

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

Psalm 130

Have you ever loved someone who had died? Have you ever heard those dreaded words: “He’s dead.” or “She has died”? There is no grief greater in this life. No words more dreaded than those. No pain that goes quite so deep. No greater darkness that befalls us. This experience is what this story this morning is all about.....and it’s about the compassion and power of God in response. And the light of Jesus that the darkness could not overcome.

The story that we hear in the gospel this morning is the last straw for those who wish to silence and destroy Jesus. They’ve had enough. This ragged, itinerate preacher is only stirring up trouble.....dividing the people.....some thinking he is possessed by demons and others thinking that he is indeed a man of God. The Jewish power brokers have been watching. And they are becoming more and more concerned with the disruption to the social order that Jesus is causing. They know that if they do not keep things quiet among the Jewish people in Judea, the Romans will swoop down on them with unspeakable destruction for everyone. Jesus, too, knows that things are coming to a head. He knows that the end is near.....the end of his teaching, the end of his ministry on earth, the end of his revealing of what God is truly like to ordinary men and women in this life. But what seems to be the end is actually just the beginning.....

Jesus has significantly divided the people in giving sight to a man who was born blind. He didn’t restore the sight. Jesus *created* his sight.....for the first time.....the way God creates sight. There’s an uproar from those watching.....some cheering and some ready to throw stones. When Jesus tries to explain to them who he really is....that the Father is in him and that he is in the Father.....they try to arrest him for blasphemy and stone him to death, but he escapes.

He flees across the Jordan River to safe territory.....to the place where John used to baptize people. And his followers went with him and while he is in hiding, many people came to believe in him there. He’s in safe territory when he gets word that his friend, Lazarus, is sick. This must have hit Jesus hard. Lazarus. Beloved Lazarus. With sisters Martha and Mary, their home had become a home for Jesus as well. They have risked it all to support Jesus in his ministry. They’ve done everything they could to help him. Their home is a safe haven for him even though it is a scant 2 miles from Jerusalem where danger awaits him.

So when Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick, we would expect him to drop everything and take off for Bethany. But Jesus doesn't drop everything. He waits. He waits a whole two days before he says to his disciples, "Let's go to Judea." The disciples are against it. "Don't you remember?," they say, "People there are trying to stone you!" But Jesus heads that way anyway. And he tells them that Lazarus isn't just sick or asleep.....he's dead. Jesus *knows* that he is already dead. This is an opportunity for Jesus to show people the true power of God in a public way.

Jesus loves Lazarus and Mary and Martha.....and when you love someone, you show up! By all accounts, Jesus was late showing up.....at least in our way of thinking.....and the thinking of Martha and Mary as well. But as always, God's timing is not the same as ours. We may have thought Jesus was late showing up, but he was actually right on time as it turns out. His timing allowed him to reveal the true glory of God as nothing else had done up to this point.

When Martha sees Jesus on the horizon, she runs out on the road to meet him. And her first words to him are an accusation, "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." For Martha, this is the last straw. She and her family have been Jesus' true friends and faithful allies for all of his ministry, so she's really struggling with her feelings about Jesus.....and don't we all do that? Can't we all relate to Martha at those times during our lives when we cry out to Jesus, "Where are you?" "Why aren't you here?" "How could you let this happen?" "I thought you loved me." "I thought you were going to shield me from all of the pain in this life." "I thought you were going to keep me safe." We know how she feels, don't we?

Jesus doesn't defend himself, he just asks her if she believes.....and, of course, she still does, even though she doesn't understand. Jesus reminds her that **he** is the resurrection.....and she doesn't quite get it.....yes, she knows everyone will be resurrected on the last day.....but like all of us in a similar situation, she wants her brother to still be with her. She wants the resurrection *now*! Even in her confusion and disappointment and her resignation to the realities she is facing, she confirms to Jesus that she still believes that "he is the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world." Interestingly, this confession of faith.....the theological center of the gospel message.....is actually located in exactly the center of the gospel of John.....and it is spoken by a woman!

Martha leaves Jesus and goes to get her sister, Mary.....who runs out onto the road to meet Jesus with the exact same accusation, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her hurt and her disappointment with Jesus come out as tears and those around her are crying, too. Jesus is so deeply moved by her distress that he cries as well and asks where they have laid Lazarus. Jesus shows up for them, walks with them, cries with them and Jesus does the same

for us. He shows up for us. He is present with us. And he cries with us in each and every heartache that we suffer. He knows suffering. He knows sadness. And He is with us always in all of these moments of greatest grief and disappointment. He will never leave us. And his presence alone is more powerful than we can ever imagine. Even if we think that he has shown up late!

When Jesus asks them to move the stone away from the tomb, Martha reminds him of the realities of a body that has been decaying for four days. It's going to smell terrible. But Jesus insists. "Didn't I tell you that if you believe you would see the glory of God?" In Jesus' plea to God, he says, "Father, thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing by that they might believe that you sent me." He wants to be sure that it is God who gets the glory here, not him. He wants to be sure that they understand that it is God who has given him this power. The message is clear. Death does not have the last word. God does. We already know that, but the raising of Lazarus happened in a pre-resurrection world. Jesus had not yet died and risen from the dead. In Lazarus' world, dead was dead and that was it. Final. There was no notion of eternal life to look forward to.

When Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out." The astonished crowd of people watched Lazarus walk out of the tomb still bound with the wrappings of death cloths. STOP. Think about that. Think of someone you have lost to death....and then, in you mind's eye....see them suddenly walk into the room right in front of you. It's stunning!! I'm not sure any of us would ever get over such an experience.

We believe our senses. We believe what we see and what we hear. Anyone present to see Lazarus walk out of that tomb knew exactly what they saw and what they heard. No one could dissuade them. Some of them simply marveled at what they had seen and believed that Jesus was exactly who he said he was. And some of them, having seen what Jesus did, took off to tell the Pharisees about this latest and this greatest of Jesus' disruptive signs.

The last straw. This final sign.....this final miracle....this spectacularly public miracle was the last straw for the powerful Sanhedrin. But little did they know that they were part of God's plan. They were God's instruments in the events that followed.....the events that reconciled humans to God through the person of Jesus Christ. They thought they were going to destroy Jesus.....to get rid of him for good. But they were wrong. They were the most powerful people in Judea, but they wouldn't get rid of him. They would only set events in motion that would propel Jesus to the forefront of humanity for all time. It wasn't the end.....it was only the beginning. Little did they know what the power of God can do.

But we know. When we get to those dark places in our own lives, when our hearts are broken, we know that God will be with us and that Jesus walks with us. When we have had it.....when we hit a brick wall.....when all the doors and even the windows seem to be closed.....we know that Jesus will show up. When the one more disappointment that we face feels like the last straw for us and we feel like all is lost, we know that Jesus shows up....walking with us, weeping with us, mourning with us, and praying with us.....and reminding us that there is no power greater than the power of God. Through all our dark moments, Jesus is the light. When the last straw threatens to break us, Jesus keeps us together and stays with us for as long as we need him. He is the answer to the last straw. He is the light that the darkness cannot overcome!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.