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Lent 5
March 9, 2008
John 11:1-45

“He Whom You Love Is Ill”

“Those who want to perfect their driving technique should go to India.

A professor went to a linguistics conference in New Delhi and took a taxi from the airport.

As in New York City, Indian taxi drivers are normally Sikhs who are easily identified because they wear large turbans. As they were driving from the airport, the taxi driver kept his head turned to the back seat while carrying on a running conversation with his passenger.

Meanwhile, the professor’s knuckles were turning white from gripping the seat and the door handle as they careened around winding mountain roads and stormed through villages with cows, chickens and people scattering in all directions.

At one point, the driver said, “We Sikhs are the best drivers in the world. Do you know why,” he asked, “we Sikhs are the best drivers in the world?”

“N-n-no,” the teacher stammered. “Why are Sikhs the best drivers in the world?”

“Because,” the driver answered, “we Sikhs are not afraid to die!”¹

This joke has absolutely nothing to do with today’s sermon. I just thought you’d enjoy it. Although it does make me wonder if any of us Christians could tell the same joke!

Today, Jesus raises a man from the grave. What was it like to come back from the dead? Would our Christian punch line to this joke be, “Because we Christians come back from the dead!”

Today’s gospel story is simple enough. A very dear friend of Jesus, Lazarus, is ill. The sisters, Mary and Martha, also good friends, get

a message to Jesus. The fact that they go to this trouble tells us in and of itself that they feel the situation is grave; and therefore urgent. The message says, “*Lord, he whom you love is ill.*”

He whom you love is ill. Can’t you just feel the anxiety of this message clutch at your heart? I will never forget the evening in 1997 I was preparing my sermon and got a call that my father, who had had by-pass surgery fourteen days earlier was dying.

I ran---almost literally---grabbing a few things and my son Ian who was 15 at the time decided to go with me to his grampa’s bedside. We jumped in the car and headed for the coast to San Luis Obispo, a three hour tear clouded trip. And all the way I pounded on the steering wheel shouted furious and desperate Nos! to heaven above.

You know what I’m talking about. Death is an enemy. And anything that threatens those we love is as well. And God is responsible for the final outcome because God is God. That’s the way I always feel—right or wrong because God is God. Right?

Yet after getting the message about his friend’s illness, Jesus remains two whole days in the place where he and the disciples are staying, informing us that “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.”

So what? The language seems stilted, Jesus unfeeling, the reasoning irrelevant and the delay unforgivable to our contemporary ears. Because we know Jesus could save him.

We contemporary Christians believe Jesus is primarily here to save us from all pain and suffering.

If we believe in him we will escape pain and suffering. Yet that doesn’t square with our experience. There is a lot of pain and suffering in the world. It’s an undeniable part of existence.

A fact that Jesus’ response to the news that his dear friend is ill implies we need to accept—not because it’s God’ will—but because it is simply a given. A reality. But a reality through which God works. That puzzles us.

¹ -www.jokes.com, October 15, 2000.

As the story unfolds, we learn that Jesus not only loves Lazarus, he also loves Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters. These are his dear friends who have sheltered him and provided for him in their home when he has needed to find respite from the crowds. This is a very close bond—his second family.

We've been in their home with them. We remember Mary sitting at Jesus' feet and Martha bustling around with preparations huffy over her sister's lack of help in the kitchen.

We remember the dinner party the family gave in Jesus' honor. We are all apart of this close circle of friends.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus and you and me. These are our friends. Jesus is our friend.

Why, we ask each other, does he behave this way? Why does he delay? What excuse could he possibly have?

By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany Lazarus has already been in the tomb four days. Death has visited and done its work. Grief permeates everything. It hangs heavy on the eyelids, gripping the heart like a vise and clouding the mind like an invisible prison from which there is no reprieve.

When Martha hears Jesus is near, she leaves the house and makes her way out onto the road and walks until she meets him. Martha tells Jesus plainly, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It's a statement of fact—but she doesn't leave it there—she goes on to add, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Jesus informs her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha, like any good and faithful Jew of her day responds, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

But Jesus tells her something new: "I AM the resurrection and the life." "I AM"

When Moses stands at the burning bush and asks God, "By what name shall I tell them it is who sent me?" God says, "Tell them I AM." "Tell them I AM sent you." "I AM the one who is

and who is bringing into being, who is creating." I AM.

