

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

This story of the raising of Lazarus is a prelude to the events of Holy Week. It's a story of Jesus as Lord, but it's also a story about real people grieving, crying, perhaps even a little angry because someone they love has died. It's a story about hope, about faith, about intimacy with God. It's a story that has troubled some people because they ask, why did Jesus wait until Lazarus died before finally showing up.

The first sister Jesus met when he finally went to Bethany was Martha who hearing he's coming, went and met him. She greets Jesus with grief, maybe even anger, with the love of a friend. In her grief she makes a statement showing faith in Jesus "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus replies "Your brother will rise again." Then Martha responds with another statement of faith "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Then Jesus says "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?" Martha answers "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Now after the death of her brother Mary stayed home as Jesus approached but when her sister called her, she came to meet Jesus bringing her own grief and pain. Mary kneels at Jesus' feet "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died."

Jesus sees her weeping, along with those who were with her, and he's greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. "Where have you laid him?" They reply "Come and see," and Jesus wept. The Jews around them wondered, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Word Incarnate feels their pain, he loves them, he weeps with them and for them. The Messiah weeps with the humanity gathered there that day.

Greatly disturbed and coming to the cave with a stone against it, Jesus said "take away the stone." And here we see true humanity as Mary says "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days." Burial took place quickly in part because decomposition started shortly after life departed which explains the use of herbs and spices to mask the odor from a body.

"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" The stone is removed, Jesus prays to the Father for the sake of the crowd and cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And many believed in Jesus when they saw what happened.

Now I want to note that although Jesus raised Lazarus' body back to life, Lazarus, Mary, Martha and everyone else in this story did eventually die. We will all die as

we must, but we live in the strength of hope because through Jesus' own death and resurrection, though we die we will rise again. Scripture tells us that whether we live or we die, we are in the presence of God, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This was true for those believers gathered that day, it's true today for us when we gather at the graves of those we love. As Jesus wept with Martha and Mary, he weeps also with us, even as we hear him say again, "I am the resurrection and the life" and we believe in the midst of our hurt and grief.

Over the years as a pastor I've stood at many a graveside sharing the words of Jesus to comfort us in times of mourning but knowing these words are heard only from a distance by some assembled at these services.

Bereaved have often wondered why their deceased loved one suffered or died so young or unexpectedly. Sometimes we want to cry out, "Lord, if only...!" as Martha and Mary did. Sometimes it seems a struggle to believe the Good News when our hearts are breaking. I know when my dad died I was able to mix feelings of hurt with statements of faith as Martha did, but I'm sure there have been times when I was only able to express pain as Mary did.

But either way, this story reminds us that we need not hide our feelings of grief and anger from God. We really can be honest with God, even if what we are feeling isn't pretty. As we all do, I wish I could say something that would take away the pain in times of grief.

Then I remember that God has spoken to us very powerfully through the quiet voice of some verse of Scripture or through the thoughtful presence of a faithful friend or even a stranger. Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God feels the pain of human grief and weeps with us, and our Lord allows us to be intimate in our relationship with God, to get angry in times of death and loss. Martha, Mary, Lazarus, all who were there that day, and everyone since, including us, will die. Whether death is welcome or an outrageous interruption is inevitable here on earth but the Good News is that God in Jesus Christ is with us while we live and there when we die.

AMEN