

John 11: 1-7, 17-44 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. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” …

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb 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.” ²⁸When 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.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The 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. ³²When 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.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The 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.”

“For All the Saints”

The first person I watched die was in his early 30s. He was a young sales executive with a beautiful, feisty wife and curly-headed preschoolers. While exercising after work one day, Rob had a sudden episode of ventricular fibrillation. The paramedics got there quickly, but Rob’s history was complicated, and it took a long time to restore his heart rhythm. By the time that his rhythm was reestablished, his brain had ceased to perform all but the most primitive functions. Rob was gone— even though his beautiful, athletic body looked so normal, so vital, when I got to the hospital that evening. As the days went on, his wife brought picture after grinning picture of him to the room. She taped them to all the equipment. The contrast between those beautiful images and Rob’s prognosis shook even the most seasoned members of the hospital staff.

But after about a week the unavoidable truth began to sink in, and his family made the excruciating decision to remove life support. They would follow the directives that Rob had *astonishingly* and *mercifully* left behind. On the appointed day, his parents, his siblings, his wife, and I gathered in his hospital room where we prayed and anointed his body, and then, one-by-one, each took as much time as he or she needed to say goodbye, until finally only his wife and I remained outside the door. Then the doctor on duty –whose belly was swollen with the baby she would soon deliver—that doctor removed Rob’s ventilator and left the two of us alone with him. While I sat in a nearby chair Regina climbed into bed with her husband, laid her head on his chest, and began to read from a small stack of children’s books that their kids had asked her to share with their dad one last time. As she read one book after another, I watched the color drain from Rob’s face.

There are few words for such a day; there are just memories seared into our hearts.

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Martha and Mary must have felt just as desolate. They had watched their brother Lazarus grow ill. And the illness had frightened them enough that they had sent word to Jesus. Jesus—the prophet, the teacher, the healer—but also their dear friend. Mary and Martha

knew that their family had a special place in his heart. They trusted that he would come and make things right.

Except he didn't come—at least not according to their timetable. Martha and Mary must have watched helplessly as their brother grew weaker and more pale, until finally he ceased to breathe. Jesus did not come and Lazarus died.

Even as the sisters washed, anointed, and wrapped their brother's rapidly cooling body, they must have wondered where Jesus was. The burial needed to take place before nightfall if possible, and at most within 24 hours; they could delay only so long. Finally they joined the procession of keening neighbors who carried Lazarus' body to a cave just outside the village. The stone was removed, their brother's body placed inside; prayers were offered, and then, with much exertion, the opening to the tomb was sealed with an enormous stone. It must have been hard to leave, but finally, when nothing more remained to do, they would have returned home, where custom dictated that they would stay for the next seven days, leaving the house only to return to the tomb to grieve. The house would have filled with people; coming was a societal obligation: professional mourners, leaders of the community—for seven days all kinds of people would eat and drink and pray together in their home, sitting on the floor as a sign of grief, stepping around each other as they tended to the normal rhythms of life. And so the strange days of mourning began to go by—and still Jesus didn't come.

After three days it may have been customary to check the deceased person's body in the tomb. Some believed that the person's spirit hovered nearby for three days—and stories were told of people entombed but not really dead—people who recovered from strange illnesses to live for many years. So for three days maybe there was still a glimmer of hope. *[See Tractate Semahot ('Mourning') (8:1) for more.—I no longer remember which commentary originally pointed me here!]* But even that prospect would have been exhausted by the time Jesus finally approached the village; Lazarus' body had been in the tomb for four days by then. By any measure, Lazarus was dead.

When word finally reached Martha that Jesus was coming, she slipped out to meet him alone.

Her words, when she sees him, are the words of someone who has faced sudden loss.

“If only....If only...if only you had been here”

And *“Still, isn’t there something to be done?”*

Jesus responds with what sounds to her like conventional wisdom: *“Your brother will rise again.”* And Martha answers appropriately: *I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.* “Martha is hearing Jesus’ words, but not understanding their meaning, so Jesus tries again. He sets conventional language aside. He reaches deep to shatter the categories of her thinking. Yes, Lazarus will rise in the resurrection on the last day, but the promise is so much deeper and wider than that.

I am the resurrection Jesus says, right now, standing in front of you. Believe that I am sent from God—that I bear God’s love to you. Believe that I bear to you a love powerful enough to separate light from darkness, to bring life from a reeking tomb. I am not just about a promise *beyond* death, this is about the life available to you right now. It’s not that I’m here to *teach you* about the resurrection; *I en flesh resurrection.* Right now. Speaking to you. I am what true life looks like.

