

March 29, 2020

Shepherd's Grace Church

Sharing the Story...Lent 6

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴But 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.' ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after 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.' ⁸The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' ⁹Jesus 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. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' ¹¹After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹²The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

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

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

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 Jews 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 Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews 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?'

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 for 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 upwards 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.'

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. (John 11: 1-45)

Welcome to Lent! As we begin this Sunday, many of you will remember that I have begun my message in this same way for each of the previous 5 Lenten Sundays. My intention in the welcome has been to invite you to know we are all sharing something together. When we began the journey to Jerusalem and the Lenten season this year, that which we shared was a common desire to increase our faith.

What we share today, on this 6th Sunday is dramatically different from anything we might have imagined. What we share today is perhaps the ultimate Lenten journey. The sacrifices we made weeks ago on Ash Wednesday, while real and prayerfully still practiced pale by comparison to the

sacrifices we are now required to make...and I say required because not only are they requested and in some cases enforced by governments, but also because the very lives of friends, family and others whom we do not know are at risk if we fail to follow the health and safety strategies set before us.

Sacrifice has become quite real to us and for those of us who choose to let it, quite satisfying. Certainly the giving up of chocolate for the sake of doing away with something we enjoyed for only a period of time and with no tangible consequence other than our willingness to affirm God above chocolate is reason enough, but what could be more satisfying than sacrificing daily routines and casual comforts so that others live?

Obligation has taken on new implication as well. At the beginning of Lent, many of us committed to additional obligations. We were going to read more scripture, pray more, attend additional worship and many other things that would help us grow in our relationship with the Lord.

Today, obligation is to such things as washing, helping children and the elderly, staying home and staying safe and beginning tomorrow, making sure that our children do the work expected of them as they begin the task of distance learning.

Lent is different this year...well, maybe not different. Maybe this year Lent is Lent. Maybe this year, it is a time of understanding what Jesus sacrificed as he made the journey to the cross for us. His sacrifice was so we all might live. This year, our sacrifice is similar. His obligation was so we might have eternal life. Our obligation is so that life might be restored to the abundance of God's promise.

This year, Lent is Lent and we can rejoice in it as we continue to wait, watch and wonder at all God is doing to invite us to embrace the sacrifice and engage in the obligation we have to Love one another! Perhaps this is the point where we enter into the story of Lazarus today.

A certain man is ill. Certainly we can all enter the story and share from this point. Maybe we do not know anyone who has fallen victim to COVID-19 but most of us probably know someone who has had the virus or knows someone who has the virus. If you do not know someone else, all of you know me and while I am not infected...let me stress again, I AM NOT AFFECTED!!! I do know someone who is. A certain man is ill.

When we enter from this point, we can begin to imagine the effects that illness has on others. The man we know has family, friends, children, grandchildren, employers, employees...people who care about him, depend on him, love him!

The man I know has a daughter who is part of the education system. In addition to being concerned for her father, this daughter is concerned for the ongoing education of the children for whom she is responsible. She is also concerned for her immediate family and for their needs. Her family is concerned for her and so are her friends and family. All of this because a certain man is ill.

It is amazing how much more clearly we can relate to the story of Lazarus this year than ever before. In years past, we could consider the man and his sisters and their concern for one another but it was difficult to imagine the lives touched beyond the three. This year, we can see the exponential effects of a certain man being ill; a specific man, a man of consequence and value. This man is ill! This man is ill and we can relate to the illness.

As we enter the story from this place, we can feel the effects of Mary's and Martha's message to Jesus. "Lord, the one you love is ill." Because we know illness, because illness is close to us this year, we can appreciate the tenderness in the words of the message. "The one you love is real."

Perhaps some of us have had to deliver this message to another person before. Perhaps not even because of the situation we are in right now, but in another circumstance, we have had to share that message. If we have, we can know the pain that comes in penning the words. We can know the struggle in speaking over the phone. "Your friend, your father, your mother, your son, your daughter is ill." "The one you love is ill." We can share this story from that perspective today and we can enter the story.

Mary and Martha send the message without further detail. Now, we do not know the age of Lazarus. We do not know if he has any underlying health issues. We do not know if he is having chemotherapy or if he has had to have radiation treatments as some of the members of our congregation have had. We do not know if there are heart problems or other symptoms of grave and life threatening issues. All we know is what Mary and Martha tell us.

Jesus knows more, however. He knows the nature and the magnitude of the illness. He knows how it is to end. When he speaks to his disciples about it, he first tries to convey the message metaphorically. "This illness does not end in death, but in God's glory and so that the Son of God can be glorified in it."

The disciples know the relationship Jesus has with Lazarus. John, the author of the gospel wants us to know as well. The depth of the relationship is in the message sent from Mary and Martha. "The one you love is ill." This part of the message is for those of us who read the story years after the events have

taken place. Lazarus is one whom Jesus loves. That is the relationship. While it seems innocent enough, it goes a great deal deeper.

