

Now.
JOHN 11:17-30, 32-44
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
26 AUGUST 2018

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, '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 this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When 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.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ... When 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.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus 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 for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I 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.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The 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.'

When considering the relative attainability of domestic tranquility, each of us, no matter how young, should know the qualitative space that lies between the following two statements:

(statement one) *put up the dishes* and
(statement two) *put up the dishes, now.*

I am a slow learner and a slow walker, which was a problem when, as a teenager, I was responsible for the dishes. "Put up the dishes," my mother would say, and I would take my time—finish the chapter, or maybe the book. Meander from room to room thinking on life and chatting on the phone. I assumed, for far too long, that my mother's desire for an empty

dishwasher was stronger than her desire that I be the one to empty it, that the dishwasher would get unloaded in some future that didn't necessarily involve me.

Around the time I turned 15 "put up the dishes" turned permanently into "put up the dishes, *now*." It took a few rounds but eventually I learned that "*now*" made all of the difference, that if I was going to have a life, books to read, a house in which to wander, it was critical that I get to moving *now* and empty the dishwasher *now* or the phone would be unhooked and my opportunities for high-school happiness would be greatly diminished *now*.

"*Now*" was the interpretive key. I just had to recognize it, and then *do it*. *Now*.

If you've grown up around the church at Easter-time you've heard the story of Lazarus and his tomb. It's one of the greats, always in syndication. Lazarus was dead, and Jesus raised him. Amen, hallelujah, let's get to lunch.

But I've got some time to fill, and this text seems particularly important for, well, *now*.

The pericope in total is 57 verses (we only read about half of it), one of the longest single accounts in John's gospel. All of the elements of a good story are there: love, conflict, death, and a happyish ending. But our retellings, brief and sparse, tend to leave out most of what gives the story its drama. Consider, for instance, the characters not named "Lazarus."

There's Jesus of course, whose early wonder-working drew adoring crowds but whose recent stunts—walking on water and healing the man born blind—have raised the ire of the religious authority. The folks in charge are concerned that Jesus is a political threat, and they have him on the hook for blasphemy. In chapter 10 he'd just barely escaped a stoning, only to just barely escape arrest. He's safe across the Jordan when he receives a dispatch from Bethany—Bethany which is dangerously close to Jerusalem—Lazarus, his beloved friend, is sick.

Then there's Martha and Mary, the sisters who dispatched Jesus. The bulk of this text is *their* story. By the time Jesus arrives their brother is four days dead. Martha approaches Jesus first, and volleys with the Rabbi about his absence (more on that later).

Having said her piece, she retreats. It's worth remembering that, despite Martha's profound confession, she has no idea what's to come. Her brother is as dead after her confrontation with Jesus as he was before.

Jesus is still Just outside of Bethany when Mary goes to greet him. Her words echo her sister's, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus inquires after the tomb, presumably to pay his respects. "Come and see," Mary says. The dead man lies dead in his tomb. Beyond healing, beyond hope. All there is to do now is look on it.

It's clear from their interaction that Martha and Mary love Jesus, that during Lazarus's illness they held onto hope that he might've come and healed their brother. Though wracked with anger

and grief they approach Jesus with tenderness and respect. The three will grieve together. Whatever expectations they had for Jesus in Lazarus's life seem now to have vanished.

There's no ambiguity in the text. Lazarus is dead. Dead as a doornail, dead as a coffin-nail, dead as the seal to the cavernous tomb. Where once was their brother was now only a cave and a stench.

That's what makes Lazarus's resurrection so incredible. Folks believed in those days that the soul lingered around for three days after death. But four? Four was beyond redemption, beyond hope. Lazarus was dead.

Until he wasn't.

But that's not what interests me, at least in this reading. The interpretive key to this text, that which makes it relevant to us—to those of us who have longed for resurrections, for life in spite of deaths both great and small—is way back in verse 25.

In her confrontation with Jesus Martha seems to ask for something—though she, nor we readers know what—“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Jesus seizes the opportunity for conversation with grieving Martha. He doesn't spout off platitudes about God closing a door and opening a window, or needing another angel in heaven. He doesn't tell her that everything happens for a reason.

He makes an assertion. Cryptically, at first, offering whatever comfort comes with the knowledge that Lazarus will indeed rise again. Martha receives Jesus' announcement exactly as warmly as she would a Hallmark card, “yeah yeah,” she says, “I believe it, the future will come and I'll see my brother, on the last day.” It's not hard to see through her begrudging confession: *But I want him back now.*

What comes next is the rhetorical zenith of the Gospel of John. Faced with his grieving friend Jesus turns Martha's expectations on their head, providing hope—*now*—where before there was only grief: “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.”