Will you stake your life, Jesus says—and the life of those you love—on the promise that God’s love in me, and in you, is stronger than anything else, even death? It’s a question for each of us. Not a question that we answer once, but a question we are privileged to answer over and over, as long as we draw breath. It’s a question we sometimes need to answer for each other when, alone, we can’t muster the strength to respond.

Often when I meet with someone in my office, one-on-one, when no one feels rushed, often at some point in the conversation the person sitting across from me will say something like: *“I haven’t shared this with many people,”* or even *“I’ve never told this to anyone...”* “and then he or she will tell a story of a time either when God seemed particularly present, or on the painful flip-side, a story of a time when God seemed utterly absent.

And I always feel honored to be trusted with such experiences—but there also is a part of me that grieves that we don't feel safe enough to share our experiences and our struggles more broadly within the larger community. If we, sitting here this morning, are really part of *Christ's Church*, if we really belong to each other as intimately as different organs in the same body, then there is no place for pretense here. We have bathed in the same bath water, friends. We eat at the same supper table. We are only whole when we are together.

So I'm going to take a risk with you this morning. I'm going to tell you one of *my* stories. I know that what I'm about to tell you is odd and I don't know how you will hear it, but as the years have gone on, this story has only become more true for me.

What happened took place on a Sunday morning much like this in 1994. Our family was living in California, just a few miles from the church we attended. My decision to go to seminary would come later that year; at the time I was an elder. Our son Nate was four, Hanna was a toddler. Many of you know that getting preschoolers ready for church is often an unpredictable process. And to add to the mix on that particular Sunday, I was scheduled to be the liturgist—and I still had a few wrinkles to work out of the liturgy.

As I dashed around our house that morning, tending to hairbows and socks and printing out final copies of prayers, I kept hearing the same words over and over in my head: “*Be with me...Be with me.*” It felt like an invitation to step aside and drink in God's peace—it was enticing and at the same time it seemed completely impossible, so with the exception of one brief moment alone in my room I resisted that voice and bullied my way through the tasks that seemed necessary to get all of us out the door on time. I wasn't really still until well into the service.

It was not my turn to speak so I was sitting down, obscured from the view of the congregation behind the large central pulpit. I don't know what was being said at the time, because what I heard, again, was an interior voice.

While the service went on around me, what I heard were the words: “No one is ever going to hurt you.”

It seemed a completely preposterous thought, so I argued back with the voice in my head. “That all sounds well and good, but you can’t promise that,” I thought. “I’m a parent. I’d like to promise that to my children, but you can’t promise that.

The voice returned one more time: “I’m not a parent in the same way that you’re a parent. No one is ever going to hurt you.”

That’s it. That’s the whole story, except to say—and please hear this—that even as I sat there I knew that this assurance didn’t have *anything* to do with protection from physical pain or emotional injury. What I understood—what I heard behind the words— was that I was being told that there is life in me—there is life in each of us—that won’t be destroyed by whatever tragedy or violence we do experience. There is life stronger than any brutalization, or illness, or accident, or loss that we will ever face. There is life available to us that is stronger than *death*.

I don’t know how to explain what happened that day, but I do know that the fear in my life lessened markedly as a result. I still may be more cautious than I ought to be, but I am braver—I take more risks—I am freer—because of that voice.

Jesus said to Martha, Jesus says to each of us , *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives-and-believes-in-me will never die. Do you believe that?”*

One more brief story:

When our daughter Hanna was three she was enrolled in the seminary’s daycare. On some days her teachers would tell stories from the Bible, and sometimes Hanna would share those stories with us when she came home. One day she told us the story of Jesus raising someone from the dead. I honestly don’t remember whether it was the story of Lazarus or a different

story from one of the other gospels, but I do remember that she told it pretty well, and then turned to us when she was finished and said quite matter-of-factly, “But I just don’t believe that.”

Some part of me was secretly quite pleased that she was already engaging her critical mind, and weighing what she was being told...

but, friends, *there are times when we are confronted and claimed by a reality we can’t explain with logical propositions.*

Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives-and-believes-in-*me* will never die.

Do you believe that?”

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Life’s losses can be staggering, and they often accumulate with the years.

Some of you have been abused by someone you trusted.

Some of you are facing really difficult diagnoses.

Some of you have watched your children die.

Many of you have had to let go of partners or parents who grounded and tethered you to life—you’re having to figure out how to put the pieces of your life back together without someone you had counted on to be there.

Some of you are being forced to let go of dreams you’ve cherished, and are finding those losses overwhelming.

Each loss can diminish us, it can eat away at life’s goodness—
but Jesus says it doesn’t have to be that way.

Jesus says that there is no reeking tomb, no breaking heart from which God cannot bring life.

Jesus said to Lazarus; Jesus says to each of us:

Come out from whatever tomb confines you.

Come out...and live.