

March 31, 2019. Imperfect Believers: To Grieve as Those with Hope John 11:1-45
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In his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul admonished them, writing “Do not grieve as those without hope.”(4:13). What I assume he was telling them then was to grieve as those who do have hope. Grief is as much a part of life as joy, yet we really don’t talk about it nearly as much. Maybe that’s one of the reasons we have the season of Lent. We all have reasons to grieve in our own separate ways and we all have a reason to hope which brings us together, and this is the season we explicitly recognize this. In this story of the raising of Lazarus, grief is the emotional driver, coming from a number of places on different levels and degrees of meaning.

In some ways this is a disturbing story. In John’s gospel, this account serves as a ‘hinge’ story, closing one chapter of Jesus’ ministry and opening another. In John’s parlance it is ‘a sign’, a prelude to another account of one whose death comes at an untimely moment and who is brought back from death to life.

It is as personal a story as there is in all the Gospels. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha, both who are close to Jesus, bringing this story very close to home. The nature of this relationship has us think about our own families right from the start; of those who have died and how others around us have responded, in various ways, with the roles we all tend to play out. We have reason to assume that Lazarus was close in age to his sisters and to Jesus as well. He may well have been in his early thirties, in the prime of his life, when he was felled by a mysterious illness.

We’re told that when Jesus got news of this, he didn’t drop everything and rush to Lazarus’ side. He had reasons for delay. It would take some days to arrive there in the first place, and Bethany was in Judea- closer to Jerusalem, where the danger of arrest was more likely than in Galilee. But beyond that, the message about Lazarus didn’t appear to be ominous; an illness as such was no real call for undue hurry.

Yet when Jesus arrived in Bethany two days later, he found that Lazarus *had in fact died* and had been lying in the tomb for four days.

According to Jewish custom, this meant that Lazarus’ soul had already departed. The King James translation summarizes the state of his body with two words; ‘he stinketh.’ But that didn’t

diminish the faith of either Mary or Martha. They didn't expect a miracle from Jesus when he arrived, but they knew he would have performed one had he been there. They kept the faith.

In terms of the theme of this sermon series: "Imperfect Believers"- you really can't fault Mary or Martha for their expectations at all. They were sure their brother would not have died had Jesus been present. They still trusted him and called him Lord. There is no bitterness in their words to Jesus and no accusation. But tears were shed, naturally enough, and their grief was still real and raw. When Jesus asked where Lazarus had been lain, they were more than ready to show him. "Come and see", they said. [Those are two words that John uses over and over again in his Gospel as a clue to a 'threshold moment', when a new level of engagement is going to happen in the storyline.]

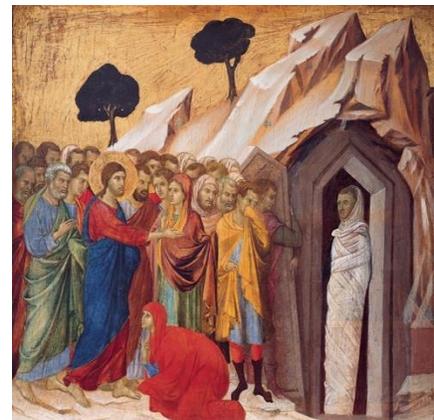
What happens here is something very new. When Jesus sees Mary and Martha weeping, 'a deep anger welled up in him', and then comes the shortest and perhaps most human verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept."

We are familiar with this verse, that Jesus shed tears for his friend Lazarus and for the sadness now come over both Mary and Martha; about the frailty of life and the randomness with which it can be snuffed out. But there is more to it than just that, as intimidating as death is. There is something else going on because Jesus' anger does not subside.

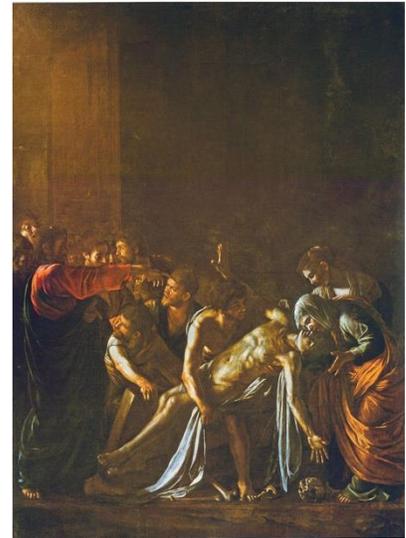
What was Jesus angry at? Was it more than Lazarus? Was it death itself? Was it about what will happen to him over the next weeks to come?

