

John 11:1-45 (NRSV)

The Death of Lazarus

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

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸ The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Judeans were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹ Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” ¹² The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Judeans had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Jesus Weeps

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Judeans who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he [became angry in spirit and

deeply agitated.] ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Judeans said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried 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.”

The Plot to Kill Jesus

(Mt 26.1—5; Mk 14.1—2; Lk 22.1—2)

⁴⁵ Many of the Judeans therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

In Lazarus Jesus Points Us to the Empty Tomb

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *John 11:1-45*

Jesus comes toward Bethany. Lazarus is dead. His sisters, Martha and Mary, are devastated. And they are more than a little upset at Jesus. Martha comes out to meet Jesus, and her first words are: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She goes and gets Mary, and her first words, too, are: , “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary and Martha may have disagreed on who should have done the dishes, but on Jesus’ blame for Lazarus’ death they are in complete agreement. Because Jesus had dawdled on the way, he was too late. Lazarus was dead.

Jesus looks at Mary. He looks at the town’s people who are weeping and consoling the sisters. And then it gets interesting.

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep.”

That’s what it says in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. That’s what it says in many if not most English translations of the Bible. But the funny thing is, it’s an obvious mistranslation of the original Greek.

Here’s the English translation again: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep.”

Now here it is more accurately: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he [snarled angrily in spirit and became deeply agitated.]³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”³⁵ Jesus began to [groan in lament].

I told you last week that the writer of the Gospel of John is the Ernest Hemingway of the Bible. His Greek is not that hard. It’s simple and straightforward. So the difficulty the English translators have here is not because the Greek is hard. It’s because they just can’t imagine that Jesus, at this tender moment, would snarl in anger and groan in lament. And I suppose that’s understandable enough. Look at the scene. Martha and Mary and their friends and neighbors are in mourning, and Jesus snarls in response. Doesn’t make much sense, does it?

Well, let’s see what we can figure out. In this season of Lent, at this point in the Gospel of John, Jesus is giving us lessons about life and death. And he is especially concerned with the way in which if we stay stuck in death and grief it can turn into something even more horrific. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus is preparing his followers for his death, and for his resurrection. And he knows that dangers lurk.

And why is that? Because death seems to us to be the ultimate human failure. In Jesus’ time and in ours death is the great dark unknown that means that life as we know it is over. And maybe the fear of it is even more true in our age than before. Some have said that today the

hospitals and the healthcare systems have become our great cathedrals – hospitals: great structures of gleaming steel and glass; huge, active centers with labyrinthine passageways and rooms ruled by hierarchies that would add new dimension to the word Byzantine; filled with mysterious technology, serums and elixirs delivered by precise doses and rituals all where we spend huge sums of money in our hope to ward off death. Ultimately, I think the relationship between healthcare and pastoral care is a lot more complicated than can be captured in the notion that hospitals have replaced the cathedrals and the medical staff the clerics, but suffice it to say that both institutions say a lot about our relationship to death. Not to put too fine a point on it, we tend not to like the idea of dying. In some manner of speaking, most of us act as though death shouldn't happen.

So what happens when we can blame someone for a death? Oh, that's very good. Our grief can turn to vengeance, often in the name of justice, and it can happen in a flash. A nightclub fire takes the lives of a hundred young people in Rhode Island, and the memorial becomes not just a place to express one's grief, but soon it becomes a place to call for justice and avenging the wrong. The club owners, the band, the booking agency, the fire inspectors someone, someone's got to pay.

Paul Nuechterlein tells the story of this morning's Gospel lesson about Lazarus from the perspective of one of the mourners.

Once we heard that Lazarus had in fact died, I hurried on ahead to get there as quickly as possible. For, you see, I wasn't just a friend of Lazarus'; I'm also a professional mourner. That's right, a professional mourner. It was my job to lead the crowds in mourning a dead person. I really have a gift to whip up the emotions of a crowd, to really get them wailing and moaning and crying out on behalf of the dead person. So when your version of John's story says that the crowd was "weeping," it was more than that, really. It was the ritual wailing that I had everyone whipped up to do.

We led everyone in purging all their emotions. This was especially important when it was a tragic death, like one of our Jewish people dying at the hands of a Roman soldier. We wanted to stir up all those feelings of revenge. This kind of ritual wailing was important to keep a community enraged at its enemies. It brought us all closer together in our hate of a common enemy.¹

Let me give you another example.

On June 28, 1987, an ambitious Serbian Communist leader came to a field in Kosovo called Kosovo Polje, the Field of Black Birds, on the anniversary of the defeat there of a Serbian commander. "They'll never do this to you again," he pleaded to the crowd. "Never again will anyone defeat you." That was the moment when the Serbian revolt against the Yugoslav federation began. The speaker was Slobodan Milosevic. The defeat commemorated on that field took place in 1389. A year later, the coffin of the defeated Serb commander began a year-long pilgrimage through every village in Serbia, followed by multitudes of sobbing mourners dressed

¹Paul John Nuechterlein, Girardian Lectionary Commentary
(www.girardianlectionary.net).

