

Lent 5: John 11:1-45 The raising of Lazarus - Jesus' last sign

Lord, if you'd been here...

A man was sick in Bethany.

Only one man. But for a small village, and especially for his two sisters, maybe it felt like a pandemic. He was a significant percentage of the village and because he was sick their lives and world were being turned upside down.

What should they do as Lazarus seemed to be getting worse by the hour?

They sent a message to their good friend, Jesus. They just let him know his good friend Lazarus was sick. They knew Jesus well enough to know he'd know what to do.

We read this story in a few minutes and know the wonderful ending, but imagine the sisters and their friends as they waited. Waiting as the minutes ticked by to become hours and the hours become days and no sign of Jesus.

Lazarus continues to get worse. Where's Jesus?

Then the unthinkable happens - Lazarus dies and still no sign of Jesus. Not even a message via courier pigeon, or whatever they used to send messages in those days.

The body of Lazarus is prepared and buried. The sisters are beside themselves but still no Jesus. Its days before he comes. Four long days and nights of grief.

Then he comes. Jesus arrives.

The sisters meet him one at a time.

They don't ask where he'd been. They don't ask why he took so long or why he didn't send word. But they both say the same thing to him. The same pain filled words. Words of disappointment.

They say, "Lord, if you'd been here my brother wouldn't have died."

Lord, if you'd just been here...

Were they right?

Jesus goes to the place of death. He goes to the tomb. A stone guards the body in the tomb, separating the living from the dead. A cold hard stone hiding the cold dead body of Lazarus.

Jesus weeps as he sees the pain caused by the death of Lazarus. The death of one who loved. The death of one who was deeply loved. Jesus weeps for his dear friends. But he hasn't come to deliver a casserole or to say what a tragedy this is - so - he stands near the tomb and orders the removal of the stone.

Jesus, the grave robber, the one who raises the dead to life, in a 'mega-phone' voice, a great voice, cries out, "Lazarus, come out!"

Dead ears hear his voice!

Breath flows into collapsed lungs.

A dead heart starts to beat.

A dead body comes to life and shuffles out of the tomb - still wrapped in grave clothes.

Lazarus is back. Lazarus is alive.

Can you imagine that moment in Bethany? The surprise?

Sadness replaced with joy. Mourning gives way to celebration. Death overpowered by life.

Martha, Mary, and Lazarus have a new understanding of the power of God to breathe life into places of death. Jesus didn't do the easy thing and stop Lazarus dying, he did the hard thing, and raised him from death

When Lazarus met Jesus do you think he said, "Lord, if you'd been here I wouldn't have died?"

The COVID-19 pandemic means death is in our face. We're confronted with the uncertainty of life. How does that make us feel? Where do we find help?

Do we want to say, Lord, where are you? If only you were here!

We should remember well - when Jesus raised Lazarus from death he was on his way to his own death. To another stone-guarded tomb. But unlike Lazarus, who still had signs of death clinging to his mortal frame when he emerged from the tomb, Jesus leaves his grave clothes behind. No signs of death cling to Jesus because he's resurrected never to die again.

We should remember well - our risen Lord Jesus promises to be with us always. Although he was bound to one place at a time during his earthly life he's now free to be with all of us because of his ascension. Where is Jesus? Right beside us.

We should remember well - Jesus called Lazarus by name, and he'll call us by name when he raises us to eternal life

We should remember well - because of Jesus we have no need to fear death.

We should remember well - because of Jesus we know what it means to live a full life.

What is Jesus doing while we struggle with this pandemic?

Jesus is weeping with those who weep. He's raising the dead to life and welcoming them to their eternal home. Jesus is assuring us that sickness, fear and death won't have the final word. He is the grave robber, the one who raises the dead to life.

We don't know how this COVID-19 pandemic will end but we do know we are Jesus' people and nothing can separate us from God's love. So in the meantime we'll listen to Jesus, we'll talk to Jesus and do our best to care for the vulnerable.