

“Love and Grief, Glory and Belief”

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Steve Ramer

Scriptures: John 11:1–44 (CEB)

1 A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha... 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill."

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, " This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." 5 Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. 6 When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, 7 he said to his disciples, " Let's return to Judea again." 8 The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?"

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days... 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died..."

23 Jesus told her, " Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, " I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.

...she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you." 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. 32 When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." 33 When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. 34 He asked, " Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus began to cry.

36 The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?"

Then (sic) Jesus shouted 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."

Sermon

We often think of love and grief as very different emotions. This week, we are challenged with the dissonance of their relationship. Pay attention to Jesus' words and actions here, and the dissonance they stir up in us.

The story we just read, is universally given the title, “The Raising of Lazarus!” And we are immediately introduced to a “a certain man” named Lazarus, which seems like a bit of an unusual way to introduce someone?

But why is he viewed as the title character? What did he really do, anyway? He’s passive, literally spending most of the chapter literally dead! We are also introduced to those who loved him; Mary, Martha, and Jesus. But they are the ones who move the story and so shouldn’t they be the main characters, shouldn’t they be in the title?

And what if we too changed the focus from a supernatural event where a dead man is brought back to life - where a “certain person” is rescued from the stench of a wholly rotten nonexistence, to a story whose focus is a far more familiar, to both those first witnesses and especially to us gathered here, a focus on how those who remain manage the miracle of moving on?

Curiously, we begin Lent, the season which ends with the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, with an invitation to contemplate the reality of our human finitude and the cost of being a particular, incarnate, mortal, human being who loves and is loved by other particular, incarnate, mortal, human beings. Rather than focusing on the passive Lazarus, what if we try instead to listen to hard words of the sisters, Mary, and Martha, who very humanly and in painful lament, much like we might said: “Lord, if you had been here . . . this wouldn’t have happened.” Maybe we also want to whisper, just like the unnamed in this story similar questions: “Couldn’t Jesus have prevented this?” “Why did he delay his arrival?” Or “Why did he discount the deadly seriousness of Lazarus’ condition?”

Of course we all know what happened in the end. But what if we would have been there on the ground as observers? What would we be thinking and feeling? Hmm... either he isn’t the all-powerful “Son of God” or he doesn’t actually really care? Maybe Jesus is more human than we think? Was he more lucky than good? Or maybe he was afraid that he might fail or make a mistake? Perhaps, unlike the transcendent Christ, even the incarnate Son of God can’t always be everywhere all at once? Maybe he delayed because he feared his own death? And maybe, just maybe, he was having a teeny-weeny bit of doubt about all this whole resurrection thing?

Now I know that it is nearly impossible to place ourselves honestly in the middle of this story. After all, as I just said, we have known how this one ends since childhood.

And knowing how much we all try to avoid talking about death, it is certainly understandable that in our great discomfort we’d much rather rush through it in order to get

to a happy ending. But those questions do hold a familiar, deeply human grief: the experience of an absence of Christ/God in a world of pain and suffering, where things are not as we want them to be.

Between the lines of John 11, we hear an echo of Psalm 22 containing the words spoken by Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” But Jesus also says that this pain—the suffering, death, and renewed life of Lazarus—is all “for God’s glory” and “so that we can actually believe!”

It is very human for us to say, “If only you had been here . . .” In the reality of our finitude and at the cost of being a particular, incarnate, mortal, human being who loves and is loved by other particular, incarnate, mortal, human beings, we too ask, “Couldn’t you have . . .?” But Jesus is also aware of another reality that we are not. “It is for God’s glory,” and he adds, all is done so, “That you will believe.” And through it all Jesus weeps with us! John chapter 11 speaks of glory and belief, but it also strikingly illustrates Jesus’ deep and real grief for his friend.

When Jesus arrives at Lazarus’s tomb, he sheds tears in such a way that the onlookers said, “See how much he loved him!” Because grief is an expression of love we observe a Jesus who loved fiercely. Despite the pain, notice Jesus’ approach to how time moves in this passage; he neither rushes to prevent his friend’s death nor to fix it. He lingered—first in that place where he first received the news of his ill friend and then outside his friend’s tomb. What is Jesus trying to teach us by dwelling in the uncomfortable dissonance of love and loss, of life and death? How might we carry this lesson with us during Lent?

Throughout this chapter, Jesus defies what we and the characters in the story expect him to do. In our lives and in our world, when things are not going the way we want them to, when things seem deeply wrong, can we make space for both love and sadness, for love and grief? Can we allow for the possibility that somehow, in some way, a far more glorious revelation from God might yet be revealed? Can we believe in and hold tightly to that dissonance between how things should be and how they really are?

Are we open to, are we expectant that God just might be at the work, in the midst of it all, transforming us, opening us up to also being brought back to the fullness of life? Are we open to the possibilities of true resurrection? Can we be like Mary and Martha and those who were looking on, willing to roll away the stones of grief and to help remove the burial cloths that hold others back who are dwelling in the darkness?

Are we too, also willing to resist the stench of a society and world in decay? Can we embrace instead, the dissonance that is always present in life? Can we allow both grief and love to exist simultaneously? Can great love also include deep sadness? Can we hold onto our beliefs as well as allow ourselves to become open to experience not only Jesus' great love for us but God's ultimate, imminent and intimate glory?!