

John 11:1-45

Encountering Jesus: Martha, Mary and Lazarus

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The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture

How will *you* respond to the life-giving power of God in Christ? This is what Jesus in our fourth gospel is asking each person he encounters. We have spent this long, long month of March in the Gospel of John, where we saw curious Nicodemus encounter Jesus by the cover of night, then disappear confused. We learn later in the gospel that his initial confusion turned out to be Nicodemus' first step toward recognizing Jesus' true power. Next, we saw the weary-with-life Samaritan Woman encounter Jesus at the well, who offered her Living Water and she drank it, metaphorically (Remember we are in John, here). Immediately she shared this gift with her fellow Samaritans, no longer concerned about what they thought of her. Last Sunday we saw Jesus give the man born blind sight for the very first time, seeing what he had never seen before. Jesus' encounter gave him new eyes, new vision: a startling, disorienting, and controversial change for everyone involved.

In each story we see the endless variety of ways that the life-giving power of Christ can enter our lives as individuals and as a community of believers. In each story we learn yet another dimension of how God so loved, and so loves the world—including you and me. Today is our fourth and final story in this series of encounters in John. On full display on that day in Bethany was a kind of love unknown that wielded a power they had never seen before. What about this day? How will *you* respond to the life-giving power of God in Christ? I think Jesus still wants to know.

Sermon

Long ago, back before Bob and I had children, we used to spend several weeks each summer bicycling the backroads of the Northwest. We rode our bikes through California, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. Out there in the wild west ranchers graze their cattle on open ranges. Their spreads of land are so vast, instead of fences they used cattle guards on the roads to contain their cattle. These cattle guards are a series of 8 or 10 railroad ties which extend across the road. Cattle will not simply not walk across them. They are also a serious hazard to the hapless cyclist who might be coasting down a hill at a good clip. If your bike wheel crosses over them, especially loaded with 50 pounds of gear in your rear packs, your rims could sustain serious damage and your lovely cross-country bicycle tour could end abruptly, in the middle of nowhere.

Well, not long into our western adventures, we discovered an odd phenomenon—something we started to call “fake cattle guards.” From a distance they looked just like the real thing, but they were not metal rail road ties spaced about 4 inches apart, they were simply white lines painted on the road the exact width and distance as the hoof crunching, rim breaking kind. We wondered about this, being ignorant suburban kids, and so one day in a small café we asked one of the locals about them who seemed amused by our question and happy to enlighten us. He explained that once a cow experiences the real barrier, which they

cannot and will not cross, then the painted lines do just as good a job. They see the painted lines but they think they are just like the real ones. Yes: Cows are corralled and contained successfully by an illusion of danger which is nothing more than several white lines painted on the asphalt.

How stupid, we say. Well, they're only cows. Tell me, dairy farmers—if cows were much smarter, you probably wouldn't like it. It's a good thing those cows form a memory and opinion and never budge from it. But what about us? How often do we form an opinion, make a decision, or cast judgment about ourselves or someone else and get stuck right there. How often do we paint fake cattle guards, or parameters around ourselves, or other people? Fake because they are not God's doing. Fake and false, because they are not there in God's eyes—only in ours. How big a pasture do we give God to release the life-giving power of Christ to use that “bristle brush” on our false and sometimes life-choking boundaries (to extend Dan's bristle brush metaphor from last Sunday's sermon).

Sometimes it takes a crisis to open our eyes to these false boundaries we create. We get so bound up in the everyday, our ruts and routines can blind us and bind us. The story of Jesus' encounter with Martha, Mary and Lazarus shines a light on a family and a village in crisis. Doesn't a crisis force us to discover what we *really* believe? It forces us to confront what really matters. And all of a sudden we see all that we hold dear in a different light. For Martha and Mary their crisis is the death of one man, their brother. It is not a pandemic. However, the threat of death by plague, famine, or bloody tribal war was never far off in the lives of our biblical friends. Perhaps that is why they took death very seriously. And we see in this story that Jesus did too. Death, even one death, mattered to Jesus. And still does. Our story's crisis centers on the death of one beloved person named Lazarus. At his death, the ground under Martha and Mary shifts. We know how that feels.

Did you notice how everyone has an opinion about when and how Jesus should handle this crisis? There are lines they think he should not cross. Others criticize him for failing to take certain steps. And then in his own perfect timing, he performs a miracle beyond the bounds of their wildest expectations: Jesus raises his very dead friend Lazarus, already four days in the tomb. All were shocked. Even his closest disciples, even Martha, who had just confessed her belief in Jesus, and Mary. In the narrative world of John's gospel, raising Lazarus became the kiss of death for Jesus. He crossed a line with the raising of Lazarus. From that day on, the religious authorities planned to put him to death. They could see that Jesus was dangerous. His life-giving power knew no bounds. If anyone really started believing in him, who knows what might happen.