*in black in each town.*² A death from 600 years before was used to inflame righteous indignation that propped up a brutal dictator and gave him full warrant to rampantly conduct genocide and other war crimes.

Jesus was keenly aware that because we could not tolerate death, there was an almost reflexive move in us from grief to vengeance when we can blame someone for a death. And, of course, as much as anything else, Jesus came to proclaim to us that death was not the failure and defeat we saw it as. That's not to say that Jesus would not have us grieve our loved ones. Death is a loss to us, no matter what our beliefs are. But as much as Jesus would understand our grieving, he would want us to face death in the light of the resurrection. And at the center of the resurrection story is the empty tomb. "For whom are you looking? He is not here."

In this story of Lazarus Jesus is worried that the mourning is already turning to blame – if you had been here, this would not have happened. He is worried that the grieving is taking on the features of whipping up discontent. Jesus is concerned that Lazarus' tomb is becoming already the rallying point. And Jesus more than anything else wants to prevent that from happening in the aftermath of his quickly approaching death.

That's perhaps the greatest uniqueness to the Christian story. The empty tomb is not a sepulcher. The empty tomb should make it impossible to turn the grave into a rallying point for violence, vengeance and justice. Jesus said not, "Get them back for me." He said, "Forgive them for they know not what they do." And of course the interesting thing was that when they heard, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," it allowed them to hear the cock crow. That is, when the rush to blame and vengeance was cut off at the knees, Peter could understand his own complicity in Jesus' death. And that was the turning point for him. As Christians, we can understand our involvement in the death of Jesus, and in that moment when the cock crows for us, quite our surprise, we can also comprehend the fact of our own forgiveness. As we understand our guilt we experience in return love rather than hatred, forgiveness rather than blame. And in some way we can never fully understand, we grasp that the empty tomb means that the fear we have of death can be taken from us.

It is worth saying that it is only when we get confused about the empty tomb that we are able to commit the atrocities to which we human beings are so prone. Centuries of Christian anti-Semitism depends on the impulse for vengeance against those who, falsely it turns out, get blamed for killing Jesus, when the two major point of the story is that we did it, and it didn't actually work. We were the perpetrators, and the tomb was empty and death defeated anyway. But we keep on getting it wrong.

Gil Bailie gives another example in his book, *Violence Unveiled*. He says, *Given the significance of the empty tomb, nothing symbolizes Christianity's apostasy in history as perfectly as do the Crusades,.... Pope Urban B launched the First Crusade by passionately imploring European Christendom to arm for the task of reclaiming from the infidel the sepulcher of Christ. This sacred mission remained the supreme rallying cry for all the subsequent Crusades. In other words, Christianity's most notorious revival of sacred violence involved a repudiation of the story of the empty tomb and a more or less spontaneous revival of the*

²March 28, 1993, edition of the *Washington Post Book World* quoted in Paul John Nuechterlein, Girardian Lectionary Commentary (www.girardianlectionary.net).

*structures of sacred violence whose perversities the crucifixion had exposed.*³

It is easy to look back Crusades or the Nazis or even those in Lazarus's hometown. But let me close with the musings from Paul Nuechterlein's fictional paid mourner who leaps across the centuries to address us in our time.

*Think about your own time, he says to us, and the reaction you may have had to the terrible murders of September 11. It was right to be sad. It was right to be compassionate to the families of the victims. But as you remember their murders and stand at their grave, at the memorials to the fallen towers of the World Trade Center, do you feel how strong the urge is to also marshal all those strong feelings against your enemies? To use them in acts of revenge? To feel good among yourselves by purging all your strong feelings at a scapegoat? Do you see how strong a temptation this presents? Do you see how Jesus came to unbind not only Lazarus from death, but he came to unbind us from the hold death has on all of us?*⁴

We fear death, and ironically, we choose a way of living that is death. In trying to escape death, we fall for the urge for retribution, which makes our life a living death, and we imagine the tomb to be a sepulcher, which makes us imagine that death owns us. The Christian story is a most remarkable thing. In it we are nudged out of our fear of death through a death we have in some sense caused and yet been forgiven for. As we face this death, we are placed in the doorway of a tomb that we see, maybe for the first time, to be empty. And there we stand, facing life and, by God's grace, choosing life, also. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³Quoted in Paul John Nuechterlein, Girardian Lectionary Commentary (www.girardianlectionary.net).

⁴Quoted in Paul John Nuechterlein, Girardian Lectionary Commentary (www.girardianlectionary.net).