



**The Fifth Week in Lent**  
John 11:1-45

**If You Had Been Here, He Wouldn't Have Died!**

Fifteen years ago, around this time of year, my mother decided she would like to have a new Easter dress. She never liked to shop, and she wasn't feeling well—in fact, she may have wanted a new dress precisely *because* she wasn't feeling well, and because she feared that this would be her last Easter—so she asked my sister Sarah to go out and find her a new dress.

Sarah went to a shop near her office and found Mother a lovely robin's-egg-blue dress. It reminded me of photos of my mother's blue wedding dress. My mother knew how to look good in a blue dress.

And yes, that was her last Easter, at least on this side of the veil. After she died in June of that year, the funeral home asked my father what outfit he'd like her to be buried in, and he decided on the blue dress. Perfect. The last time I saw my mother, in death, she looked very lovely in her Easter dress.

Some time later, my sister went back to the shop where she had bought the dress. The sales associate remembered her and asked, "So, how did your mother like that dress? Did she like it?" Now, my sister is a kind person, and she didn't want to ruin this woman's day. What do you say when someone asks after your recently departed mother?

Sarah thought quickly, smiled, and said, "Oh, she loves it. She wears it all the time."

At that very funny but very sad moment, my sister wanted to flee the shop, but she couldn't decide whether it was because she wanted to laugh or cry. In any case, she and I and all the rest of our family are well acquainted with the feeling of having a beloved relative sealed in a nearby tomb. My mother was my first "Lazarus." There have been a

few more since then.

And so that's why I want to reach out and embrace poor Martha and Mary in the Lazarus story—a story that I think is really better titled the *Martha and Mary* story. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They both say this—this very human, very plaintive, and very (in my hearing) blunt and impolite rebuke.

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And this complaint takes the story in a surprising direction. It began with the serene, all-knowing Jesus deliberately staying out of town past the point of being able to save his friend. Like a doctor who deliberately blows off his scheduled shift, Jesus just goes about his business, and then, okay fine, decides to say to his friends, “Let us go to Judea again.” And at that point, he already knows his friend Lazarus has died. This is often how John the Evangelist portrays Jesus: omniscient, anticipating the coming events, a ‘cool customer’...even on the cross.

But Martha first and then Mary confront him with their lamentation. Like so many before them in the history of God's people—and so many after, and so many this very day!—they cry out to their supposedly all-powerful Lord: if you had been here, he would not have died!

And we discover that Jesus' response is nothing less than the same grief they felt. This is the surprising turn that the story takes. *Think!* Jesus also is grieving. Jesus also is weeping. He has the power to reverse death, and yet he touches the depth of human sorrow in his own human experience.

But...does he really have the power to reverse death? Or...does he have that power *exclusively within himself*? I think that if we listen very carefully to the Martha and Mary story, we'll see that maybe he doesn't. *Maybe* he doesn't. Maybe it was important *that Martha and Mary be involved*, and maybe that's why Jesus waits a couple of days.

For one thing, Lazarus, often seen as a main character in the story, is dead for practically all of it, and has no lines, nothing to say upon his emergence from the tomb. (“He's just the stiff,” a funny friend of mine commented to me last week.) And...all of the action between Jesus, Martha, and Mary takes place *before* Lazarus is raised. Is Jesus an irresponsible physician who alone was capable of reversing death, if only he had shown up at the hospital for his shift? Well...that's not what I hear. “Your brother will rise again,” he tells Martha. And at first she cautiously affirms this by repeating what most Jewish people like Martha, Mary, and Jesus believed at the time: that there will be a resurrection of the beloved dead “on the last day.” No, Jesus tells her, that's not it. “*I AM* the Resurrection and the Life,” he tells her. “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?*” he asks her. And then Martha does a remarkable thing: she *surrenders* to Jesus.

She places her faith in him...*before* her brother is raised.

And so I am not entirely sure that Lazarus could have—or at least *would* have—been raised if his sister had not done this. Martha took a leap, decided to trust Jesus fully. She stepped beyond the safe belief that “on the last day”—meaning, some day ‘once upon a time’—her brother would be raised, and leapt into trusting that with Jesus, on *this* day, today, not only would her brother be raised, but Resurrection itself is standing before her.

And then Jesus—and we along with him—encounters Mary. She begins with the same grievous rebuke: “If you had been here, dot dot dot...” And she and her companions are weeping, which moves Jesus deeply. He also begins to weep. And so, once again, I am not sure that Lazarus could have—or at least *would* have—been raised if his sister Mary and Jesus had not done this, had not allowed themselves to acknowledge the depth of their sadness in the face of death.

And how do I know that Lazarus could not be raised without Martha’s faithful surrender to Jesus, and the shared grief of all three of them and their friends? I don’t. But I’ll say this for myself: as I speak, my mother’s earthly body lies in a grave, her blue dress serving as a lovely substitute for Lazarus’s grave wrappings. Like those you love but see no longer, she has not been literally raised like Lazarus. And yet...I think if we look closely, we can see that they *have* been raised—in two ways.

First, they have been raised in our weeping: we who preach Christ crucified are as well-acquainted with weeping as anybody else, so much so that Jesus himself, the central figure of our faith, the Word of God, the One who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Trinity—Jesus himself not only dies, but he weeps with the human experience of grief. Our weeping—his weeping—all of this weeping is not simply a cry of despair. It is a sign of our deep love for one another—flowing from God’s fathomless love for us—in a world in which indifference, separation and death are too often our companions. In her weeping for her brother, Mary *looks beyond herself*. She grieves the death of *another*, and in so doing raises both herself and Lazarus to life: to *life in community*. Lazarus in physical death lies alone in a cold tomb; but Mary in her weeping weaves him back into community. About our beloved dead, our tears say this: they are still a part of us. Within and among us—and also, painfully, beyond us—they are not dead. They have been raised.

Here’s another way to say this: all along the lonely streets of hell, there are many tears...but there is no grief. To feel grief, you have to care about somebody else. That doesn’t happen in hell.

And Martha is if anything a stronger apostle who proclaims the good news of Resurrection and Life beyond all tears and weeping. By surrendering to Jesus, by saying Yes to life with him, Martha in her faith participates with Jesus in the raising of her brother to life. We can see this in our own lives: when we say Yes to working together, life-giving works of justice get done. When we break bread into enough pieces, everyone gets to eat their fill. When we follow Jesus—that most unlikely of Lords—through the

dusty pathways of ministry, there is no house that can't be rebuilt, no city that can't recover from a tsunami, no nation that can't throw off its oppressor, no village that we cannot nourish with fresh water, not one of our own sick or infirm who lives or dies alone.

So let's walk back to the side of my sister, feeling the urge to flee that little shop, to run from that sweet sales clerk. Like Mary, sister of Lazarus, she wanted to weep. And maybe, like Martha, she was daring to trust in the promise of new life. However she felt—and as real as death in its many forms is for us today—I hear in the story of Martha and Mary God's desire to raise us up, adorn us in our best blue Easter garments, and give us life, life and more life.

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