What about us? Do we live like we really believe? Do we live like we really “be-love” our death-defying Lord? For Jesus and people in Jesus' time “I believe” meant “I give my heart to.” The premodern meanings of the word “believe” involved a level of self that was way deeper and more multi-dimensional than the intellect, as Marcus Borg points out in his book, *The Heart of Christianity*. He explains, ‘I believe’ meant, ‘to hold dear, to prize, to give one's loyalty, to commit one's self’... Most simply, ‘to believe’ meant ‘to love.’ Indeed, the English words

‘believe’ and ‘beloved’ are related. What we believe is what we be-love. Faith is about loving God.”¹ That’s what we need to remember when we hear that word “believe.” To believe in Christ, is to “be-love” Christ. If we “be-love” or “believe” in Christ, that means we are in relationship with the one who is the resurrection and the life.

Choosing to choke ourselves off, choosing to separate ourselves from the Divine Love we know as Jesus, is our only real spiritual death. We know what that feels like here in this life. Our range gets very small and the air close. We are not at home on that tiny range at all. Instead we start to choke ourselves, and feel so closed in, it almost feels like being buried alive in a tomb. Sometimes this happens because of what others do to us: like when we are misunderstood, disrespected, shamed, or dismissed. It happens when we are forced to deny our true, God-given sexual orientation or our true gender identity. When these kinds of things happen, our lives can feel like a tomb that Jesus came to call us to come out from. Perhaps it feels ironic to talk about being isolated and cut off spiritually when we are in our third week of this thing we never heard of before, but now is part of our everyday vernacular--this absolutely necessary COVID-19 fighting practice called “social distancing.” Yet perhaps this period of “social distancing” could also be seen as an unusual and unexpected opportunity for us to engage in our “spiritual deepening.” Stay with me—metaphorically, just a little while longer.

Let’s see how the Lazarus story can shine a light on the various tombs we make for ourselves. We have so many ways of choosing death. In the responses of the people in this story who were swept up into this crisis situation, we can see some of the ways that we also choose spiritual death. Ways that we choose to separate ourselves from Jesus. This story mirrors some of the ways we project our own limited world view onto what God can accomplish. Ways that we create false boundaries around God’s love and grace.

Let’s begin with the disciples: Did you hear the way they warned Jesus it might not be safe to go near Jerusalem where Lazarus was? They implored him *to play it safe*, to think defensively, strategically. To this Jesus replies: hiding is not possible for those who are in the light. We must go as we are led, and trust God with the details. Yes: there is risk if we place our trust in Christ. God will surely call us out into situations where we will suffer. If we choose always to play it safe over the call to reach out to those who are in need, we are choosing death.

Then, when Jesus tried to explain to the disciples what he must go and do, the disciples chose *to deny* what was really happening. If he has fallen asleep, he will be fine, they said. Jesus had to spell it out for them: Lazarus is dead. Denial is a lethal killer. In Jesus we are given the ultimate confidence that the One who is Life and Light overpowers all darkness and death. But still we turn to food, alcohol, and drugs to block pain. As a nation we avoid looming problems with our social safety net, our healthcare system, our shrinking middle class, and the death of our planet by global change. The data is there and the ingenuity to make positive change are there--but when we chose instead to deny and disclaim, we are choosing death. There is no problem which God will refuse to enter with us, and bring us through.

Martha and Mary reproach Jesus for taking too long, for not responding to their crisis in the way they thought he should. They both say in this story the same phrase, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (vs. 21 and 32) They wanted to tell Jesus what he should do—they thought they knew best. “why didn’t you answer our prayers the way we asked you to?” Don’t we fall into this trap, too? We’re so sure we know—especially those of us who think of ourselves as problem-solvers, tend *to think we know best*, if only God would get with the program. This kind of praying can also kill us.

What about Lazarus? What can we learn about Jesus from Lazarus? We know next to nothing about him. Nor does he say anything in this story. You have to wonder, if Jesus loved him so much--why don’t we hear about him in the other gospels? Biblical scholars love to speculate on his identity. Some even conjecture that Lazarus is the beloved disciple. This is the kind of puzzle that keeps New Testament scholars up at night. But for you and me, I invite you *to imagine yourself in the place of Lazarus*. I do this, because this is how much Jesus loves every one of us. We can only speculate what angered, troubled, and seized Jesus to the point of weeping. We know that he chose to enter into our pain, our suffering, the darkness of death. We see the undeniable connection between suffering and love. “See how he loved him!” (v.36)

Here’s the good news I see in this story. There *is* a balm in Gilead. It is never too late. No valley is too deep. Four days dead, you would think it’s over. But God does not. Christ calls out to us with a loud voice, “come out!” Come out of your grave. Come out of your self-imposed prison. Come out of that tiny pasture bounded on all sides with fake cattle-guards. Play it safe, deny the truth, tell God what needs to be done, forget how much Christ loves me: I know I have fallen into all of these God-limiting traps. That is why Christ weeps with us and for us. Christ does not deny the pain of death. It is scary and lonely. Jesus knows that first hand.

One final short, but essential lesson this story teaches: We cannot do it on our own. We need God *and* we need one another. Jesus did not roll the stone away himself, nor did he unbind Lazarus himself. He asked those nearby to do these things. The raising of Lazarus involved a number of people working together. Who is God calling you to unbind? Yes, we need one another to release the power of Christ within us. The power of the one who overcame death with life. We belong to a God who frees us to fly through the air on our bikes, flat out, without fear of broken rims, or constrained by false boundaries. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering A Life of Faith*, (Harper San Francisco, CA, 2003), pp.40-41.