

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, March 26, 2023

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John 11:1-12:8

The first thing both Mary and Martha say to Jesus in the gospel lesson for today, is “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

They bring up a very important and often expressed problem: “Jesus, if you had been here then my friend would not have died of cancer. Jesus, where were you when my family was fracturing? Where were you when someone was shot in my community? Where were you during the holocaust in Germany, the genocide in Rwanda, the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, or the Uyghur Muslims in China. Where were you during the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade?”

Notice, Jesus does not respond to either of them by talking about some vast, grand plan. He does not imply that somehow your friend dying or your family breaking apart is somehow planned by God to bring about some higher purpose. He never says that the holocaust was somehow okay, part of God’s plan, that genocide and the ethnic cleansing and the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade were somehow okay because they served some greater good.

Nor does he tell us that the bad things that happen in this world are really our own fault, a result of our sins and of our fallenness.

Indeed, a lot of the suffering in the world comes from the evil things that people do. Also, we would be able to deal a lot better with the tragedies and suffering that come from sheer random chance if we were kinder to each other.

But Jesus doesn't even mention any of that. What does he say? He says, "Where have you laid him?"

Jesus wants to be near us when bad things happen, when we grieve.

Then Mary and the others say to him, "Lord, come and see."

What a heartbreaking thing to say! Because, all through the Gospel of John, people have been telling each other to "come and see" Jesus. "Come and see the light of the world. Come and see the Word of God through whom all things were made, by whom the love of God is etched into the foundations of existence. Come and see the Light of the world which demands that people be treated with dignity and creation with respect is woven into the fabric of reality. "Come and see."

What's more, the word "see" and the word "know" in the Gospel of John are the same word. The Greek word, "Oida," same root as the word "video" means both "see" and "know."

"Come and see, come and know, come and discover, come and grow, come and wonder at things you had not dreamed of, not since the day you were born."

That's what people say about Jesus, "Come and see."

But now, Mary and the others say to Jesus, "Come and see." "We have come to see you, Jesus. Now, you come and see us, Jesus. Come and see the tomb where we are all headed in the end. Come and see how death tears us."

Then Jesus weeps. That's what he does when bad things happen. That's where he is.

Jesus weeps with us when our friends die. He weeps with us when our families fracture. He weeps at the holocaust, the genocide, the ethnic cleansing, the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade.

We also weep with each other when our friends die. We weep with each other when our families fracture. We weep over a shooting in our community, over the holocaust, the genocide, the ethnic cleansing, the slave trade. We are the followers of Jesus, the Body of Christ, so we weep too.

But Jesus doesn't just weep. He also does something about it. We followers of Jesus do something about it too.

Jesus gets to the tomb. He says, "Take away the stone."

Martha, being of a practical inclination, says, "Lord, it already stinks. He's been in there, dead, for four days."

We also would rather not open our tombs. Often, we would rather not share the loss or emptiness or pain over the death of a love done. Makes us look to vulnerable, to out of control. We may not want to look at our own family dynamics, the behaviors and resentments that tear our families apart. They're not pretty. We would prefer not to see the devastating price and the crushing societal causes of a shooting in our community. We would prefer not to deal with what made it possible for the holocaust to happen.

Here's how the holocausts and genocides and ethnic cleansings happen. People lie. They lie and other people lap up their lies. Lap it up, because it's easier to blame our problems on those people over there who are different, who are a threat, who are dangerous, who are inferior to us, who are, in fact, not really human. It's easier to hate them than it is to do the hard work of acknowledging our own sin, and learning to live together. We had rather not roll that stone away, and see the ongoing effects of the Atlantic slave trade.

Cause it stinks.

But Jesus says, "Didn't I tell you that you would see the glory of God?"

What do we come to church for? To see our friends? To receive forgiveness? To be touched by something greater than ourselves? To see the glory of God?

This is where you will see the glory of God: in the tomb, when we roll away the stone from the tomb.

Martha is brave. Martha is courageous. So she has her people roll away the stone.

Are we willing to be brave like Martha and Mary? Are we willing to roll away the stone?

Jesus stands in front of the tomb and calls, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus comes out, all bound up in his grave clothes, all bound up by the power of death and the fear of death. Jesus says, “unbind him and let him go.”

Jesus comes to us, every day, in our tombs, where we stink. Jesus calls us by name, just as he will call us by name some day from out of our graves. Jesus will give us life.

Now, the Gospel lesson ends here, but the story does not. I have to tell you the rest.

The religious authorities of Jesus’s day hear about Jesus raisin Lazarus from the dead, and this is when they decide to have him killed. Because if people believe that the love of God in Jesus is beyond death, they will cause a ruckus, they will disrupt the careful balance with the powers that wield death. And the powers that wield death, that is, Rome, will come and kill everyone.

So, because of the power of death, the authorities decide to kill Jesus.

Now, you would think, perhaps, that Mary and Martha will tell Jesus, “Keep your distance for a while, please, it’s getting too dangerous to be near you.” But they don’t do that. They are brave, so brave that they do the exact opposite. They have Jesus over to dinner.

We also have Jesus to dinner, every Sunday. Even though we know that Jesus’s love will disrupt any power of death, any power of injustice in the world. We have Jesus to dinner even though we know, sooner or later, it’s going to cause trouble.

Moreover, at that dinner, Mary knows Jesus is going to the cross. She does not know about the resurrection. As always in the Gospel of John, we don’t know all the answers, we don’t see the whole picture. But she sees enough. She sees enough to anoint him with precious oil, for his burial, because she loves him.

Our Hebrew Scripture for today says talks about God breathing God’s Spirit into people, into us. Can we let God’s Spirit move in us so that we are brave like Martha, so that we love like Mary?

Thanks be to God.