

**Sunday, March 17, 2024**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-4, 7-14; John 11:1-44**  
**“Rise UP!”**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

In his poem “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot writes: “What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.” (*Four Quartets*, 1942). The story of Jesus and his friend Lazarus is a story of both an ending and a beginning. Most of us know that Lazarus was brought back to life by Jesus, four days after his death – but what else does this story say to us about starting again from what we believe is an end?

This story begins at the end, with Mary and Martha’s deep feelings of helplessness, grief, and despair. But first, let me tell you about my friend Jennifer. Jennifer was the kind of friend who after talking with her for over an hour, you’d realize she asked all the questions and you did all the talking. A caring wife and mother of two little girls. The kind of person who loved her family as herself and Jesus with her whole heart. One day she said she was tired, laid down and her heart just stopped. And she died of a form of heart disease so rare, that it was undetectable until after her death, at 35 years old. It has been many years since that horrible day, but I still remember clearly the pain, the grief of losing someone so close, so fast, so young.

This is also the story about a really good friend dying. Jesus’ friend Lazarus. This is the story about a brother dying, and the sisters who loved him. Now we know the Martha and Mary story. Jesus came to visit their home one day, and Martha was really busy getting the meal ready for Jesus, while Mary sat relaxed at Jesus’ feet, wanting to listen to him teach. Martha reprimands Mary for not helping her and Jesus suggests that perhaps Mary had chosen the better part, who cares about a meal when you are in the presence of the Son of God? Oh, that busy Martha, we do love her.

Then there is the story where Jesus was again visiting their home, and in this story, sensitive Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with oil and then dries his feet with her long hair, with loving and gentle kindness. So we are aware of these stories about busy Martha and tender Mary, both dear friends of Jesus.

Now, our story for today. Mary and Martha send word to Jesus; his really close friend Lazarus is about to die. And then they wait and they wait. We know what that feels like, to wait for God, wait for a response, wait for test results, wait for pain to subside, wait for someone to do something. And Lazarus does in fact die.

Now, funeral rituals of Jesus’ day were obviously different than ours. When somebody died, there was no embalming but immediately the body was wrapped in linen clothing (our symbol today) and put into the burial vault, a limestone cave carved into the limestone rock. There was intense mourning for seven full days. It was also believed that the soul left the body after three days, so since it is the fourth day, Lazarus is really dead.

Now when Jesus was told that his very good friend was ill and close to death, we would have expected Jesus to immediately run to him and heal him, right?! But that is what a friend would do, not the Son of God. Notice that Jesus immediately makes the connection between Lazarus’ illness and death, and his own life and death. The gift of life is to be

linked to Jesus' relationship with God, but in order for the disciples to understand this, he must wait and go to Judea to do a really important miracle. And so he remained where he was knowing Lazarus would die. Some translate this as he tarried. Think about that for a moment. How many times in your life are you tempted to say, stop tarrying God, stop just sitting around, God, somebody, do something. So Lazarus' death is not only an occasion of revelation for us, but also another occasion for the disciples to come to belief. To move them and us to see things through the eyes of God.

As Jesus approaches, sensitive Mary stays in the house with the fellow mourners but busy Martha; Martha heads out on the road to be the first to confront Jesus. She knows Jesus is a righteous man and she hopes he will do something about this. She's also a little mad – if you had been here Jesus – and really sad and yet, also hopeful? Jesus responds to her, offering up the general resurrection of the dead, which has a long history in the Jewish faith and Martha believes this will happen on the last day. But then Jesus makes one of the most powerful statements of the entire gospel, you believe in the future resurrection, well, "I am the resurrection and the life." The promise of resurrection is no longer a future distant event because they are in the person of Jesus. He is the future – "the one who believes in me and dies – lives" and the present – "The one who lives and believes in me – never dies."

Then he asks one of the most important questions found in the Bible, "Do *you* believe this, Martha?" What a question. Do you believe this? Do YOU believe this? Martha answers "I believe. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God and that whoever lives and believes in you will never die."

That is an incredible conversation, and we could stop here but the story continues. Martha goes back home to get her younger sister. Sensitive Mary approaches Jesus with the same anger – if you had been here Jesus - but before Jesus can say anything, Mary burst into tears and so did all her grieving friends. And what was Jesus' response to her tears? The Bible says that he was "deeply troubled," but the Greek word underlying this says that Jesus "*shuddered with sadness,*" that his body *shook* with emotion.

