

God's People in Wilderness: Grieving Loss, Receiving New Life

Psalm 118:1-9, 21-29

John 11:1-6; 17-27; 38-44

I'm only reading parts of this very long narrative.

11:1-6: Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ 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." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Verses 17-27: 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.'

(we learn in John 11:35 that Jesus wept; he saw the family and others weeping, and it moved him; so here is Jesus, deeply moved with compassion)

Verses 38-44: 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.” (Martha is very practical) 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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

As we wrap up this series on wilderness, at the start of Holy Week, we’re looking at the wilderness of loss, and grief. And the hope and promise that we have, even in the midst of grief and loss.

In our account from John’s gospel it’s the loss of a person, a beloved brother. But I want to widen our understanding of loss here to include other kinds of losses we experience and have experienced, especially during this pandemic year. If we were gathered here, I would ask you all a question and would love to hear your responses. Since we aren’t, here is something for you to think about at home: what losses have you experienced this past year, particularly because of covid? Loss of in-person social connection, loss of family connection? Loss of income? Loss of sleep? (because of anxiety, perhaps). Loss of culture, because everything is changing, and things won’t return to full normal,

as we have known it? For students of all ages, there has been an enormous loss of social connection and friendship, of learning, sports and other activities, and the marking the significant events throughout the year, and of transitions like graduations.

And of course we want to acknowledge the pain of the loss of life because of covid.

And it needs to be said that loss and grief has affected communities and persons of color especially. Covid has affected black and Hispanic people and communities at disproportionately high rates because of job loss, underlying health issues, and lack of health care and access to health care, among other things. Add to that the racial tensions and attempts to seek understanding and justice, and the pushback that has come as a response to those efforts. In all this it's been a painful year for many people and communities of color.

Yet, there are many positive things that have come out of this year: like the racial justice conversations and efforts to create more equitable workplaces and society, a heightened awareness of our neighbors in need, a greater prayerfulness and spiritual hunger, an acceleration of our learning curve of technology (now you

can hop on Zoom pretty easily next time you want to see your relatives across the country, if you didn't know how to do that before), and so forth.

These are all positive things that have come out of this year. But... it isn't Easter yet. And there are losses that need to be marked, and grieved. Not to make us depressed, but to prepare us for resurrection, a new kind of resurrection because things will be different from now on. And in order to embrace the new, we need to grieve the old and acknowledge our losses, whatever those may be.

A biblical word for this is, lament. In order to truly move forward, and be resurrection people, we (like many people in Scripture and history) need to lament the losses, the mini-deaths if you will.

So this morning we learn from Martha, and how she handles a loss in her life, in her family. We witness her lament.

As we take a look at Martha and her conversation with Jesus, I'd like to reflect for a moment on one important aspect of this narrative, which takes place before Jesus gets into town. It's that comment that John makes in verses 5 & 6: *"Though Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days."* Did that catch your attention? When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two

more days. What's up with that?!? Jesus stayed where he was two more days??

Why does he do that? When we call 911 in an emergency, it would be really disturbing if the person on the line said, "We'll get there eventually."

Now, we know how the story goes, and how it ends, and we learn what Jesus' purposes were in letting Lazarus die, but if you're Martha and Mary and the rest of the family and friends who are in the middle of this, at the moment it makes no sense. It feels hurtful, and frustrating. Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, so he stayed two more days where he was. Ugh.

I'm so glad that this part of the story is in the gospel. In a way it's comforting because it tells us that we may experience the absence of God from time to time. It reveals the mystery of God's will: sometimes he waits. I don't know about you, but *I* think it should say, "Jesus loved them, so when he heard Lazarus was sick, he dropped everything and ran straight away to Bethany to make him well." We reflexively think that's how it's supposed to go. Jesus high tails it to wherever there is dire need, to answer prayer requests, right?

But our experience is that it doesn't always go that way, does it?

Sometimes when we pray and ask for his help, Jesus waits. For two days. Or six

months. Or a year, or longer. Perhaps we all, at some time in our life, experience the silence, or even the absence of God.

And it's when that happens that we might be tempted to lose our faith. Yet we also have an opportunity to *use* our faith—to *exercise* our faith—faith that chooses to move toward God in spite of the fact that we don't know what the heck is going on. Faith that is willing to surrender to the mystery—and also to the goodness—of God's ways and purposes, even if the faith we're exercising has questions or doubts.