We almost never preach this part of the story, save at funerals and gravesides. It's a shame, really, because Jesus speaks powerfully into the present: Mary's and Martha's and ours. “I am the resurrection and the life” is not an affirmation about some ambiguous future, but rather the power of life in Christ today. The power of life *now*.

Jesus affirms something absolutely central to our faith that has long been forgotten. Christianity is not about temperature settings in the afterlife. We do not confess Jesus Christ as the living Lord to meet our deductible on eternal life insurance. Contrary to the prevalent view, Jesus's promise is particularly important to our way of being *now*.

It should shape how we live and move and have our being, how we act and think and vote and pray.

“I AM the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says. *I AM*. Note it, grammarians: the present tense.

It’s the difference, on an existential level, between the following two statements (1) *put up the dishes* and (2) *put up the dishes NOW*.

Which is another way of saying that, because Jesus is our life *now*, our resurrection *now*, how we live *now* matters.

Martha affirms deep belief in Jesus, as does Mary. They see an ineffable truth about his being that many in the Gospel have missed. But for them, at least at first, it is a promise only for the future. Lazarus *will be* raised. Things *will be* better then. Later. On the Last Day.

But Jesus speaks to the living. Now don’t hear me wrong. Jesus calls into the grave, and his word affects life. Discipleship gives us the confidence that nothing, even the tomb, can separate us from the love of God, that in our living and in our dying we are God’s. But this story about far more than a dead man walking. It’s about life for all of us, resurrection for all of us *now*.

I AM is here *NOW*. The God of Israel incarnate in Christ alive by the power of the Spirit is among us as our resurrection, our light, and our life *now*. In all of our darkness, all of our tombs, all of our joys and sorrows, we are not alone. But if we are to live, we have to act.

A million things happen between Martha’s confession and Jesus standing before Lazarus’s tomb. For one, Jesus weeps, overcome by the reality of death and grief, overcome by the sure knowledge that Lazarus’s raising will lead to his own crucifixion. It is a beautiful moment that bespeaks the full humanity of the incarnate Christ, the grief at death that consumes even God.

Then of course, after 38 verses, Jesus stands before Lazarus’s tomb and commands the dead man to live. And he does. Jesus spoke the impossible into possibility. He took a coffin nail and made it a man.

We know that part but that’s not all. Sitting here together it’s about time we unload the dishwasher, we consider the consequences of a present-tense Lord.

Lazarus comes ambling out of the tomb clothed in death. That’s a problem, and it requires action. “Unbind him,” says the living Lord whose cross looms large over the scene, “let him go.”

Now.

Jesus’ demand echoes forward. We, the gathered community, privileged to hear the Word of God, are still responsible for removing the grave clothes of our brothers and sisters, for cracking open the tombs of oppression, of injustice, of hate and suspicion to the light of life and resurrection. *Now*.

This isn't just about *the big one*—the tombs that consume us. Life and resurrection is about the stuff of our daily living. About the places we have lost hope, the places our culture, our society, our church has lost its life and vitality. It's about our slavishness to a culture that insists we can never be enough, have enough, do enough, and our commitment to a God whose life enables to touch eternity in our present.

To those consumed by the stench of society's graveclothes, of democracy's failures, of tyranny's power, the Living Lord calls the gathered community—the witnesses to *true* life (us!), “unbind him.”

In the places where we have wounded, *we* are to offer healing. In the places where, by our prejudice, our dislikes, our selfishness, we have bound up our brothers, *we* are to unbind, to loosen the robes of oppression.

NOW.

And even if it wasn't us, even if we aren't culpable, guilty of shackling our sister, it is our call to work for her freedom, to reach out and remove the robes of the tomb so that she may see the light of the resurrection.

We are called to go find those tombs, those places, wherever they might be, where a community grieves, we are called to touch death, and to proclaim a power beyond.

Because death may have its way, death may have its power. But God is more powerful still. And God calls us *now*. Today. *I Am* the life and the resurrection and the bread and the vine. *I AM present in and through trials and tombs. Now. Get to work.*

Lazarus found himself dead. He was raised by the power of God, but given the freedom to walk thanks to the gathered community.

Jesus, who by raising Lazarus ensures that his own end (and by it a world's beginning), is calling and that means we better get to unbinding, making the world more free, more bright, more alive.

And we better get to it *now*, because our future — better yet our present — depends on it.

—*Leigh Stuckey*