All we really know is what Jesus did next. Taken to the slab of stone in front of Lazarus' tomb, Jesus demanded it be moved away, despite the stench to come. He raised his eyes to heaven and said a prayer.

And though we always read this prayer calmly, with reverence and devotion, I cannot honestly begin to imagine what this actually looked or sounded like.



Have you ever prayed publicly aloud in anger? Artists through the ages have painted this scene, often with halos around Jesus' head, but I don't imagine it happened that way. I think his tears were still falling; tears of sadness at what Mary and Martha had endured, at what Lazarus had gone through, and tears of grief of what the scourge of random death brings to life. He shared a public prayer to make explicit his connection to the power of life over against the power of death. His grief was real, human and as essential to the story as his very presence. He shook with passion and his command to remove the stone was perhaps the strictest command he ever gave.



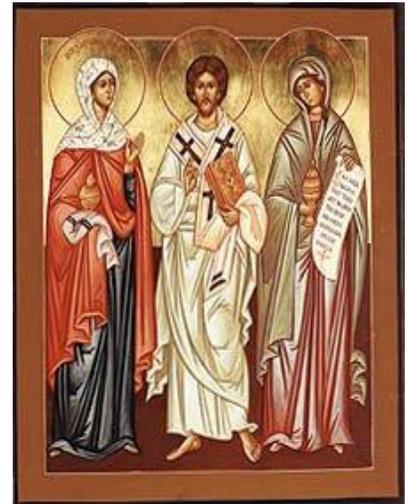
Lazarus must have been listening in to all of the commotion, because at the command, he appeared, still wrapped, but alive and obedient. And that is all we know about Lazarus. But that hasn't stopped novelists, playwrights, poets and even the Church from imagining a future for him.

According to tradition from the Eastern Orthodox Church, sometime after Jesus' resurrection, Lazarus was forced to flee Bethany because of rumoured plots on his life and went to the island of Cyprus. There he was appointed as the first Bishop by the apostle Paul and his colleague Barnabas. He is said to have lived there for thirty more years, and at his death was buried there for the second and last time. Further evidence of this is the story that the Bishop of Cyprus' liturgical stole was actually first worn by Lazarus as part of his shroud, said to have been sewn by the Virgin Mary herself. You can see the stole on display in the cathedral in Nicosia on your next visit to Cyprus.

Interestingly, also according to tradition, Lazarus never smiled during those thirty years after being brought back to life, still troubled by the sight of unredeemed souls he had seen during his four-day stay in Hades. The only exception was when he saw someone stealing an earthen ware pot, he smilingly said: "*the clay steals the clay.*" (Some wry sarcasm there!)

Despite the fascinating storyline that Lazarus presents, he is still not the central character of the story, and despite their compelling faithfulness, neither are Martha or Mary. It is Jesus who both befuddles us with his delayed visit to his dear friend, and his literally death-defying compassion outside Lazarus' tomb that amazes us. That is, if we can believe it.

So, again, with our theme "Imperfect Believers", I'm not looking to put together an airtight argument for Jesus' delay or to unequivocally prove his Lordship over life and death. God leaves room for argument and space for us to live into the questions. And the gift of grief may be a guide given to us for more faith-filled living. Our sadness is not an expression of disbelief; our grief is just what it is.



Jesus' weapon was not a sword or a spear. It was his tears. His tears arose in response to the tears of the sisters of Lazarus, and his courage rose in response to their faith in him. There is no reference in the Gospel of John to Jesus' passionate prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane; this is as close as John gets to that particular scene, here at the tomb of Lazarus, when Jesus wept.

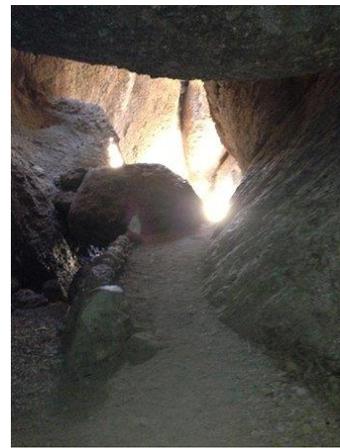
Without this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, the Pharisees and Sanhedrin might not have felt threatened by Jesus' power and growing influence enough to call on the Roman authorities. Briefly put, for Jesus to call Lazarus out of the tomb is for him to enter it.