With that in mind... We see that Martha *is* disappointed with Jesus, and when he arrives in town she lets him have it. That's how I picture this, in mind; everyone is in the house grieving; she hears that Jesus has finally arrived. And I can picture her stomping out of the house, coming up to Jesus and putting her finger in Jesus' chest, giving him the business. But Martha doesn't lose her faith. In fact, she makes one of the great ***faith statements*** in the New Testament.

And as a result, we see that Jesus reassures her with one of the great ***promises*** of the N.T. and gives her some insight into his purposes for that situation. And the good news here is that Jesus, though delayed, does not turn his back or walk the other way, or ignore the situation.

He does not *remain* silent. He communicates with Martha (and Mary). He hears, and he responds. It's a couple days later than they hoped and expected; and it's probably not what they want to hear at that time. But he responds to them with care and deep compassion.

So, one of the things we learn from this is that God doesn't always answer our prayers right away, or in the way that we want or think he should respond. Anyone experience that? It's part of the mystery of God's will and ways. But God is always faithful. Anyone experience *that*? The result of this in Martha's case is that her brother is raised from the dead, and God is glorified as a result.

I would summarize it this way: *sometimes God lets a difficult situation become impossible so that it becomes clear that only by God's power can the miracle happen, and therefore God is glorified.* It's something only God can get credit for and can only be explained by God's power. In this situation, Jesus chose not to do something *good*, so that he could do something that was *great*.

And, Martha doesn't have the big picture yet. As the apostle Paul says in 1Cor.13, "*For now we see through a glass dimly...*" We don't have the big picture. A lot of life is like that. We often don't understand what God was up to until later, when we're looking back. It's when we're on the other side of the

experience that we look back and say, “Oh, *that’s* what God was doing.” After we’ve come out of the wilderness, so to speak. When we’re in the wilderness, we’re... in the wilderness. Not directionless, but not always able to see the big picture.

With all this in mind let’s take a closer look at Martha and her conversation with Jesus; what she’s experiencing, how she acts, and how Jesus responds to her.

First, it’s clear that Martha is grieving. So, all of the emotions are there: sadness, frustration, disappointment, even anger. And she gets in Jesus’ face and kind of lets him have it. Yet in doing so she makes one of the greatest confessions of faith in the New Testament: “*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. Yet even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask him.*”

What a great faith statement! You and I know it’s easy to have faith when things are going well and life is flowing effortlessly. But authentic faith is often expressed in times when we have to exercise it—in times of perplexity or indecision, times of loss and struggle; times when our prayers aren’t being answered in the time or the way we hope they would be.

This goes against our assumptions. We think—oh, if God will answer my prayer *now*, I will trust him more. But God says “If I *don’t* answer your prayer

right away, will you still trust me? I'm asking you to trust me, to persevere through this difficult time and trust that I am working toward the bigger picture, then you *will* be blessed with an increase in faith, and with a greater and deeper understanding of my love."

Martha is a great example for us; she hangs in there with Jesus, she does kind of let Jesus have it (in faith, hope and love, of course). Yet what's great to observe here is that Jesus is not put off by Martha; he doesn't scold her for being upset, or tell her "You're not supposed to be angry at me; I'm Jesus, the son of God. How dare you!" Or, he doesn't say to her, "That's a bad prayer request; you should be praying something different."

He doesn't scold her; instead, he comforts her, and in a tender moment Jesus makes one of the greatest promises recorded in the New Testament: "*I am the resurrection and life; those who believe in me, even though they die, shall live; and anyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*"

I want us to be aware that this is a one-on-one encounter. This may not seem like a big deal at first glance, but I think it's significant. This promise of Jesus is not given to a crowd, or pronounced from a hillside, or in the presence of the congregation in the temple, like some of his other "I am" sayings in John's gospel.

Here, “I am the resurrection and the life...” is spoken in a one-on-one conversation, to a grieving sister whose brother had died. I used to think that Jesus said this in front of a huge crowd. It’s such a “big” declaration. “People! Listen up! I am the resurrection and the life...” No, this is relational Jesus in a personal moment telling a grieving sister “I am the resurrection and the life...”

If Martha has her finger in Jesus’ chest, then he has his hand on her shoulder as he says this to her. This is just for her. Only she gets to hear it. And when we are grieving the loss of a loved one, or any significant loss—when we are lamenting—this is just for us too. I use this declaration from Jesus at the opening of almost every memorial service & graveside service that I facilitate. Those are public gatherings. But after you have lost a loved one, and you are having a quiet moment of grieving or contemplation and remembering, you need to hear these words, quietly and personally spoken to you from Jesus, the compassionate one.

