

Hope Against Hope

John 11:1-45 (1-4, 17-18, 32-35, 43-44)

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

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem...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." When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply moved and troubled. He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.

Then Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him and let him go."

This week our text reminds us we are so near to Jerusalem. To Jerusalem, and the Last Supper and Jesus' death on the cross. In fact, the text says we are "two miles away," in this place of death and mourning, at the cave that was a grave and with those who gather nearby, troubled in spirit: the family and friends of Lazarus, including Jesus. And we are, in the church calendar, only two weeks away from the Easter and empty tomb. How fitting, then, and how challenging, to read, on this Fifth Sunday of Lent, this text of the raising of Lazarus, set firmly within, even entangled with, the controversy and plots that swirl around Jesus. Where is our hope?

There are those who see in the words and the works of Jesus—even in the healings—a blasphemy and sedition that deserves death. But Jesus claims to be doing the works of Abba so even the worries and warnings of his disciples do not keep him from making his way not only to Lazarus' tomb, but also to his own place of suffering, death, and, eventually, resurrection.

This story in John is an emotional and relational climax for Jesus. If you were to peruse the story for emotional and relational terms, you would find the following descriptions: "he whom you love" (the sisters send a message to Jesus in 11:3), "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (11:5), "our friend" (Jesus says about Lazarus in 11:11), console/consoling (11:19 and 11:31), weeping (the Jews, Mary, and Jesus in 11:31-35, "Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (11:33), and "See, how he loved him!" (The Jews say of Jesus in 11:36). The whole passage is saturated with emotional responses. The fact that John depicts these

demonstrations of emotion and connection from the beginning of the chapter, well before the scene at the tomb, is significant. (1)

So far in John's gospel, Jesus has been characterized in a more aloof way, affected only minimally by those around. But here, Jesus loves his dear friends, is deeply moved, and even weeps. There is arguably no other scene in the Gospels where Jesus is as relationally and emotionally connected to people as in John 11. As the story moves on from here, Jesus' interactions with his disciples show increasing emotional connection and affection (specifically in the foot washing scene in chapter 13 and in Jesus' farewell address). This chapter seems to serve as a catalyst for Jesus opening himself up more and embodying hope.

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, there is so much of the human experience of loss:

- receiving word of a loved one's illness and need;

- decision-making, timing, and complications, even risks and dangers to be considered;

- frustrations, questioning, and lack of understanding on the part of those closest to us;

- grief and mourning by loved ones, and the community encircling them, perhaps not all

 - with the purest of intentions;

- audacious hope, a expression of faith in Christ;

- a wistful "what might have been";

- limited understanding of what we ourselves are saying;

- courage, anger, and weeping;

- mixed motives and responses, for some saw how much Jesus loved his friend and his fully

 - human, and Divine Love Incarnate, while others, in the face of physical evidence

 - (the tomb), cynically questioned his power;

- the trust of Mary and Martha, even in the face of physical reality (the stench of death);

- and finally, life, hope, stepping out of the burial cave, unbinding, Jesus' gratitude to God.

This story invites us into our own places of loss and grief and into this presence of the Christ.

Perhaps grief, loss, anxiety, financial troubles, hatred, resentment, or a lack of faith has put us in our own tomb of despair. There are places and times when our religious imagination fails us, stops us, refuses to move us to places of new life and possibility. Often, the world around us tells us about "real life"—and claims that it clashes with the gospel vision of being truly alive. What do we think we need to do in order to "achieve" or "accomplish" new life, as if it were our doing, and not God's? (2)

When Jesus hears that Lazarus has died and is the burial cave, a tomb of despair and death, Jesus began to weep." Often we fail to experience Jesus' humanity. These words suggest that he knew anger, and grief, and deep spiritual pain, just as we do. He was moved to compassion and sadness. How do these two words "Jesus wept" shape our spiritual lives? This entering into the human experience? What is God speaking to us today, in the tears of Jesus?

Where we are in this scene. Skeptics. Sisters who are grieving. Disciples who raise more questions. Lazarus – illness that can and does lead to death. Lazarus who is bound up in a cave, wondering what it means to step out and be unbound. What does hope look like?

