

A sermon preached by Dean L. Francis
First United Methodist Church of Evanston
April 2, 2017

John 11:1-7, 17-45

11 A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2 This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, “Lord, the one whom you love is ill.”

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This illness isn’t fatal. It’s for the glory of God so that God’s Son can be glorified through it.” 5 Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. 6 When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, 7 he said to his disciples, “Let’s return to Judea again.”

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. 19 Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother’s death. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. 22 Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you.”

23 Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.”

24 Martha replied, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day.”

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. 26 Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

27 She replied, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God’s Son, the one who is coming into the world.”

28 After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, “The teacher is here and he’s calling for you.” 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. 30 He hadn’t entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb.

32 When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.”

33 When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. 34 He asked, “Where have you laid him?”

They replied, “Lord, come and see.”

35 Jesus began to cry. 36 The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”

38 Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. 39 Jesus said, “Remove the stone.”

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.”

40 Jesus replied, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” 41 So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. 42 I know you

always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me.”⁴³ Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

Well, we have finally made it to that most sacred of days, opening day for major league baseball. Tonight some of us will gather around the TV and watch the Cubs and the Cards go at it again. In case you are wondering, the Cubs lead this rivalry by 1,207 wins to 1,156 wins for the Cards, with 19 ties. Yes, there used to be ties in baseball. At the end of the season at least one if not both sets of fans will be crying in their beer. Whoever wrote the line “there’s no crying in baseball” wasn’t a true fan.

Today we also conclude our series of encounters with Jesus as told by the author of John’s gospel. John seems to know that the power of these stories of encounter lies in part with the narratives’ willingness to impart a great sense of humanity to Jesus. In today’s lengthy story about the raising of Lazarus, we encounter a Jesus who isn’t afraid to cry. But this is only a part of the story; indeed throughout the story we see a whole basketful of emotions.

Prior to this story, Jesus had just escaped being stoned for a second time and it is clear that the disciples are fearful. The authorities had tried to arrest Jesus, but he escaped and went back to the place at the River Jordan where he had been baptized by John. This element of fear and apprehension may have a great deal to do with why Jesus seems to take his sweet time in responding to the illness of his friend Lazarus. He’s only two miles away and yet it takes him four days to arrive. That’s only 4000 steps, for those of you who keep track.

When he finally does arrive, other emotions greet him. Deep in their grief, Mary and Martha are disappointed, maybe even angry about his tardiness. Their friends and family have gathered to sit shiva with them. That is a practice that was first described in Genesis (7:10). During the period of shiva, mourners sometimes sit on low stools or boxes while they receive condolence calls. It is a practice that symbolizes the mourner being “brought low” following the loss of a loved one.

So, when Jesus arrives at Bethany, Lazarus’ family is practicing this ancient ritual. The custom would have been for Jesus to *come to them* but eventually both Martha and Mary *go to*

Jesus, leaving their home and breaking a pattern that would have been to stay home in mourning for seven days.

So even before Lazarus is raised from the dead, we see the breaking of traditional patterns and behaviors. Jesus, as the son of God, is inviting a new and different kind of behavior. The old rituals of time and place are being broken down. Even death itself doesn't confine his followers. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and if we don't have at least a little bit of fear about what that discipleship means, then I'm not sure we really get it. Following Jesus can lead people into dark places – uncomfortable, dirty, smelly places. It can lead us into danger, and bring us into contact with dangerous people. Following Jesus calls us to our pews and our hymns and our rituals, but it also demands that we go out into the world. Jesus calls us to love. And love can be difficult sometimes.

Following Jesus means that we have to love, and it's okay if that scares you a little. It should. It means that you're paying attention. It means that you have your eyes wide open to the cost of discipleship. It means that you didn't stop reading the story of Lazarus with the smelly tomb. Because you see, the raising of Lazarus is a precursor of Jesus' own suffering, death, and resurrection. It's a precursor to our own recommitment, our own dying to self.

So often Christian faith is portrayed as something that alleviates fear, and sometimes it does. But the truth is that often this faith we have in Jesus takes us to places of deep and disturbing realities. By the time John's gospel was written, the church was experiencing brutal persecution from the Roman state. The early Christians were huddled in tombs of their own, fearful for their own lives and wellbeing, hiding from brutal Roman power.

So perhaps when the Church heard Jesus' cry, "Lazarus, come out!" it was a cry that filled them with fear...because they didn't know exactly where it would take them. They weren't sure they wanted to be unbound, exposed to the light of day.

Today Jesus is standing at the entrance to our tombs and crying those same words: Come out! Come out of your comfort zone. Come out of your fortress. Come out of your addictions. Come out of the lies that tell us how to succeed, consume, spend, or buy. Come out of your slumber, and seek a new realm where God's call offers justice, peace, and hope. Come out to face your fears. To leave the comfortable home of grief and begin anew. Only then can we be unbound. AMEN