Another thing this one-on-one encounter of Martha with Jesus shows us, among other things, that Jesus (God) is not fragile; he can handle our disappointment, and even our anger, and we can get right in his face about how frustrated we are with him when he waits two days—or longer. Just read some of the psalms of David. Just read the prophet Jeremiah, who really lets God have it

after a particularly painful experience as God's messenger. There is a lot of the practice of lament in the Bible, and we can learn a lot from this practice.

Jesus will not scold us when we go to him with our whole self, emotions and all. So, here is a great definition of faith: *faith is taking steps toward God, instead of away from him, in every circumstance of life.* And with all of our true feelings. Even our uncomfortable feelings. We honor God by bringing ourselves honestly to him. And he honors us back, with his promises.

Jesus honors Martha's faith. And she does have faith: "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died*" is a great faith statement, if you think about it. She knows Jesus had the power to heal Lazarus if he wanted to; but he chose not to at the time. She believes in him. She even says, "*I know that God will give you whatever you ask.*" She just doesn't get her desires met in the way and time that she wants (even if it's a good desire, like the healing of a loved one!). But she takes steps toward Jesus (literally and figuratively, she takes steps toward him), and not away from him. And she brings her whole heart with her! And Jesus honors that.

And I think Martha speaks for all of us at some point in our life when she says, "Lord, if you had been here..." (fill in the blank). If you had been here my

loved one would not have gotten cancer. If you had been here, I would not have lost my job. If you had been here, I would not have been mistreated as a child. If you had been here... fill in the blank.

There are times in our life when this rings true. And Jesus will honor us for taking steps toward him: with the promise of life, and his love. And maybe even a miracle. Martha and her family got one. We might. We might not. But more important than the miracle is the gift of Jesus himself—his presence, his love. After all, miracles are “signs”—that’s what the New Testament calls them. And what do signs do? Signs point to something. With regard to Jesus’ signs, they point to God’s goodness, God’s power, God’s love; and the promise of life abundant.

So the miracle here is not *primarily* for the benefit of Martha, or Mary. Certainly not for Lazarus. After all, he’s going to have to die again! I sometimes wonder what Lazarus thought after this... “Thanks a lot, Jesus. I wonder how I’m going to die next time...” The miracle—this sign—points to God; it’s for the sake of those observing and listening; and for God’s glory. But in the process of taking steps toward Jesus, miracle or not, we get to become closer to Jesus and experience his grace.

That's what Martha received—and she received it *before* Lazarus was raised, not after the miracle happened. Jesus didn't say "Hey Martha, did you see that?!? I just raised your brother! **Now** do you believe?" That's not to say miracles don't come first sometimes. But in this case the miracle doesn't come first. Which means, if Lazarus had not been raised, she would've been blessed by this conversation with Jesus, and had her faith increased anyway. She didn't know what was coming. Again, she doesn't have the bigger picture yet. The miracle was a big a sign for everyone to see, so that God would be glorified and that people might come to experience Jesus in a pre-(capital R) Resurrection sort of way.

So, more than answered prayer, more than giving us what we want or even what we think is best at the time, Jesus wants to give us himself. A relationship with himself, like he had with Martha and Mary and Lazarus (who Jesus loved, it says). Even though there is still grief; and always will be to some degree, after the loss of a loved one. Those wounds don't just go away. But they are opportunities to experience Jesus' love and his promises.

And Jesus weeps for this family, he was moved with deep compassion. Jesus is no stoic. *He who stayed away for two days and let Lazarus die, now*

weeps out of compassion for them. That's how close he was to them—and that's how close he is to you. He's your friend.

Do you believe that Jesus weeps with you, or over you when you suffer? Think about that. *He who sometimes lets a difficult situation become impossible in your life, is also the one who weeps with you over that impossible situation.* Again, it's a mystery. But he is also the one who might just perform a miracle too.

This is the personal Jesus, who pays attention to individuals, calls them by name, who makes the promise that neither death nor life, present or past, height nor depth, or anything in this world can separate us from his love. And he promises that there is eternal hope. There is resurrection. **He** is resurrection and life.

I don't know about you, but that helps put things into perspective for me. It isn't always what we want, or when we want it. But it's what we need.

The invitation here is to let God be God (let Jesus be Jesus) as we take steps toward him in every circumstance of life, with our whole heart, our questions, our emotions, our doubts, and in all of that with a willingness to trust God's wisdom and his best for us as he guides us through these wilderness times in our lives.