When Lazarus emerges, we do not hear a single word from him or know of his response. But we're not surprised by the response of the "ordinary" people who witnessed the extraordinary that day: again, a range of reactions, from faith and following to fear and fretting.

Then we hear the words of Jesus, "Unbind him, and let him go."

How might we be Lazarus? Choosing to step out of the cave. And yet often we are held back and bound by the old habits or regrets just as Lazarus was all wrapped up in grave clothes. Then there are those who offer to unbind him.

That is part of being the church. We count on the community, the Body of Christ, which assists us daily in stripping off the binding remnants of the old life, the false self. We as a church are with each other as we face death, our own death, the death of our wife, husband, partner, beloved, a child, a friend. We sit with each other in that grief in different ways. We don't need to pretend. We can weep with each other. It is hard to do. And we hold onto a hope that comes from the deep connection to the Holy One and each other. We are not alone.

At the beginning of this story, Mary and Martha are deep in the wilderness of grief. Mary confronts him with a version of that ancient question: Where is God in times of suffering and death? "Lord, if you had been here..." Jesus offers her a promise and a hope "I am the resurrection and the life." And this good news for Mary is also good news for all of us: when we suffer, when we feel overwhelmed with grief, and even when we die, God is there with us, is "deeply moved" and calling us back to life.

How do artists depict a range of emotion, of suffering and of hope? How do they see the world? Henri Matisse did not create his art in easy times. He lived through two world wars. He was displaced from his home in France by the threat of bombs falling out of the sky. And his beloved daughter was tortured and taken by the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police. Thankfully, she escaped when the train stalled on the way to a German prison camp. Matisse also struggled with poor health, especially later in life.

How does someone like Matisse create so much beauty in the midst of so much pain? Many of Matisse's paintings are full of vivid color, beauty, and joy. But he was also "deeply moved" by other emotions in his work.

For example, look at *French Window at Collioure* (1914) painted during the year World War I began. Compare to the painting of an open window painted in *Open Window, Collioure* (1905). What is he reflecting about how he sees the world and how it has changed?

Let's look at two versions of *Bathers*. Here is the piece from 1905 and here is *Bathers by a River* (1916). This is perhaps the most famous example: originally commissioned as an idyllic scene of leisure, Matisse reworked it during the war into a drastically different picture. What once was a blue river he distills down to a stark, vertical band of black; the lush greenery on the left gives way progressively to a kind of wasteland as the eye moves across the painting from left to right; and in the center, the form of a serpent rises from below – all clear signs that Matisse, in the midst of the war's desolations, was creatively meditating on the ancient biblical story of sin and estrangement. Even as the shadows of violence closed in, Matisse continued to create art that expressed and evoked the emotions that deeply moved him. (3)

Compare *View of Notre Dame* (1914) with his earlier *A Glimpse of Notre Dame in the Late Afternoon* (1902), painted from the same spot. Here is an artist that enters into the reality of shadow, suffering, war and death using colors. What differences and similarities do you notice? What emotions do you think Matisse was feeling in each case?

This week's color is purple: Where are the shades of purple in your life these days? Which shades – lavender, violet, amethyst, burgundy – evoke which emotions? When in your life have you felt the most sadness, loss, or grief? What color did it feel like? What helped you feel better – and what didn't help?

We hold the hope against hope that in the midst of loss and grief and pain, we are not alone. We are invited out of our caves, invited to take off what is binding us, holding us back, and hearing the invitation to come out, come into life, a resurrection life.

Let us pray. God of weeping and resurrection, give us the strength to mourn, and the courage to hope. Fill us with your Spirit of life, so that we might be deeply moved toward peace, creativity, and love. Amen.

1) Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, Commentary 5th Sunday of Lent, [workingpreaching.com](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45-7)
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45-7>

2) Kathryn Matthews, "Hope Against All Hope," SermonSeeds
https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_april_2_2017/

3) SALT Project – Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent Devotional 2023
<https://www.saltproject.org/matisse-and-lent/matisse-devotional-for-lent>