

Lent 5A 2026 John 11

Last week I told you that I didn't like the appointed gospel for the day. This week *you* need to tell *me* if you don't like this gospel, because there's about a 40% chance I'll read it at your funeral if you don't tell me otherwise. You can pick pretty much any scripture you want for your funeral; you can pick the Christmas story if you want, although your mourners may think you're strange. But today's reading is one of the two most highly recommended funeral passages, and you can see why: John so perfectly captures the frustration, anger, regret, and resentment that are part of grief. *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* Whether it is a literal death or any other devastating loss, Mary and Martha make the bold accusation on behalf of all of us who grieve: *God, why didn't you stop this terrible thing from happening?*

Mary and Martha and their neighbors have a point: *Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?* The subtext of the message the sisters sent to Jesus about Lazarus being ill was surely the expectation that he would do something about it. Even after Lazarus has died, their faith in Jesus' ability to heal and to receive whatever he asks for from God never waivers. Their question isn't *can* Jesus save their brother, but *will he* intervene. That may be the hardest part of our grief, too; we profess our faith in God who is all-powerful...but will God exercise that power to make whatever we pray for happen?

Jesus takes a while to find his footing in showing compassion to the sisters. Martha suggests that even four days after Lazarus has been in the tomb, Jesus could help if he chooses: *Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.* Imagine how much confidence Martha must have had in Jesus' divine ability to appeal on her brother's behalf days after he's been interred. But Jesus' consolation rings hollow: *Your brother will rise again...* which is true, but not what Martha wants to hear. We do the same thing, don't we? Someone dies and we try to find consolation at the very time when we are most inconsolable. We say our loved one is no longer suffering, which is true, and as

empathetic people should be some relief to us, but that doesn't make up for them dying. We talk about being reunited with our loved ones at the heavenly banquet table, but that's not the same as sitting down with them at our Thanksgiving dinner table.

When Jesus meets Mary, who echoes her sister's accusation that had Jesus only been there, Lazarus would not have died, Jesus finally stops challenging their mourning with theology. He stops challenging their mourning at all. *When Jesus saw her weeping, and those who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved...and Jesus began to weep.* For all of the places in John's gospel where Jesus makes it clear that he is divine—*I am the way, the truth, and the life...I am the resurrection and the life...I am the vine, the good shepherd, the bread of life, the light of the world...*this is the place where he is most clearly human. *Jesus began to weep.* Because there is no escaping this human experience without pain, loss, and grief. God could not have been truly incarnate, truly human, without truly suffering.

Now, at funerals, we stop reading before the part where Lazarus comes back to life. It would be mean, really, to remind ourselves in the midst of our grief that Jesus answered that prayer once for Mary and Martha but isn't going to intervene supernaturally for us. As much as we may wish it wasn't, the mortality rate is still 100%, and all of us, Lazarus included, get there some day. But if Jesus isn't going to bring our loved ones out of the grave four days later, like he did for Mary and Martha, at least we get the next best thing that Jesus did for them: we get the compassion, the empathy, the solidarity of God who weeps with us when we weep. In death, in disappointment, in fear, in betrayal, in strife, God has promised to be with us. Yes, the flashy part of this story is Jesus shouting *Lazarus, come out!* and the dead man walking out of the tomb. But the quieter sign that may be just as miraculous is that Jesus, knowing that he was going to revive Lazarus in just a few moments, still wept with those who were grieving.

*Lord, if you had been here...*but the Lord is here. Thanks be to God who has promised to be present on our journey—in joy, in sorrow, and in everything in between.