From this point forward in John's gospel, the disciple whom Jesus loves is referred to no fewer than 7 times. This disciple is the one who asks Jesus who is going to betray him, the one who races with Peter to the tomb, the one who stands at the foot of the cross with Mary the Mother of Jesus, the one who tells Peter that it is the Lord standing on the seashore and the one who looks on while Jesus tells Peter that Peter is to lead the church and feed the sheep. Prior to chapter 11, no mention has been made of this disciple but from this point on, the other disciple plays a prominent role in helping the other disciples to deepen their relationship with Jesus.

Some have wanted to claim that this disciple was John, the author of the Gospel but John is established clearly in the gospel. He accompanies Jesus to the transfiguration, and prays with Him at Gethsemane. I want to suggest that this other disciple is the same certain person who has taken ill. I believe that the reference Mary and Martha make to Jesus is consistent with the other seven references John makes in the balance of the Gospel and that Lazarus is that disciple. (Several authorities share this theory and the reason I advance it here is to use it a little later in the message.)

Now that we are on the same page with the other disciples, we can appreciate more completely Jesus' statement to them. "The illness does not end in death, but in God's glory being revealed and in the Son of God being glorified." Jesus wants all of us as disciples to know that love conquers all. Love is the ultimate justice. As Paul says in 1Corinthians, Love never fails. Because Love never fails, Jesus can safely remain where he is two more days. He can be at peace that everything will be accomplished in exactly the right ways.

If you were with us in worship this morning, you would have heard the song, "Four Days Late." Isn't it great that God can seemingly be four days late and still be on time? What kind of freedom does it give us to know that while we are slaves to the world and the 24/7/365 clock that binds us to task after task, God works outside of time and breaks in right on time.

Even though Jesus seems to delay, he does not do so at Lazarus' expense. He does not do so in order to make Martha and Mary suffer. Instead, he delays so that God's glory might be revealed. This is the second week we have seen the glory of God. Last week, the eyes of the blind man were opened. God's glory was seen. Today, we are about to see something even more profound. When we think of today's story, might you enter from the perspective of last week's? Might you remember through faith, the power of God? Might you be willing to trust because you have seen?

Jesus' disciples were not quite to that point this morning. Jesus invited them to return with Him to Judea, the place where the leaders of the Jews were trying to stone him to death. While the disciples were ready to go with him, they still tried to talk him out of going, saying that it was dangerous.

For the record, discipleship is dangerous business. It requires risk taking. Many of you are experiencing those risks even this morning. You are staying home when it is far more normal, far more safe to go where you usually go. You are struggling to care for parents or other family members who might actually be carriers of the Corona virus. You do not know what the outcome of that care will be for you but you put aside your own concerns and do what is necessary for others.

This week, a small group of 5 gathered at our church and made meals for people to come by and get so some who might have gone hungry would be fed. Our small group fed 48 people on Thursday. Other food ministries offered the same ministry and served still more. There were risks involved but these brave people gave selflessly, weighing the cost and still sharing. Just like Jesus, they knew "Love wins."

Discipleship has risks and while we are willing to assume those risks, we still have to ask if they are really necessary. Jesus said, "Let's go" and the disciples asked the question. Jesus answered, "We work in the light. The risk is something we can't avoid because we are guided by the light of the world." Others who do not know the light stumble and fall, but not us. We walk knowing the risks and accepting them because to do otherwise is to allow death to overcome life.

We must choose life even if it means death. Jesus tells his disciples, Lazarus is dead. We are going to find life in this situation. Thomas speaks for the group saying, let us go with Him so we may also die with him. Some have said, Thomas was expressing a bitterness or even a sense of anxiety at the decision and still made it.

I choose to believe Thomas, the twin, the one who looked like Jesus was expressing faith. His response was saying better to die in Christ than live in darkness. I believe Thomas, the one who would be misunderstood later at the time of resurrection was not misunderstood now. He spoke clearly for the whole group and we have to decide this morning if he speaks for us.

There is an old song, "I have decided to Follow Jesus." In the song, the lyrics no turning back repeat often as a refrain. Though some may leave, no turning back. Though some may doubt, no turning back. Today, with Thomas we

must decide. Will we follow Jesus through difficulty or when things get a little tough, will we turn back?

What are the risks? What are the rewards? No turning back...no turning back!

Jesus arrives at Bethany (actually just outside Bethany) and Martha is made aware of his arrival. She goes out to see him and we might assume she is grief stricken. Where were you? Why weren't you here? What were you thinking? She asks all these questions and we can imagine she asks them through tears and with a difficult catch in her voice.

Jesus listens. We listen. No turning back. We know the decisions to delay and while we do not yet understand it fully, we still accept that this decision will end with God being glorified. Our whole reason for worship is to Glorify God! From the days of Moses to present, the purpose of God's people is to worship God. We have been set free to do this!

Reminded of this, let us listen in a worshipful attitude as Jesus responds to Martha.

Do you believe?, Jesus answers her questions with a question? Martha can't imagine not believing and yet there remains this perspective of inadequate action. It is a perspective many of us feel. Where is God in this quarantine? Where is God in this sickness? Where is God in my lay-off? Why hasn't God shown up.

