

20240929 Life Over Death – Ps Bijoy

John 11:40-44

“Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

The Waiting and the Questions: Where Was Jesus?

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, three adult siblings from Bethany, are friends and followers of Jesus. Lazarus has fallen gravely ill, and his sisters Mary and Martha send for Jesus, who is “across the Jordan” (10:40; 11:1-3). Jesus’ response to their situation seems surprisingly calm “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” (11:5-6). Jesus expresses confidence that Lazarus’ illness will not lead to death, but rather to the glory of God (11:4), yet by the time Jesus finally gets to Bethany, Lazarus is already dead and buried.

We can understand the anguished cries of Martha and Mary to Jesus, who greet him separately but with the same words: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). Implied in this statement are some pointed questions, perhaps even accusations. Where were you, Jesus? Why did you take so long getting here? I thought you loved my brother. I thought you cared about us. Some of the neighbors gathered also ask among themselves, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (11:37).

Aren’t these exactly the kinds of questions we ask, or would like to ask, when tragedy strikes? Where were you, Lord? How could you have let this happen? Couldn’t you have prevented all this horrible pain and heartache?

The Weeping Savior: Jesus Shares Our Sorrow

It is noteworthy that Jesus does not rebuke Martha or Mary or their friends for what they say. To Martha, he responds with a promise: “Your brother will rise again” (11:23). After Martha confirms her belief in the resurrection on the last day, Jesus responds with another promise: “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” (11:25-26). Jesus pulls the hope of the future resurrection into the present, promising abundant, eternal life that begins here and now.

John does not recount a verbal response by Jesus to Mary, but tells us that “when Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11:33). Then, after asking where Lazarus is laid, Jesus himself begins to weep (11:34-35).

Jesus does not answer all the questions that we might wish he would answer. He doesn’t explain to Mary and Martha and all those grieving why he didn’t come sooner and prevent Lazarus from dying. But it is clear that he is completely with them in their pain and loss, deeply moved and grieved.

Victory Over Death: Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life

Of course, Jesus does more than share in the pain and sorrow of his friends. He also acts. When they come to the tomb, he says, “Take away the stone” (11:39). Martha is alarmed. Even though she had boldly professed to Jesus when he arrived, “Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him” (11:22), she is not so confident now that Jesus knows what he is doing. Does Jesus really understand about death? “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days” (11:39).

Jesus is undaunted by the stench of death. The stone is taken away. After repeating his promise that this would all lead to the glory of God, and praying out loud for the benefit of the crowd, Jesus cries, “Lazarus, come out!” (11:43). Obediently, Lazarus comes out, probably stumbling with his grave clothes still wrapped around his face and body. “Unbind him, and let him go,” Jesus commands (11:44).

Jesus had seemed so slow in coming. It seemed as if he was too late. But with Jesus, we find out, it is never too late. Even when we are convinced that all is lost, even when we are ready to concede to the power of death, Jesus demonstrates that there is no loss, no tragedy, no power in heaven or on earth or under the earth, that can place us beyond the reach of his infinite love and abundant life.

What it reveals is that Jesus is the one in whom there is life (1:4), the one who even now calls us out of all the dark and binding places of death (5:25). In grief, people do not only need or want to know that Jesus is powerful enough to raise the dead. But Jesus is life itself; Jesus himself is resurrection's defeat of death. Jesus is the place where death ends, and everlasting life begins. Without denying the eschatological promise of resurrection and death's final elimination, the life of Jesus breaks into our present and transforms it. What we need to hear is that on both sides of the grave there is life for us because Jesus has been sent to call our names. On both sides of the grave Jesus is life for us. Jesus is not simply one who can restore life, but the one who is life itself. Jesus is the place where death ends, and life begins.

The resurrection of Lazarus prefigures that of Jesus. The tomb won't be able to hold Jesus any more than it could hold Lazarus once Jesus showed up. In Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, death has met its match.

Much of the time, honestly, it does not feel like death has been defeated. Like Mary and Martha, we cry out in pain and ask our agonizing questions — about job loss, wayward children, financial crises, chronic illness, loss of loved ones, war and terrorism — whatever casts death's shadow across our lives. Even as we cry out of the depths, however, we live and wait in hope. Like Martha and Mary, we learn that God does not act exactly when, where, or how we think God should act. But God will act in God's good time, and death will not have the final word. The day of resurrection will come.