had been here," she says, "my brother would not have died."

When I hear those words, I wonder what's behind them. Is there an element of anger? Is Martha accusing Jesus of being too late. "If you had been here, Lord ..." But you weren't, were you. And now my brother is dead.

Or is there longing in these words, a kind of wistfulness? "Even now, I know that you can change things." So please Jesus, maybe it's not too late.

Or could it be more than that. Is there confidence here? A bold, trusting belief in Jesus? "Lord, I know that God will give you whatever you ask."



Jesus seeks to reassure her. "Your brother will rise again," he says. She nods in agreement. This is what her faith has taught her. There is more to life than death. And even though her brother has died, he will be raised. At the end. When the promised resurrection comes.

Already Martha's faith shines through. As painful as this experience of grief is, she knows that death is not the final word. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." In God's future time, things will change.

And that is true, and a wonderful hope for all of us to cherish. But now listen. Because Jesus goes further. And here's where the great disruption I spoke of enters in.

Martha owns the conventional religious wisdom of the day: There will be a general resurrection at the end of all things. But Jesus leads her one step further.

"I am the resurrection and the life," he says!

This is one of several "I am" statements in the Gospel of John, where Jesus hints at his divinity. Because those words "I am" echo the very name of God.

"Who are you, Lord?" asked Moses at the burning bush. "When the people ask who has sent me, what should I tell them?" "Tell them 'I AM' has sent you."<sup>1</sup>

"I am ..." the light of the word, the good shepherd, the door. And here we have the most astounding "I am" statement in the entire gospel.

Lynn Jost, professor of Old Testament and Preaching at the Centre for Anabaptist Studies at Fresno Pacific University, writes: "It's the boldest, farthest-reaching of any promise in John. The claim 'I am the resurrection and the life' reflects Jesus' intimate relationship with God. The statement declares Jesus' authority ... over the most challenging circumstances. Jesus promises that those who live and believe will never die."

Another writer, Gail O'Day, calls the promise "an invitation to experience the power of God's love in the world that defeats death by believing in Jesus. ... God present in Jesus has decisively altered the believer's experience of life and death."<sup>2</sup>



See the power of God's love in the world?



There's lots of love in this story. There's love among family and friends and community, all of which has been challenged by death. Martha's grief is tangible.

And for the record, Jesus' grief is too! It's important to note that he shares our grief. He is not separate from it. Jesus has entered the world, and he too has lost a dear and treasured friend.

At the Bible Study here on Friday we heard Pastor Mandi speak about the way our first-century brothers and sisters felt emotion – not so much centred in their heart as in their gut. What we have here is gut-wrenching grief. Bowel-moving grief, though perhaps we wouldn't put it quite like that!

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3:14

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Jost, "In the Lectionary, March 26, Fifth Sunday of Lent," *The Christian Century*, March 2023m Vol. 140, No. 3, p.27.

Jesus is deeply troubled. We're not even sure how to properly translate the language. Is it "greatly disturbed and deeply moved" as our English translation has it? Or should we follow Luther and subsequent German translations that speak of "anger and indignation"?<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps there's an element of both: Sorrow and indignation. Grief at the loss Jesus sees all around him. And anger at the power death wields in our world.



"See how he loved him?" the crowd remarks. And now the power of God's love present in Jesus, moves him to action.

"I am the resurrection and the life!" I am. Right here, right now! "Take away the stone."

Martha, ever practical, hesitates to act. "Lord, it will smell." Her brother's body is decomposing. But Jesus persists. "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

The stone is rolled. Jesus prays. And then he speaks: "Lazarus, come out!"

And lo and behold, out he stumbles. This once-dead family member and friend. He comes out of the tomb into the light. The power of God's love will not be defeated!



Duccio di Buoninsegna - Resurrection of Lazarus, 1308-1311



There are two realities present in our reading for today. Death and life, held side by side. Two kingdoms – the deathly order of the world we live in, and the lively order of God's bright new world breaking in upon us. Jesus calls Lazarus out of the old and into the new.

And what I want to tell you this morning is that Jesus words were not only for Lazarus. They are given here, in the Gospel of John, so that all might hear them. We are called to live. And this is a choice we make every day.



How do we live in the midst of death? Can we opt for life? Can we let the power of God's love reign within us and move us to action? What would that look like? Well try these on for size:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.27.



When a loved one dies, can we somehow, acknowledging our loss, yet find a reason to keep on living?

When we receive an unfavourable diagnosis, can we be at peace, knowing that our loving God will hold us tenderly and never let us go?

When violence interrupts our lives, when war rages and destroys, can we still move forward with hope? Can we offer relief to the suffering? Can we work and pray for peace?

When politicians grab power for themselves, and bully their opponents, and manipulate the truth, can we be true to Jesus and live his servant way?



When we get up in the morning and cannot face another day, because it seems like more of the same never-ending death and darkness ... can we find the courage to live fully and love deeply, knowing that God's love is the most powerful force in the universe?



Now as we finish this morning, I should remind you that we're still in the season of Lent. Though Lazarus has been raised, he will still die. But think of his rising, his coming out of the tomb, as a preview of something greater.



John's not finished yet with his gospel story. There is another resurrection still to come. And this one will be permanent. When Jesus himself is put to death, he will rise. And the power of God's love will triumph not just for a day or two, but for all eternity.

The question for this day is, can you hear the voice of Jesus calling you out of death and into life? In the midst of death that is all around us, can you hear his invitation?

"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?" Well, do you?

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How have you experienced death in your life?
- What is your hope for life after death?
- When is death necessary for new life to emerge?
- How might you embrace life in the midst of death?
- What is your prayer?