Still, though, Martha trusts. Yes Lord, I believe I will see my brother on the last day. I believe God will grant you whatever you ask. I believe. But I hurt!

Might you enter the story this week from this perspective? We can believe and still question God's timing or seeming lack of action. We can believe and still wish God might have acted differently. We can console Martha because we know the same things to be true.

We can say, "you will see your brother again," and offer these words as comfort, but we know as she does that is not what she wants. She wants her brother and believes God's action is inadequate. God is late! Why?

She professes her faith and acknowledges the reality of the one to whom she is speaking. "You are the Light coming into the world. You are Messiah." Jesus responds, "I am the resurrection and the life." If you believe this, you will see the Glory of God.

Martha leaves with these words ringing in her ears. She returns home and tells her sister that the teacher is asking for her. Her reference to Jesus as

teacher is an unusual one for a Jewish woman. Jewish teachers in Jesus' day did not teach women, but Jesus set this tradition on its ear. He wanted to teach Mary as he taught Martha.

Mary goes immediately as a good disciple does. Others follow her as they often do those who walk by faith. She does not lead them to death, but instead to Jesus. She does not lead them to the tomb but to the author of Life.

She leads them to love. As we discussed earlier, the words of Mary and Martha are essential to our understanding of the lesson for today. "Lord, the one whom You love is ill." Mary's actions, her weeping, her wishing; Martha's actions, her anger and desire, all are predicated upon the love they know for each other and for their brother. They are all predicated upon the love they have for the Lord and that He has for them.

Those who have followed Mary express this love. "See how He loved him?" we hear them say. Even while we hear them say it, we also hear them doubt it. "Couldn't he have done more for someone he loved?" they ask. Perhaps we enter the story from this point as well, wondering if God couldn't do more for us or for our loved ones.

Even as they wonder, Jesus arrives at the tomb. Deeply disturbed in spirit, he weeps. He weeps because He knows the lack of faith expressed by those who have not yet fully committed to God's promise of life. He weeps because He knows that some will not commit even after they see what they are about to see. He weeps because he knows some were present when the blind man was made to see and their faith only sustained them for a little while. Does Jesus weep for you and for me this morning? Does He once again invite us to remember the mighty acts of God and be strengthened in faith?

When he asks the crowd to roll back the stone, even Martha steps back from her faith. She can't imagine anything other than a worldly reality. It has been four days and there will surely be a stench! When we can see things only from a worldly perspective, often they have an odor. Often they are not pleasant to be around but what if the world we know is not the only reality of our existence. What if there is more. What if we are able to believe that in all ways and at all times, love wins?

Jesus reminds Martha of his love for her and for her sister and for her brother when he says, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" At that, Martha recalls Jesus' claim. "I am the resurrection and the life," He says. Out of a deep and abiding love for the Lord, Martha recovers

her faith. She relents because she remembers. She orders the stone rolled away.

For those who have not yet discovered the faith of Martha, Jesus steps away from the anxiety of the moment. In the peak of excitement, as all are standing looking on in great expectation, Jesus steps away.

Perhaps we could learn something from his direction in this moment. Perhaps we could all stand to remember in the moments of our greatest expectation that God is worthy of praise and glory and honor; perhaps in our moments of greatest triumph, we can stand to remember to give thanks to the One to whom all thanks and praise belongs, perhaps we could find more ways to come together instead of pulling apart.

You see, when we are not looking for credit or glory, it is easier for us to work together. It is easier for us to share ideas and reach compromise and respond with new energy and enthusiasm when we are not all trying to be recognized.

This morning, as we work together, as we all respond for the goodness of one another, as we all react with love to our current situation, perhaps we can imagine times after this when we will be challenged again and can start even earlier to care for one another.

Jesus steps away. He looks to heaven and prays, not for Himself, but for us so that we might believe. Out of an abundance of love, the resurrection and the life shine forth for all who are willing to see.

“Lazarus, Come out!” Jesus says in a loud voice. The dead man comes out and life is affirmed. The one whom Jesus loves is restored and life is embraced!

The good news for all of us is that Lazarus means, “The one helped by God.” That name could be any one of ours. Each of us could be and in fact, are the other disciple. We are the ones whom Jesus loves and is willing to give life to where we can only see death. We are the ones who get to lean in to him and ask who is betraying him. We are the ones who get to care for family after he is gone. WE are the ones who get to recognize him as He stands on the lakeshore waiting to welcome us. We are the other disciple! We are the loved and this morning, we see that Love wins!

Love wins when we are willing to express our faith as Thomas. Love wins when we are willing to renew our faith like Mary and Martha. Love wins when death is defeated. It is our Lord, Jesus, the Messiah who defeats death for each one of us and Love wins when we receive Him in our lives.

Many came to believe because of what they saw at the tomb that day. As a result, many others began to plot to kill Him. There will be time to explore the plot a little later. For now, let us go out and be the story that invites all to believe in the one who came in Love to live and die so that we might die and live. Amen!