

Can These Bones Live

By Kate Satterstrom

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John 11:1-45 NRSV

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb 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. The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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 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 upward 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."

Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

One of my favorite things about working with youth is the questions that they ask. Sometimes they are so naive and innocent, it serves as a good reminder to make sure we are building a solid foundation of faith. Other times they ask unknowingly deep and profound questions that many adults wouldn't dare to ask. And I am overwhelmed with gratitude that I get to shepherd them through their wonderings. And then other times they are conniving and try to come up with questions to stump us. These are some of my favorite questions because they think they've got you in a corner and if you're able to come up with an answer you can blow their minds. One question I've been asked many times is "are there zombies in the Bible?" Whenever this question is asked, they are always cheeky and think they have outwitted us. My response is "if a zombie is someone who has died and then comes back to life, let me tell you about Lazarus!" So, whenever I hear the story of the raising of Lazarus I think of zombies.

If you too have ever wondered about zombies in the Bible, you might be familiar with this scripture. Though, this scripture might also stand out to you if you grew up having to memorize Bible verses for Church School. The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35 which is "Jesus wept". So, if you were looking for easy ways to complete the task of memorizing scripture this too might be familiar to you. But today's sermon is not about zombies or about ways to outsmart the system of memorizing scripture. Today is about death and hope.

So, with all that said, we enter into today's text. Our text shares the story between friends; friends who have become like family and love each other dearly. Mary and Martha – who we know from when Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume and then mopped it up with her hair, and Martha who complained when Mary wasn't doing enough work in hosting people for a gathering at their house— Mary and Martha send for their dear friend Jesus when their brother Lazarus becomes critically ill. As word reaches Jesus he is in the midst of his ministry and it takes him two days to set off towards Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are waiting. By the time Jesus—*finally*—arrives, we learn that Lazarus has died four days previous, and the burial rites and rituals have already been performed. Jesus is too late to say his goodbyes. Jesus is too late to help in Lazarus' medical care. Jesus is too late to perform any miracle that had been longed for. Jesus is too late.

As he arrives on the outskirts of town Martha runs out to Jesus. She reminds him how late he is. Jesus does what he is known for and proclaims promises of new life in his ever-unclear language looping

present and future realities into a head spinning web of hope. He says “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Do you believe this?” and Martha declares without hesitation “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” A bold and important proclamation. She is one of only two people to make this Christological confession in the gospels. In the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke it is Peter who responds to Jesus asking, “who am I?” by saying “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” But in John it is Martha who makes this proclamation. Martha, a well-respected, beloved member of Jesus’ inner circle, and a woman. This is no little statement, but a bold declaration that should not be overlooked or minimized.

Martha then goes to get her sister Mary who runs to meet Jesus followed by the guests who have come to mourn Lazarus and comfort the sisters. Mary sees Jesus and falls at his feet in grief. And like her sister she brazenly chides Jesus for not coming in time while simultaneously implying the most sincere and faithful trust in Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Surrounded by Mary who is weeping and the trail of weeping mourners who followed her, Jesus is overcome by emotion. He asks Mary to bring him to Lazarus’ tomb and he too joins in the weeping. I want to pause here because this is one of the most beautiful examples of Jesus’ humanity and godliness coming together. As we make our way towards Holy Week and the cross, we emphasize the Godliness of Jesus—his power, transcendence, fortitude—but days before he enters into Jerusalem for Passover he is overcome with emotion at the death of Lazarus and sorrow of the community who loved him. Jesus weeps out of love for his dear friend and genuine heartbreak for all the grief that surrounds his death. The deep humanity of Jesus grieves, and the overwhelming godliness of Jesus loves, and in this one moment we get a glimpse into the fullness of who Jesus is. Jesus stands in the midst of hope of what is to come while also the brokenness of the current state of things.