This is high drama and powerful theology, but it doesn't always have to involve death and tombs. There are more ways to relate to this story than you might imagine. Here's one way that I've been thinking about it recently.

I found out a few weeks ago, through Social Media, that an older brother of a childhood friend of mine passed away. This is now happening with increasing frequency, which is worrisome in itself. But a small group of friends began to share stories about things we did years ago that brought back a link to the Lazarus story that I'd long forgotten.

It must have been when I was 13 or so, and it was around this time of the year, when a group of kids from my neighborhood went on a caving adventure. Growing up in the Poconos was a pretty great thing. We were outside pretty much all the time, rock hopping in the creek or making forts in the woods. This cave adventure, though, was something new for us. I can't remember how we got there, it wasn't far away, just a few miles over the ridge on the way to Cherry Valley, but we must have all squeezed into the back of Larry's older brother's station wagon to get to where this cave was. He was 17 at the time. They said it was a place where the Boy Scouts would go to get merit badges in spelunking; but we didn't know what that word meant and were just looking for an adventure. The cave was on private property. You needed permission from Farmer Jones, or whoever he was, and we didn't have that. So we must have parked a mile away and hiked through the woods to the mouth of this cave.

They called it the 'Indian Cave' because you were supposed to be able to find arrowheads in it, and there was a skull, way back deep in the cave, maybe five or six chambers back in there. That was both a scary and alluring notion. So the six or seven of us made it to the cave and started go in. You needed to lay on your back to slide in at first (I don't know why we were to do it



that way- except that you could see the rocks come crushing down upon you, if that ever were to happen.)

All of us got in the first chamber, just 20 feet or so inside the cave, all except Larry. He was too scared to enter. All we could do was yell for him to get in fast, before Farmer Jones found out we were there. But Larry just stood there crying, with us trying to both yell at him and encourage him to give it a try.

The next thing we knew, he stopped crying and shouted at us that someone was coming; it must be Farmer Jones! With another call of encouragement, Larry finally entered the cave- he didn't want to get caught by mean Farmer Jones!

So there we all were, huddled on our bellies, quiet as we could be, peering out to see if we could see a pair of boots outside the entrance of the cave. We didn't see his boots, but we did hear his voice booming through the woods: "You kids get out of there, or I'll go get my shotgun!" Farmer Jones meant business and we needed to do something, fast.

Larry had stopped crying some time ago now, and his older brother was the one to come up with our plan. All together we would crawl to the mouth of the cave, and then burst out, sprinting as fast as we could, scattering through the woods. It sounded as good a plan as anyone else could think of, so we gathered up our courage and did it. I don't remember even seeing Farmer Jones standing there- I picked out a tree to run toward and got there as fast as I could. I never looked back.

Somehow we all met up at the old station wagon some time later, with a few bloodied knees and a great story to tell. We beat Farmer Jones at his own game, or so we told each other.

So, last week, when I heard of Larry's older brother passing, all I could think about was our adventure in that cave, and our escape.

I grieved his loss, for sure, but my memory of our 'great escape' is the story I'll remember most about him. And when the remnants of our bunch get together the next time we're all home, we'll remember the adventure, the togetherness, the excitement and the courage we shared.

One more thing. We found out some years later that Farmer Jones wasn't who we thought he was. He wasn't an angry homeowner on the lookout for trespassers. He was actually Reverend Jones, from the Cherry Valley United Methodist Church, just down the hill. He was also a Scoutmaster who knew the Indian Cave very well. He knew that five chambers back, beyond where we had gone, there was a very steep drop off, 10-12 feet, they say, that would have been very bad news for us kids. Rev. Jones was warning us, (as well as chasing us off!) He meant well for us, not trouble.

So what I've been sharing with Larry and the others is that his older brother, Bobby, was called back by Farmer Jones, who meant well for all of us.

So in the end, we do not grieve as those without hope, because we are all called and loved by the one who stands just beyond, beckoning us all to life; in Jesus' name. Amen.