

SERMON TEXT FOR LENT 5A

PREACHED APRIL 2, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: John 11.1-45; Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6-11

Today's gospel lesson involves a rather large cast of characters: Jesus, his **disciples**, a group of **mourners**, and a **family** that plays a fairly **prominent** role in scripture. That family includes three **siblings**: Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

The first time we meet Mary and Martha in scripture, Jesus is visiting their home. If you recall, **one** of the sisters is busy preparing the **meal** while the other is **sitting at Jesus' feet** taking in every word. If you're like me, you can never remember **which** is which. Well, it was **Mary** who was preparing the meal, the one who was deeply **disturbed** because she was doing all the **work** while, seemingly, her sister **Martha** was doing **nothing**.

What Martha **was**, in fact, **doing** in that instance was **listening to Jesus**. And we **know** that because of the way she reacts to Jesus in **this** story. Even though she and her sister greet Jesus – when he finally **does arrive** – the same way (*"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"*), it is **Martha** who ends up being the only person in John's gospel who **confesses** that Jesus is *"the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."* Clearly, Martha **had listened** to Jesus, saw his mighty signs, and **witnessed** with her life that Jesus is the Christ, God's chosen one.

This is a very **long** story, full of great detail and a number of scene changes. So it is helpful to break this story down into **scenes** or by **theme**. I have chosen to do the **latter**.

So, there are, I think, **three major themes** to this story. The first is **heartache**. This is not just the heartache of **Lazarus' death** - which was undoubtedly **significant**. There is also the **particular** heartache of Jesus' **delay**. Whatever his **motives**, Jesus' delay in coming to see this family (whom he clearly **loved**) at such a crucial time only **intensified** the pain of the sisters' loss. Both Martha and Mary **begin** their interactions with Jesus by sharing their **distress** and perhaps even their **disappointment** - that Jesus has been delayed. Their pain, disappointment and hurt are **evident**.

The **second** element of this story is **miracle**, the miracle of Jesus bringing the **dead** back to life. When Jesus initially declares that Lazarus will be raised, Martha assumes he is speaking about the promised resurrection of **all** believers at the **end of time**: *"Yes, Lord, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."* But Jesus means something **else**, something **more**, something **immediate** - contending that the life **he** offers is not merely an **end-times** promise but something that makes a difference **here and now**. And that promise provokes from Martha the **confession** that Jesus is Messiah.

The miracle promised earlier in the story comes to **fruition** when Jesus comes to Lazarus' tomb. Jesus is walking into a rather uncomfortable situation. Not only had **both sisters** confronted him with their disappointment, but the **crowd** also voices their belief that if Jesus had **cared** more, he would have come **sooner** and thereby **averted** this tragedy.

Yet in the very midst of this disappointment and doubt, Jesus **surprises** them all - **first** with his command to remove the stone to Lazarus' tomb and, **second**, with his call for Lazarus to come out. And Lazarus does.

This is what **we** call a **miracle**, but in John's Gospel it is referred to by scholars as a **sign** – something that reveals the character and commitment of God to God's children. What is **interesting** about this sign is that it provokes **very different reactions**. Because of what they saw and heard that day, John tells us, *"Many of the Jews ... who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, **believed** in him."* But in the verses that **follow** those of our appointed text, this same miracle/sign prompts those who oppose him **to plot his death**. In this way, Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead was the **catalyst** for his **own** arrest, suffering, crucifixion and death.

As if this story didn't have **enough** to unpack, there is yet a third theme to consider: **invitation**. That is, even while the action to raise Lazarus from the dead is clearly and decisively **Jesus'**, he **invites** those around him to **participate**. The bystanders are the ones who roll away the stone from the tomb's entrance. And after praying, Jesus instructs Lazarus to come out of the tomb. He does, but he is still wrapped in his burial clothes. *"Unbind him and let him go,"* Jesus invites them.

Truth be told, Jesus did not **have** to issue that command. He might have gone over to Lazarus **himself** and unwrapped him, then given him a heartfelt and congratulatory smack on the back on his return from the dead. But rather than linger in the limelight of his miracle, **Jesus invites those around to get involved**, to **play a part** in seeing this miracle move forward.

I think the same is true with **us**. We are not only called to be **witnesses** of God's action in our lives, but also to be **changed** by what we see. We are invited into the **ongoing reality** of what God is doing. **God does the miracle, but God also gives us a part to play as it unfolds in our lives and in the world around us.**

Martha says to Jesus about her brother Lazarus, *"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."* But Jesus corrects her: resurrection is not something reserved just for Easter morning. It is not for some day way off in the future. **Resurrection is now.** *"I am the resurrection and the life,"* Jesus

says. This is more than just a **coming reality**; it is a **present reality**. Anytime Jesus arrives, the dead are set loose.

Jesus is present with us in the waters of **baptism**. Jesus is with us in **bread and wine**: *"This is my body, my blood given for you."* Jesus is present with us through the **Word**. So the good news is, we don't have to wait until **Easter** to see the risen Christ. Even here, and now, in the darkness of Lent, steam-rolling our way to and through Holy Week, **Christ is with us**. AMEN