

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
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John 11

Life is short, we sometimes say, which is to say that we know life on this earth only lasts so long. You have to die sometime; we might say in a callous or snarky retort when engaging in some ill-advised activity. And yet, life is precious. We feel it in grave moments. Life is precious and we seek to extend it through all means available. This includes wise choices, medicine, procedures, pacemakers, joint replacements, and so on. There will come a day, we know, but we also have a sense of when a loss has come too soon and ill-timed. Even if we have come to terms with the inevitable, there is a sense that there is a right time, and a sense when it is out of order. In many instances, COVID has messed up the timing, disrupted the order and left us a little disoriented.

I wonder if Jesus' friends were not feeling similar emotions in our passage. For when Lazarus died, it felt too soon. It was not the right time. And they sought to extend his life in the ways they knew—sending for Jesus to heal and help. But he did not arrive in time. And therefore, Lazarus passed in a way, and a season that did not seem right, that seemed out of order.

The family and friends of Lazarus grieve. They were sad and angry. When Jesus finally arrives, the house is all out of kilter. The anxiety, the unmet expectations, the grief, the hurt, the people frenzying about trying to help, the swirling sense of people cranky with each other, unveiled in their disappointment and dismay. Grief over losing Lazarus, missing their connection with him, missing a sense of closeness with Jesus, missing the sense of possibility and hope.

While they still had their traditional ways of remembering and grieving intact, we can perhaps relate to the off-kilter aspects, the frustration, and confusion. Because sometimes a death is overshadowed or complicated by bigger questions.

If you remember, Jesus was a family friend of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. It seemed he stopped to visit and stay with them on his visits to Jerusalem. John identifies Mary as the one who poured perfume on Jesus' feet at a dinner in their house, pouring out her love and affection, wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. He wasn't just a teacher and a prophetic figure to them. He was their friend. So, when Lazarus fell ill, it was no wonder that they sent for Jesus, expecting he would hurry to see and help his friend. Their oral telegram in verse three said, "Lord, he whom

you love is ill.” And it says, “though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,” he still delayed in coming.

I imagine Mary and Martha kept one eye down the road, watching, hoping that they would hear a voice coming up the walk, and it would be him. But Jesus delayed in arriving. Not only did they watch Lazarus worsen, but they also sat with him as he passed and went through all the heart-wrenching work of grief and burial. It was not until four days later, when Jesus finally came walking up.

Lazarus, their brother, is gone. Jesus, the one whose feet Mary had washed with her perfumed hair, has abandoned them in this dark hour. She and Martha are hurt. And when they hear Jesus is coming, Martha goes, but Mary stays in the house, hurt and dejected. And Martha bursts out with the words that Mary too will echo shortly: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Mary does come out, her consolers follow because they thought she was going to the tomb to weep. But instead, she weeps before Jesus, and her comforters weep as well. And Jesus becomes so moved by emotion that he too weeps.

Maybe Jesus expected this when he arrived, to find his friends in disarray and angry, with their eyes swollen from days of crying and mad at him. Or I wonder if he was surprised to see how quickly their relationship had changed, how fast the greeting turn cold and accusing.

Loss during COVID has been a hard thing to make sense of. It has been reasoned and rationalized at times, trying to make it more manageable and make us feel better about wanting to get back to normal life. Furthermore, the loss has been hit and miss, hard to map who would be adversely affected by it. And amid our own disorientation and discombobulated rhythms, the scale of loss has been hard to comprehend. While death is something we expect in this world for all of us at some point, it has all been out of order. And unlike Lazarus’s friends and family, at many junctures, we were not able to have the services, the gatherings, the rituals. And especially early on, friends and family were not in the hospital, not able to sit at the bedside.

This story reflects a moment when things seem out of order with all the angst and energy to go with it. It perhaps has a way of dignifying the experience. We are right to be a little worn down, sad, dissatisfied. This story is an odd one however, an emotionally confusing one in several respects. I say this because in this story, Jesus’ friends go through all this, when, to Martha and Mary’s point, a little better timing would have saved all that disappointment and sadness and so on. It seems unnecessary. Jesus waltzes in four days after Lazarus has been buried. It was

something that didn't need to happen. COVID has had its emotionally confusing aspects, leaving us caught in the tension between that which is inevitable, death comes to us all, and that which seemed unnecessary, meaning this didn't have to happen this way, and as COVID continues around the world affecting many, it still feels that way to me.