John's gospel is telling us, we are standing in the presence of the Living God -- even as we are faced with the reality of death and decay. In this person, our friend, Jesus is the power that brings life into being: that presence is none other than God.

Jesus says tells Martha, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and every one who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

All of us Martha's sitting here this morning—do we believe this? Let me hear you! Do you believe this? What does Martha say? She says, "Yes, Lord!" "Yes, Lord! I believe!"

What does she believe? What do we believe? "I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ---The one who OVERCOMES the world as we know it—the world where disease and death enter in to rob us of our loved ones; where sin invades our relationships and steals the goodness out of them—destroying marriages, alienating children and parents, building fear and distrust: setting cultures and religions against each other, bringing nation against nation: causing us to look only to our own and ourselves and shutting our neighbors out.

Do we believe? What do we believe?
What do we know? What do we trust?

For Martha her grief is a window into a greater truth: Life is larger than the narrow, fear dwelling, death dealing realities we experience around us---because she knows God is in it. God is present and at work in it --even when all hope feels defiantly gone. This is why Martha goes out to meet Jesus. This is why she says even in the face of her dear brother's death, "I believe."

Her sister Mary is not able to see things this way. She can't reason out anything because her grief is so engulfing she is swept away—but that's okay too. Because the mystery is that even though Jesus is God, Jesus is Jesus.

When Jesus meets Mary and she says to him, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died,” this is not a confession of faith—it’s plain and simple hurt. She feels betrayed.

Where has he been? What took him sooo long! Why didn’t he come! Mary is that side of us that depends on God’s providential care and does not and will not accept or understand why we are not rescued—why bad things happen to good people—why, even when we’ve done all the right things and been good kids death still happens.

Its not that Mary doubts Jesus—she doesn’t doubt him or she wouldn’t be bothered with him—its because she does trust him and because she does feel betrayed and makes a point of telling him so---*that* tells us she is still in relationship with God.

Have *you* thought about that? When you feel the most angry and upset and despairing, you don’t stop talking to God—or yelling and cussing at God—you do it, maybe completely unconscious of the fact that this means we do believe God is there and that God is the power that should, could, oughta—must care. So why the blankity blank doesn’t God do something about it! We want to know.

And Jesus doesn’t let us down. Jesus shows us what God does: God weeps. Jesus seeing Mary’s grief and friends in the community who are grieving with her is ‘greatly distressed.’ This is another way of saying Jesus bursts out in tears.

This is no demi god walking around among us untouched by human reality. He’s human. He’s real. He hurts. He loves them. Lazarus may well be the unidentified Beloved Disciple of whom the gospel of John speaks. Most definitely, Lazarus, people is you and I. Just as Martha and Mary are you and I. We belong to God. We are Jesus friends. The whole of creation is God’s child.

The end of this story is a miracle beyond imagining. Jesus commands the stone be removed from the tomb. He prays and then he calls Lazarus out of the tomb. Lazarus, dead

four days, is knit back together—the decay and the stench disappear and he is restored to his sisters. When he stumbles out of the tomb and into the light, Jesus commands them, “Unbind him and let him go.”

Consider what a strange thing for Jesus to say: Unbind him and let him go. As if Lazarus—Lazar—US—were somehow in bondage. But of course we are. Aren’t we? We are in bondage to death, to fear, to insecurity, to hate, to revenge, to jealousy, to lust, to desire, to addictions, to the pursuit of success or wealth or fame or failure—you fill in the blank.

Jesus’ mission is to heal and release He whom he loves—you and I and the whole world. His mission is also ours.

He can only do it by dealing with the reality of our world: death itself—and then only by living through it—suffering through it—only by walking through our pain with us, without us and beyond our consciousness—but always for us can he overcome it. He faces our fears and breaks through and brings us with him!

And he calls us to do the same. We are given permission to feel like Mary, and we are called to understand like Martha and we are called to rise above death like Lazarus.

This is the last Sunday of Lent. May the events of Holy Week and Easter help us journey with our Savior into the depths of our human darkness and on beyond into the new reality of the life, the power of life he brings us through resurrection to overcome the world: now and always.