You and I have experienced this in life, where a person is so grieved and sad, that their *whole* body shakes with sorrow. Then comes that classic line, the shortest verse in the Bible. "Jesus wept." As one pastor writes, in our antiseptic way, we imagine a single tear running down his face. Rather, the Greek suggests, Jesus "*burst into tears.*" So here, in this little episode with sensitive Mary, there is no classic, eloquent teaching about eternal life. In fact, there are no words at all, but simply bursting tears that shake his body. And yet within that Greek word for "shudders with sadness," there is a connotation of anger, that Jesus was angry about something, and the scholars ponder what Jesus was angry about. (1) I know what Jesus was angry about: he was angry that Lazarus died too soon, too young. I knew those feelings of anger when my friend Jennifer, died too young and too soon. I was mad, really mad inside. You know those feelings from your experiences as well.

When I arrived at my friend's memorial service, the family asked us to go in to view her before the service. I never liked this practice very much but it was important to the family. And somehow I knew I really needed to see her. I was so scared, and when I saw her, I was startled. It wasn't my friend. It didn't look a thing like her. But amazingly enough, I

felt such a sense of peace; she was really gone, and she wasn't just dead, her spirit was gone too. Gone, well, not exactly.

So, Mary enters the scene simply heartbroken and angry. And Jesus steps into Mary's pain, not glossing over it, but goes to the source of that pain and just weeps. Even knowing all that will happen, he still weeps, but Jesus' tears are not to simply show us his humanity but the reality of the pain which death causes. He has the power of God, the power over death, but death is still really hard, and knowing his purpose doesn't make the death of his friend any easier.

Notice that after the stone is removed from Lazarus' grave, Jesus stops, he stops to pray a prayer of thanksgiving. He doesn't need to pray to God or ask God; he lives in total communion with God, but he wants to direct the eyes of those observing, to God, so that **God's** glory will be seen in this miracle, not his own glory, God's. And we so have our own biblical "dead man walking". And for Lazarus to emerge still bound in grave clothes underscores the magnitude of this miracle, for he walks even though his hands and feet are bound. The fact that his hands and feet are still bound speaks to the fact that the people had to come and unbind him. They were a part of this process, this miracle. For we too are co-creators with God working to help unbind, set free, release, and renew the world around us. Think about that for a moment, God is still commanding us to rise up, help unbind and renew our relationships and restore God's people.

Like the Prophet Ezekiel is asked, can these bones live? Can the people of Israel live again after being exiled, losing all they knew and loved? Ezekiel's response is, only you know God, only you. And God says yes, prophesy, prophesy Ezekiel and I will bring life to these dried bones, I will bring the breath of life back to my people Isarel, my spirit will fill them with this promise.

Let me ask you this. What if we were to face and think about our future, including even our own our death as in the hands of God, maybe it would lose some of its sting. And maybe we might live each present day a bit differently, if we loosen some of that control, we love control, because Jesus is the resurrection but Jesus is also **the life**. We don't think about that part of his statement much. Jesus is the word made flesh, the resurrection sure, but also the life. He gives Lazarus back his life. The end is just the beginning of something amazing and new, new life here and now! It is the same ruach, spirit, God's breath of life that brings back to life the dried bones, the people of Israel, the body of Lazarus. The same spirit, "the life" that fills us.

A little while later we were all standing at the graveside of my friend, and I remember being so full of sorrow, at one point my hands dropped at my side. But they were taken up, one by my husband and the other by a friend. And suddenly I felt it. There was Jennifer. There was her spirit. In my hands, in all those who cared and loved her, in all of our hearts. And her spirit still remains there. There is resurrection, there is the breath of God.

And that my friends is what the church is supposed to be – what you are supposed to be: a community of Christ's compassion and consolation to one another. I remember years ago when I first preached here and I saw the four page prayer list in the bulletin which had more than names, it described circumstances, why we should pray for these loved ones, friends, colleagues. I was shocked. You all wrote and still write and even

sometimes say out loud in worship, really personal things. Why? Because you know you will be seen and heard and surrounded and so will your loved ones. As one writes, in our busy and active culture, we often don't have time to live deeply with our feelings. In our hurried up plastic world, we often don't have time to share deep love or deep sorrow. In our shallow materialistic world, we attempt to minimize death [and suffering]. But not in the church. Not in here. We know love; we know grief; and we [know how to] share it with one another. (2)

So, here are the truths revealed in this passage: God can and does work through tragedy. God identifies with us and feels our hope and hurts as God's own; and Jesus acts to redeem and save in mercy and love. And God invites us into that activity and grants us lives of meaning and purpose. You see, Jesus does not do the easy thing which would be to keep bad things from happening. He does the hard thing which was to reverse destruction. Bring new life out of tragedy. To rise up that which is dead in us.

Jesus is the resurrection, yes, but Jesus is also the life. Life, spirit, ruach, the breath of God in us now. So rise up people of God, rise up out of your graves, out of your dried bones, and live, preach, sing, pray, invite, surround, and we shall see all the miracles God is still doing each and every day. May it be so. Amen.

(1) Markquart, The Rev. Edward E. Lazarus: Jesus Bursting into Tears.

(2) Ibid.