

Fifth Sunday in Lent, A
The Raising of Lazarus
John 11:1-45

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Today's wonderful scripture, the raising of Lazarus, takes seriously the experience of grief and loss – something we are going through today. In the midst of grief and loss, our Living God brings hope and the promise of a future beyond our present moment.

It's completely natural that we should be grieving in these strange times. Just think of how much we have lost, so suddenly, in this time of COVID-19. The whole world has changed in just a few days, and so much of what we took for granted has become uncertain.

It can be valuable to put words to what we have lost. By naming our losses, we bring these feelings out into the open, and it gives us the chance to move through them into a new normal, with God's help.

Let's reflect on some things we have lost. We've lost our normal routines and habits, the simple rhythm of school and work, a shopping trip, a restaurant meal, a trip to the playground. We've lost freedom and independence. We've lost social connections, the warmth of handshakes and hugs, gatherings of friends and playmates, family get-togethers, coffee hour socializing, relationships we loved and needed. We've lost our sense of safety, because now the world outside home does not feel as safe as before. We've lost a sense of security, with jobs being cut, economic indicators changing, and the systems we depend on in medicine, government, and business being severely tested. Even if we are not personally ill, we grieve for others who are, in China, Italy, Spain, New York City, Louisiana. Our hearts go out to those losing loved ones, to people without homes, to health care workers and so many other essential workers staying on the job to keep things operating.

What's different about right now is that our grieving is collective, it affects everyone. There is a sense of grief that reaches around the world, it seems to be in the air we breathe. We grieve for what used to be normal, and we also grieve in anticipation of what we fear could happen next. The future is unknown, and we hate that. We long for control, or at least the illusion of control we once enjoyed.

As uncomfortable as it may be, it is really helpful for us to name this collective grief. It's helpful to remember that the stages of grief will keep coming around to visit us in no particular order: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, acceptance, a search for meaning. When we can name these realities, we can face them, and God is here to help.

God knows what we are going through, and God is grieving with us. We see this truth in today's scripture. In the raising of Lazarus, Jesus gets deeply involved with grief, and brings to that grief the full impact of God's love and power and promise.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus – two sisters and their brother -- were dear personal friends of Jesus. They shared a home in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, and Jesus often ate meals and stayed over with them. Quite a few gospel stories happened in their home, including the famous story of Martha the busy hostess and Mary the attentive learner who sat at Jesus' feet. Their home was infused with the deep warmth of shared faith and friendship. It was a haven of safety and companionship that Jesus must have sorely needed in his challenging ministry.

But suddenly an illness invaded this place of safety and security. The word came to Jesus: "Lord, the one you love is ill." Words that strike fear today, too. The illness seemed to be both unexpected and severe, so that by the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus was already four days dead, his body sealed in a tomb.

Mary and Martha were grieving deeply for their brother. Mary was inside the house surrounded by friends, weeping, rocking, talking quietly, sitting shiva in the Jewish tradition. Martha was not able to keep still, she was pacing, watching the road. When Jesus arrived, Martha rushed out to greet him with anxious words that reflected her anger and grief. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" Perhaps she spoke more accusingly than she intended, yet Mary said the same later on. We can imagine they'd been repeating in despair: *Oh, where in the world is Jesus? Why couldn't he come and heal Lazarus before it was too late?* They were stuck on it, the way it sometimes happens in a time of sudden loss.

Not only the two sisters, but the whole village was grieving. A crowd of people had come to console them, walking alongside Mary to the tomb, to weep and wail with her, so she wouldn't be alone. Lazarus's death affected everyone.

It affected Jesus, too. In no way did Jesus stand apart from their grief. He loved this family deeply. The sisters' pain was pain for him. And he experienced his own loss, for he loved Lazarus too. Scripture says, "Jesus wept." He wept for the death of his trusted friend, for the tragedy befalling this family, for life being erased so suddenly. Jesus wept because he was fully human, and he was sad. Just sad. His heart was broken.