The whole group of people make their way to the tomb of Lazarus; a common thing to do in the midst of mourning. But Jesus surprises everyone in attendance and demands that the stone sealing off the tomb be moved to open it up. Ever practical Martha asks Jesus “are you sure!?” saying “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days”. A glimpse into how unorthodox this request is while also getting in one last dig by reminding him how late he is in arriving. Jesus pushes back saying “I thought you believed in me?!” And with this last reminder the stone is rolled to the side—a scene that very much foreshadows the coming death of Jesus and the mourning at his tomb.

With the stone rolled to the side and the tomb opened Jesus cries out loudly “Lazarus comes out”. And in the most zombie like part of this story, Lazarus—very much alive—comes out with his feet, hands, and face bound in strips of cloth. Jesus commands “unbind him and let him go.” And because of what they saw, this moment stands as a marker when many came to believe in Jesus.

Wow! This is a crazy story filled with all the emotions and all the twists and turns. But this story stands as much more than a story of people coming to faith in Jesus as the promised messiah. This story stands at an important point in our Lenten journey into Holy Week. This miracle reminds us that Jesus is able to make a way where there seems to be no way. When the options have run out, when the proclamations have been made, when the final nail is in the coffin, that is not the end of the story. With Jesus there is another way. With Jesus there is hope in a different ending.

Practically, this sets us up well for Holy Week and the impending death of Jesus. Jesus is planting the seed for everyone who witnessed Lazarus' miraculous return to life, that death does not mean finality when it comes to Jesus. Death is coming, but Jesus exists in a world where death does not get the final say. Like a teacher handing out a study guide before the big test, Jesus is saying remember when you see death on the exam, remember that that is not the end point, remember when it comes to me, death does not get the final word. And so we are grateful to Jesus for this remember that despite the impending man hunt, betrayal, torture, and death to come, there is hope that stands on the other side of Holy Week; there is hope that Easter is on the horizon.

Beyond Holy Week and Easter, though, this story reminds us that our faith in Jesus is filled with promise and hope. Jesus not only meets Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in their darkest moment, but Jesus too meets us in our moments of heartaches and hopelessness; when we can see no other possibility. Jesus meets us in our dark places. When we feel bound up he calls for us to come out and experience something new; possibility where possibility never existed before.

It is hard to watch the news or read the paper and not feel trapped by hopelessness. Or to hear that another friend has been diagnosed with a medical "something". Or to receive word that work is going to have to make some structural changes. Or being forced to squeeze more out of a dollar that already seems stretched too thin. These things are the things that keep us up at night, the things that seem so overwhelming we can't see a way past them. And yet Jesus meets us in those moments, stands with us in our heartache, grief, anxiety, and discomfort. Jesus mourns with us. But that is not the end. Jesus then points us to a hope we didn't know was possible. There is something beyond the suffocating bindings that fix us to the spot we are in.

Veronice Miles says in her commentary on this text "resurrection confronts us as an urgent call, beckoning us to consider the possibility that those whom our world deems socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally dead might live into a new reality. We pray for the power of resurrection in the lives of persons and communities bound by graveclothes of war, genocide, poverty, disease, dis-ease, systematic abuse, and systematic oppression."

If you are anything like me and anything like Mary and Martha, it is hard not to come up with our own timeline, our own preferred outcome. As Jesus meets us in our need, we too lead the conversations with reminders that he is too late, that he didn't do enough, that our possibilities are quickly diminishing. But so too does Jesus open doors we didn't know existed, he rolls back tomb stones we didn't think to move. Jesus calls to us, beckoning us out of the darkness and surrounds us with community that helps us to remove the graveclothes that bind us. Jesus' gift of hope to Lazarus is his gift to us that the script is being rewritten to include beauty and hope that were previously never part of our story.

I have one last thing I want to point out as we head into Holy Week and Palm Sunday next week. Our scripture for today stops at John 11:45 where it says, "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him." In the *very* next verses, it says "But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So, the chief priests and the pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'what are we to do'" and one in that meeting says, "you do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed". So, it is out of this miraculous healing and display of hope that the decree for Jesus' arrest comes.

It is with hope and trepidation we continue in our Lenten journey and give thanks to God who saw a way when there was no way.