But what is interesting is that even though the angst and grief and anger are short-lived and perhaps unnecessary, Jesus is present in it too. He feels it too. He sees the anger and the hurt, he sees the tomb where his friend lays, and he too is moved by it all. If there is anyone who could brush off the circumstances of life, it is Jesus. And yet, he is present in it with his friends. He feels it. He grieves it. And he responds out of their sense that this is not the right time.

Even in this unnecessary moment when he could remain emotionally distant, Jesus is present in it. And so, on this morning, when we pause to remember these individuals and the many others like them, we remember Christ's own involvement in our grief and confusion and frustration. We redeem a moment to remember and to grieve and to know that Jesus is with us. That Jesus comes close, and Jesus too weeps.

Now this passage seems to make clear that there are things Jesus' friends and we as readers need to overhear. There are things that are being foreshadowed and taught here. And so, it becomes clear that Lazarus is not the model for how Jesus handles all loss, meaning that he will come in and reverse it all. But this instance reveals something about Jesus' power and the larger story that we sometimes lose sight of in the intensity of the moment and the loss. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." You see, in our grasp of the preciousness of life, we sometimes cling so tightly that we lose perspective on the longer trajectory. "I am the resurrection and the life." Life in God's presence goes beyond the flesh and blood life we know.

Now this passage, as I said a moment ago, seems to make clear that Lazarus is not the model for how Jesus handles all loss, somehow reversing it all. In fact, Lazarus is not still alive in flesh and blood, which is to say he would die again, perhaps at a time more expected, that felt more appropriate. Even for Lazarus, earthly life is not forever, and so perhaps death shouldn't be so difficult, so interrupting, so disconcerting. And yet it is. We are connected, a part of one another. it is an aspect that John Donne captures in this famous poem. Ask not for whom the bell tolls, that is, ask not who has passed, for it tolls for you. Some piece of you is lost, for you are not just an isolated, disconnected individual, but connected to mankind. When another dies, we are diminished, and that is how it ought to be. Our love of

neighbor is such that their loss triggers our connectedness, and intertwined-ness. And the moment we lose that connectedness, the moment a loss does not affect us, atrocities happen.

But Lazarus will die again, which means his family and friends will have to go through all these rituals again, of grieving and burial and placing in the tomb. And yet, I suspect, it will all feel less severe the next time. Oh, they will grieve, and they will miss him, and they will cry and wail as the rituals dictate and invite. But at that point, they will have seen Jesus' power in raising Lazarus from the dead, and they will see Jesus defeat death in his own resurrection. And in the wake of such power and resurgence, death takes on a less permanent and terrifying aspect. Yes, we still prefer for death to come at what feels like the right time and in a fitting way, and sometimes we are not afforded these things. But we also are invited to keep in perspective that "Those who believe in [Christ], even though they die, will live."

And so, while Lazarus' resurrection is only for a while, in terms of this life, Jesus uses it to forecast his own death and resurrection. He teaches us about his ministry. For his ministry is not just to heal earthly ailments like illness and disease in this life, but the cancers of sin that affect our souls and to raise us to eternal life.

"Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 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." 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

So, we pause this morning to acknowledge loss in the time of COVID, loss still going on for many all around the world. And as we pause, while the pain and loss and scale is hard to comprehend and easy to separate ourselves from because it too hard, I nonetheless remind us that we are part of humankind, and if we love as Christ loves, each loss diminishes us. Because we have been called to love the world, to love our neighbors as ourselves. So we should be affected, just as Jesus is. Just as Jesus is moved to tears at the sight of it all.

So, in our desire to fulfill those great commandments, we stand vigil for all affected by this pandemic. And we pause to grieve the losses of our friends and family, and those that died alone and at times that seemed all out of order.

And at the same time, we also pause to remember the longer trajectory of God's love and redemption in us and for us, reclaiming that eternal hope, affirming that

death is not the final answer. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and even though we die at some inevitable time, we live. Our loved ones live. Only believe.

And all God's children said...

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Jesus Weeps

²⁸ 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.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² 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.” ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ 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.”