This is one of those moments in scripture when the world seems to stand still. Jesus is truly and fully with us in what we suffer. Just as God is fully and truly with us, right now, present with the whole world's grief today.

And then, in an instant, the scene pivots. It makes a divine shift.

Because just as Jesus is fully human, he is also fully divine. So with human tears on his face, shaking with human emotion, Jesus goes to the tomb to do what only God can do.

He cries, "Lazarus, come out!" And incredibly, unbelievably, Lazarus returns to the light of day. Returns to the arms of his loving sisters. Returns to the community of his village. Returns to his place in the circle of followers who now know for sure that Jesus is the Son of God.

All the relationships that were torn apart by death are mended. Yet this miracle is bigger than one man's life being restored. It's bigger than one family or one village being reunited. This is the climax of all Jesus' signs and miracles. It is the bridge to God's greatest work of resurrection that we will celebrate on Easter Sunday.

The good news is not just for Lazarus and Martha and Mary, but for all of us. God's work is to raise people up. God's work is to unite us across all the barriers that would separate us, and even across the final barrier of death – which is no barrier at all for God. God's work is always to unite us with our Creator and Source of Life, and keep us connected with one another in the human family, come what may.

It doesn't matter that Easter is still two weeks away -- God's resurrection is influencing lives all the time. God reaches into every place of death and despair and grief. God revives us. God retrieves us. God reunites us. God makes resurrection happen, time after time after time.

In fact, through God's grace, the rhythm of resurrection is the rhythm of our lives. We die and God raises us. We sin and God forgives us. We reach a dead end, and God makes a way where there is no way. Especially now, in these unprecedented times, God makes a way where there is no way. God keeps on raising people up to new life.

In this time of pandemic, God doesn't erase our communal grief. Instead, God grieves with us. Jesus wept back then, and God is weeping now, with all of us, because death and separation are real. Yet God's infinite power is real, too. When we are attentive, we are able to see signs of God's loving, healing presence active every single day. We can see God teasing new life out of the struggle, bringing hope out of despair.

We know that in any situation, God is able to bring something good out of the bad. It's good to give God credit when we do see it. Divine blessings are happening in tangible ways each day. We give God credit for granting patience to people living in isolation and households living closer together than they are used to... Granting courage to essential workers, and perseverance to those running food pantries and homeless shelters...

Granting insight to decision makers... We give God credit for granting compassion to neighbors, friends and family helping each other. Each personal connection and act of kindness is a sign of resurrection. A sign that while grief and loss are real, they do not own us. We belong to the God of life.

It can be easy to get stuck, staying at home, fearful thoughts tensing our muscles. When we become stuck in worry or fear, I invite all of us to allow God to do God's good work in us. Allow God to return us to the present moment, help us realize that for this moment we are safe and provided for. Help us name three things we can be genuinely thankful for, at this moment. Allow God to help us breathe, long and deep and slow, the simple gift of oxygen restoring us. Allow God to help us let go of what we cannot control, and give us just enough trust for today. Allow God to set us loose from this stuck moment and move us into the next moment with more freedom of spirit. This is God working resurrection in us.

As I close, I want to return to a couple of verses from today's scripture. I want to read them from my Occasional Services Book. You can see how creased this little book is, through years and years of use. I can't count the number of times I have read from this little book by a graveside, and read these words from the story of Lazarus: *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."*

I am the resurrection and the life. Generations of Christians have lived and died by this promise, and we live by it still today.

Today Jesus calls us out of our graves – of fear, anxiety, grief and loss – into the daylight of renewed hope and love. We experience resurrection, not as something that comes from our will or determination, but something that is God's work in us.

The name Lazarus means "God helps." And maybe this is enough for us to remember today. God helps us, today. God grieves with us and God helps us. God is leading us beyond today's grief and loss into tomorrow. And although we cannot see tomorrow, or imagine it, God holds tomorrow in God's wise and good hands and God will walk with us through every single day.

Friends, let us be gentle, with ourselves and others. God is with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.