

## ***Moving through Loss to New Life***

***John 11:1-45***

***March 29, 2020***

The story of Lazarus' death and rising is full of emotions which mirror the very moment in which we find ourselves. It is a story of loss with a range of feelings and experiences that accompany losses of many kinds.

Mary and Martha request Jesus to come to the aid of Lazarus, for they **fear** that illness might take his life. We are fearful of an illness that has launched a global pandemic, a disease that is highly contagious, and that manifests as mild, or painful and debilitating, and even deadly. Fear is very present among us.

The sisters of Lazarus express **hope**. As Jesus has acted powerfully in other lives, they are hopeful that he might bring a cure to benefit his friend. We, too, long for treatment to stop the spread of this illness. More than cures, Jesus brings care, and his compassionate care gives people hope. We can be bearers of hope in these days as we care for one another.

The disciples express **concern for Jesus' safety**, for some are ready to stone him. They fear that his life is at risk if he dares to venture near Jerusalem. They want him to keep a physical distance for his own safety and protection. We are concerned for safety, our own as well as others. We are concerned for first responders, persons experiencing homelessness, persons with underlying health conditions, people whose medical treatment is delayed because hospitals are overloaded. We share a concern for safety in many dimensions.

This story is marked by **love** between siblings and friends who have meaningful relationships. Where there is deep love, when we are parted from one another in a time of need, there is deep **sorrow**. We know the value of love among friends and family members and are grateful for those with whom we can continue to connect through technology. Yet we share sorrow in our physical absence from one another. We share the sorrow of family members who are unable to be present at the hospital bedside of a loved one as they face the virus, other illness, or a medical procedure. We share the sorrow of those whose loved ones have died in recent weeks, and who now must delay a celebration of life. Our love for others brings great joy and sometimes deep sorrow.

Martha expresses **trust** in Jesus' ministry, in his affinity to God. She expresses belief in Jesus as God's Son, and receives his promise that those who give their hearts to him will experience life everlasting. Through our relationship to Jesus, we trust that God is at work in the midst of this crisis. We see the

healing presence of Christ in doctors, nurses, scientists, aides devoted to saving lives. We witness the compassion of Christ in the outreach of friends, neighbors, and even strangers. We have faith in the activity of God in the midst of seemingly impossible circumstances.

In John's story there is **confusion and misunderstanding**. Jesus says, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up." But when Jesus arrives, Lazarus is dead. Is he dead or is he sleeping? There are mixed messages. Have you felt like you've heard mixed messages in the past few weeks? It is no surprise, for it is an evolving situation with changed circumstances every hour. Not surprisingly, there are also differences of opinion, which add to the chaos!

Once Jesus heads toward Bethany, Thomas says, "We're going along with you, Jesus, and we'll even die with you if necessary." There is a **sense of solidarity**. We're in this together; we're not leaving you alone. We need you, Jesus, and we're going to be there for you. There is a spirit of camaraderie among the disciples; they pledge to be there for one another. We've seen many expressions of social care this month. The opera singers in Italy who sang from their balconies to lift the spirits of neighbors. Youth, well-rehearsed for spring theater and musical performances, invited by actors to share their music and dances via social media. Through various means people are saying, "We're in this together. We value one another. We value your talent, your gifts, your life, and we will empower you to express yourself in a new way."

In this gospel story we witness **grief** over the death of a loved one. In response friends rally around to offer support. People are experiencing a multitude of losses in these days. The Grief Recovery Method teaches that there are over 40 different types of losses people might experience. Right now people are not simply experiencing one loss at a time, but multiple losses at the same time. The loss of independence. The loss of special occasions, such as weddings, events, travel plans, and commencement ceremonies for high school and college seniors. Peace Corps volunteers have been called home, shattering their dreams of making a difference in the world. Sports teams have cancelled practices and games, even suspended seasons, depriving young people of opportunities to develop teamwork and skills. Many are losing hours of work, small businesses, and jobs. Any loss evokes grief, and sometimes a loss revives grief from previous losses. There is much grief to be processed from this current experience, and the losses continue to grow. Grief manifests itself in our emotions and actions in many ways. It is helpful to name the losses you and your family members are

experiencing. Making a list puts in perspective your feelings and the disorientation you might be experiencing.

Both Martha and later Mary express **frustration and anger**: “Jesus, if you had come when we asked, Lazarus wouldn’t have died.” It didn’t have to get this bad, if only you had acted sooner. Loss arouses anger because our needs are not met, our need for healing, our need for security, our need for compassion. It is natural to express anguish and annoyance in the face of loss. If you are angry, consider what need of yours is not being met. Is there another way to meet that need?

In the sister’s expression of frustration, there is a hint of **blame**: “Jesus, if you had come when we asked, this wouldn’t have gone so badly.” When we feel powerless or angry, it is easy to leap to blame and to hold someone else accountable for what’s happening. COVID-19 is a disease for which no one is to blame. Some have harmfully tried to blame LGBTQ persons for the virus. This is untrue and untrue. It is an assault on beloved children created in the image of God.

Even Jesus is disturbed by Lazarus’ death to the extent that he weeps for his friend. It is wise to name our feelings, to honor them, and to **offer ourselves compassion**. Jesus says that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Too often we forget to love ourselves. In a moment of overwhelm, pause, take a deep breath, name what you feel: sadness, disappointment, helpless, impatient, nervous. Your feelings are entirely valid. Pamper yourself until you are ready to move forward.

This story holds within it fear, hope, concern for safety, love, sorrow, trust, confusion, solidarity, grief, frustration, anger, blame, and compassion. If you feel like I’ve taken you on a roller coaster of emotions, you are exactly right. That’s the nature of grief; it’s the nature of loss; it’s the nature of this season in which we find ourselves. One moment we are hopeful; the next we are so anxious that we fear for our future, for everyone we love, and for our nation and even the world. One minute we tell a friend, “I’m here for you,” and the next we feel so lonely we could cry. This collective grief experience is a roller coaster of emotions along an uncertain path.

We look forward to a day like the one when Lazarus walked out of the tomb and Jesus said, “Untie him and let him go.” We are anxious to walk out of our homes, to be unleashed to dance together, party with friends, exchange hugs, shake another’s hand. As that day came for Lazarus, we have faith that it will come. But that day is in the future yet to come. We need to remain at home and

follow the best advice of our public health officials. We need to do what is right for the common good.

In the meantime, we remain anchored in our faith in Christ who said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die." With Jesus, we will rise again. We will conquer the losses, learn from them, and grow into more faithful disciples of Jesus. We will be set free to live life in a more meaningful way, for we are coming to recognize the precious nature of all that we experience.

We trust that God is still at work in us, through us, and around us, transforming lives and our life together. We pray that this period of collective isolation will give birth to collective compassion for our human sisters and brothers around the world. For this disease has no boundaries; it is indiscriminate, touching rich and poor; famous, infamous, and ordinary citizens. In that sense it is like the love of God, indiscriminate, available to all in abundance. God's love conquers all that tries to hinder it.

My friends in Christ, may the unconditional love of God empower you to cope with the losses of this season. May you cherish the saving grace of Jesus Christ, with whom we shall rise to new life. May the healing presence of the Holy Spirit grow in you the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

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