

Years ago when I was a student at Rosedale Bible College there was a young man who attended that had a degenerative disease. As I remember he had been born with normal abilities but as John grew he became more and more disabled. By the time I met John he was in a wheelchair. He got around well but I remember many times seeing other young men hoisting him on their back to take him places the wheelchair could not navigate. John was a believer and was the kind of person one is drawn to.

At some point one of the students proclaimed to the rest of us that he/she felt that God had revealed to them that John (by the way this is not the real name) was going to be healed on a particular date and it would be while we were at school. This person was calling us all to prayer and fasting. And again as I remember we did just that. John was a loved classmate, had a good sense of humor, was not going around sour and in despair about his situation, but of course also longed for healing. We prayed, we fasted, we were anxious, we were excited – would John really be healed? Were our prayers going to be answered in the way we had prayed them, for it was specifically that John would be healed of this disease and that he would be physically whole.

The day came and we filed into Chapel to see what we would see. (pause)

The healer had not come, Jesus had not fulfilled our longings, had not satisfied the desires of our hearts, John remained in the wheelchair.

Had we been misguided? Had the student who called us to prayer heard the wrong message? Did Jesus the healer not want to give to his children all that was good, we had come believing?

In our scripture today we have another example of Jesus not showing up at the right time. He was by all accounts too late. Not only was he too late, he planned to be late, he waited till all hope of healing was gone. Jewish people believed that the spirit lingered for three days and then it left the body and so Jesus waits. Jesus tells his disciples clearly that Lazarus is dead.

The utter disbelief that Jesus would not come, would choose not to come just seems preposterous. What kind of friend waits around while their friend is dying?

As one person has said, "with friends like that who needs enemies?" These are not just any friends, these are "Special" friends, friends that he has shared food with, he has stayed in their home, has had many conversations with. Why would one not come quickly?

Thinking of being special, there are well meaning people who have said to those who are grieving, "You must really be special, that God would trust you with such a loss." A person close to me heard this line a number of times after losing an eye in an accident. He told me later that he wasn't sure he wanted to be **that** special.

What Jesus did, seems to violate basic human compassion, not to mention a scorning of the elementary instincts of pastoral care. I wonder the response, if after calling one of us pastors to say your loved one was ill or dying, and we not showing up for several days? In fact we would choose not to show up.

I believe we ask Jesus the same questions as Mary and Martha do, "Why did you not come; if you had come, if you had intervened our brother, our daughter, our son, our mother, our wife, our husband and on and on would not have died. Why if you could didn't you?? Have any of you dared to say in some fashion, "Jesus you are/were too late?" We may not say it out loud for we know someone would surely set us straight – of course Jesus is not too late, Jesus timing is always correct. But we are human and we ask human questions and we have human longings and it is OK to be human.

This could be especially true for Mary and Martha since it appears that Jesus had just been declaring himself to be the “good Shepherd.” Could it be that Mary and Martha had been in the crowd and heard Jesus talk about this? He just proclaimed to be the good shepherd and that as the Shepherd he lays down his life for the sheep, so one would think that it is safe to follow Jesus. It would feel good to be his sheep, he protects us in the sheep fold, he is the gate by which we enter so he keeps bad things from getting us, he claims to know his sheep and his sheep know him so how do you put the reality of Mary, Martha and Lazarus’s calling on their shepherd and the shepherd decides to not show up, at least not when he was needed. **JESUS WAS TOO LATE.**

I think Lazarus death probably makes about as much sense as deaths we have experienced where we have prayed diligently and earnestly, times when we were sure that God would be honored and people would come to believe and know the power and love of God in ways they had not yet experienced and yet Jesus does not show up and I’m sure we all know people who have turned from faith because in their mind Jesus/God did not show up, not when the crisis called for intervention, not when there was still hope, not when there was a chance for healing. It

just didn't make sense, we prayed, we believed, we hoped – and yet **Jesus is too late**. We can certainly identify with Mary and Martha.

We know this story, we can read the whole story as we did this morning and in several minutes we have it all wrapped up – we know how it ends, Lazarus is raised from the dead and everyone goes on their merry way. The end.

Except it's not the end. For us who have not had our prayers of healing end this way of being called back from the dead or our loved one wasn't healed, we did experience profound loss, loss that we didn't know if we could survive – where is the meaning, what is the meaning, how can/does our faith survive?

Is it possible that sometimes Jesus/God saves us by being absent rather than present, at least in ways we demand or expect or want? Could it be that there is a larger picture, a broader knowing, and a fuller scope of meaning that we are not capable of comprehending?

Jesus will be obedient to God's will and not ours, given the fact that God knows the beginning from the end? Jesus will accomplish the saving work of God in the big picture, not our small and local understanding of who we want him to be in any given moment. Jesus is not just our leader but he is the leader and light of

the whole world. We want Jesus to guide, heal, protect and save **us**, but Jesus guides, heals, protects and saves all humanity. We want Jesus to respond to our immediate concerns, but his mission is not captive to our sense of the urgent. He is our Lord because he transcends, he is not held by the moment, he is bigger than our world, our moments, and He is our Lord because he is Lord of all. In some ways this almost feels uncaring, like individually we are not important, but I believe what Jesus demonstrated to the little group of Bethany is also what we need to learn, to absorb.

