

## Hope at the tomb

Bible reference for sermon John 11:1-45

*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup> after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

Our gospel reading today begins in a place that is deeply human. Two sisters send word to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." They don't tell Jesus what to do. They don't demand a miracle. They simply tell him what they know. And then they wait.



Perhaps that moment is familiar to you? Maybe you already know that so much of life—especially life in a broken world—is waiting. Waiting for news. Waiting for healing. Waiting for answers that do not come as quickly as we hoped. Waiting in that space between prayer and outcome.

Mary and Martha know that space well. They send word to Jesus because they trust him. They know he loves Lazarus. They know he has the power to heal. But Jesus does not come immediately. And by the time he arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. The sisters both say the same words when they see him:

**"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."**

There is profound grief in those words. Grief is not hidden in this story. We don't rush past it to get to the miracle. In fact, most of the story takes place in the place of mourning. There are tears. There are questions. There is confusion. And there is also faith.

Martha meets Jesus first. She speaks with remarkable faith. Even in the face of her brother's death she says, "I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." And then Jesus speaks one of the most powerful statements in the whole Gospel:

**"I am the resurrection and the life."**

He doesn't simply say, "I will bring resurrection someday." He says, "I am the resurrection."

Resurrection is not just an event in the future. It is a person standing before Martha. And Martha responds with one of the great confessions of faith in the New Testament:

**"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."**

In the middle of grief, Martha proclaims faith.

But Martha is not the only faithful one in this story.

When Mary comes to Jesus, she says the same words as her sister:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."



But Mary does not argue theology. She does not reason through belief. She falls at Jesus' feet and weeps. And Jesus responds in a way that surprises us. He hears her and then he witnesses her weeping and the weeping of all those gathered. And even though he knows that death will not have the final word and that momentarily Lazarus will walk out of that tomb, alive, Jesus' response reveals to us just where God is at times of great suffering and grief.

The Greek words that are translated as "being greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" are so, so much stronger than the English.

There is anger,  
Outrage  
Turmoil  
agitation.

And when we get to that famous verse, 'Jesus wept', this is not some delicate tear rolling down his face.

The Greek word used here refers to an abrupt release of tears.

I can picture Jesus breaking into sobs that rack his body, huge emotions taking over.

It is dramatic enough that those around him say "See how he loved him!".

Jesus does not scold Mary for crying. He does not tell her to be strong. He does not say, "Don't worry, I'm about to fix this."

Instead, he shares her grief.

In that moment we see the heart of God. A God who is not only powerful, but compassionate. A God who enters the pain of the world rather than standing safely outside it.

And Jesus shares not just Mary's grief but the grief of all who gather, because Mary and Martha are not grieving alone.



The house is full of people. Friends and neighbours have gathered to mourn with them. In the Jewish world of the first century, grief was communal. People came to sit with the bereaved, to cry with them, to hold them in their sorrow. Grief was never meant to be carried alone.

When Lazarus dies, the community gathers around Mary and Martha. They weep together. They lament together. They sit together in the difficult silence of loss. And when Jesus finally arrives, he steps into that community of grief. That is something the church is called to be today. In our culture we often learn to handle grief privately. We try to be stoic. We say, “I’m fine.” We carry sorrow quietly.

But the Christian faith tells a different story.

The church is meant to be a place where grief is shared. Where people sit with one another in sorrow. Where tears are not hidden but honoured. Paul writes that the church is the body of Christ. That means when one part suffers, all suffer together. In other words, grief becomes something we carry as a community. And sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is simply show up—like the mourners in Bethany—sitting with those who are hurting.

When Jesus finally comes to the tomb, the story moves toward its dramatic moment. He tells them to roll away the stone. Martha hesitates. She knows the reality of death. “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

But the stone is removed. Jesus prays. And then he calls out:

**“Lazarus, come out!”**

And Lazarus does. Still wrapped in burial cloths, the man who had been dead walks out of the tomb.

But notice what happens next.

Jesus does not unwrap Lazarus himself. Instead, he says to the people standing there:

**“Unbind him, and let him go.”**

In other words, the community has work to do. Jesus gives life—but the community helps restore that life. They remove the grave clothes. They help Lazarus return to the world of the living. They welcome him back into the circle of family and friends.

This is a powerful picture of the church’s calling.



Because resurrection life is never meant to be lived alone.  
Faith grows in community. Healing happens in community. Hope is sustained in community.

We help one another remove the grave clothes—fear, despair, shame, loneliness. We help one another live the life Christ gives. Perhaps this week we could do this by praying and encouraging those who are taking part in confirmation classes at the moment.

And then there is another important detail in this story.  
After this moment, many people believe in Jesus—but others begin plotting his death. This act of life-giving power is what sets the events of Holy Week into motion. Ironically, the miracle that raises Lazarus from the dead leads Jesus toward his own death.

The one who gives life will soon enter the tomb himself. The resurrection of Lazarus points forward to something even greater: the resurrection of Jesus. Lazarus will eventually die again. His resurrection is temporary. But when Jesus walks out of his tomb, death itself is defeated forever.

So what does this story mean for us?

First, it reminds us that Jesus meets us in grief. He does not stand far away from our pain. He stands beside us, weeping with us, holding us in love.  
Second, it reminds us that grief is not meant to be carried alone. The Christian life is communal. We mourn together. We pray together. We hold one another when life becomes too heavy to carry by ourselves.  
And finally, this story reminds us that death does not have the last word.  
Because the one who stands before the tomb of Lazarus is the one who will soon stand outside his own empty tomb.  
He is the resurrection and the life.  
And that means that even in the darkest places—even at gravesides—even in seasons of waiting and unanswered questions—hope remains.  
The voice that called Lazarus out of the tomb is the same voice that calls us.

Calls us from despair to hope.  
From isolation into community.  
From death into life.

And one day, when Christ returns, that voice will call all creation out of the tomb.  
Until that day, we live as people of resurrection.  
People who weep with those who weep.  
People who unbind one another from the grave clothes of sorrow.  
People who trust that the Lord of life is still at work.

Because the one who stood in Bethany and cried out, “Lazarus, come out!”  
is the same Lord who promises us:  
**“I am the resurrection and the life.”**  
Amen.

*Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul’s Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>*