We are part of the whole, and Jesus will work out his mission for the world, be it our small world or the “whole world.” He is not tied to my felt needs or desires. He knows the big picture – and we cannot not know until we live into it and then we may still have difficulty really knowing. We do not understand, nor can we for it is beyond us. It is mystery. Jesus knew that the tragedy that Mary, Martha and Lazarus’s experienced would end in triumph here on earth, but we are not promised that knowing or that ending. We only know that we hold on to faith that in the end all will be well and it takes a long time to come to that faith when deep pain is experienced. So my question is:

What are you waiting for? What are the desperate needs of your heart? What makes you cry out to the healer, knowing full well that healing may not look like what you desire? You bring your needs by faith, trusting that the healer will give what is ultimately best, even when your heart cries out in pain.

I love Mary & Martha's relationship to Jesus. You can tell they were good friends, they looked Jesus in the eye and both said to him, "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died." In other words, where were you, what took you so long, why didn't you come when there was still time? There seems to be a fair amount of accusation in their greeting. And why not? They had seen and heard of Jesus healings, of miracles he had performed so healing their brother seemed easy enough. To expect Jesus to heal their brother did not seem out of line.

However healing in the moment was not what Jesus wanted to teach. He had a greater mission in mind and in that initial conversation Jesus says to Martha, "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." Jesus asks Martha if she believes this and she responds with "Yes, I believe you are the Messiah, the son of God." Jesus declares who he is in the big picture to Martha, who

is consumed with her own individual picture. Jesus is helping Martha work out her faith, her salvation, he is not put off by her need or requests. I don't think Martha really knew yet who Jesus was, just as I don't think we really know either, but we are working out our own faith and salvation. I think most of that working out comes in times of deep brokenness. Times when we have nothing left of ourselves, where tomorrows look bleak and daunting. We need something beyond ourselves and we cry out to the healer. We are desperate for answers.

Mary's interaction brings with it a different response from Jesus. She brings with her friends and neighbors who are weeping with her and after the initial question of "why" Jesus weeps with her which I find in some ways rather curious. Scripture says he was "deeply" moved. Given that Jesus knew what he was going to do, was he weeping because he was sad, because he saw their grief, because of what the power of death had done, because he knew that in a short time he would be facing his own death? We don't know, but we do know he was identifying with the people. He was with them. The question for us is:

What are you weeping for? What are the pains and distress that make you weep? Where have you invested time, energy and love, that when things have gone awry you weep – you have lost your way? All seems to be lost.

Now Jesus wants to go to the tomb – “Where have you laid him?” When they arrive Jesus has the audacity to ask that the stone be moved away. “What” I can hear Martha say, (I love her) she knows this is not a good idea. She knows Lazarus stinks and she says so, but Jesus is not put off by stinky people, dead or alive. He goes to the tomb, the tomb is opened and he prays and then calls in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.”

The hushed silence must have been palpable. Would he come out, could this possibly happen? We know the story. And now Jesus calls the community into action, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Can you imagine being in that crowd and being part of the unwinding the yards of cloth wrapped around a once dead man? Was the smell of death gone? Lazarus was indeed alive, called forth by the healer himself. Jesus was on time. Jesus was on time for the big picture, Jesus was on time for what he knew was needed, that of teaching that He indeed is the resur-

rection and the life. Jesus was on time for Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Jesus was on time.

And Jesus is on time for us. My last question is:

What about you smells bad and what are the grave cloths that need to be taken off of you so you can truly rise from the dead?

Will you allow your community to help unwind you?

Several weeks ago I had about 2 days when I lived and wallowed in defeat and was bound by my grave clothes. I knew I wasn't good enough, wise enough, smart enough, spiritual enough etc. for the ministry I'm called to. I went home from church that Sunday and said to Sheldon, "I think I'm going to throw in the towel." (Sometimes I am a little dramatic) I felt like I had failed in something, I was comparing myself to someone I saw as superior, someone had received what I thought I deserved, on and on. The grave clothes hung around me tightly. I brought my stinky self to church on Monday morning and what I was so very grateful for was that there were several wise women who helped unwind those grave clothes from me. They allowed my honest sharing, they didn't condemn me

and tell me to grow up, to tell me I was all the things I was telling myself I wasn't.

They allowed the struggle and yet believed in me. The grave clothes came off.

We all have some kind of grave clothes that bind us. What are they for you? Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go." Jesus calls us to action, holy work of unbinding and freeing each other.

Jesus has called us to resurrection, not from physical death but from the weight of what holds us back, from the sins that keep hounding us, from the evils that seem to hold us captive.

So maybe the question is not so much, "will you die" the real question is "will you live?" Will you live into the resurrection Jesus gave you at your new birth and take hold of the promise, that the one who is the resurrection and the life is the one within you. Will you believe and walk with the power of the Spirit. Will you choose life or death?

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life."