

This time of Lent we will be looking at scripture found in both the Narrative and the Revised Common Lectionary to weave together stories of the slow, intentional journey to the Cross. Because of this, some of the stories we will tell will be different from the stories we tend to explore during Lent.

This Lent season we will explore the both-and. The knowing and the not knowing and the tension between how things are and how we want things to be. We are invited to stay – and not skip, dwell and not fix, and to welcome mystery, grief and unresolved longing.

We begin today, not with ashes or temptations, but with a tomb, tears and a love that lingers. Our passage today holds together love and grief, belief and doubt, death and glory and the divine and humanness. This is where we begin. Can we trust God in the dissonance?

Today our scripture story is from John 11:1-44

I want to take this story apart a little bit and I want to start by talking about the part that makes me feel the most uncomfortable. That is, Jesus' refusal to hurry. The story starts with Jesus and the disciples hanging out somewhere far from Bethany – at least 2 days walking away from where Lazarus and his sisters lived. Jesus was in danger. If he returned to Judea he could be captured and stoned by the religious leaders.

What I found interesting when studying this portion was that Jesus waited 2 days after hearing the news, "The one you love (Lazarus) is ill" to leave to go to him. Why did he wait? Doesn't love usually rush? But Jesus waited 2 days. And after 2 days, when they were departing, Jesus knew that Lazarus was already dead. He said, "Lazarus has died. ¹⁵ For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him."

I love the questions Mary and Martha ask, "Lord, if you only had been here..." They were not afraid of asking because they knew and loved Jesus and knew that Jesus, in turn, loved them.

We know the ache of unanswered prayer. We know what it is to wait for healing, justice, change, answers to what the future holds. We know of the ache of "if only you had been here..." But what if God's delay in answer to our prayer isn't that God is absent? What if God is with us while we wait?

Lent asks us to linger in that unanswered place. To resist rushing God toward outcomes and to ask ourselves, "What will happen if we trust God in the process?" and "What will happen if God doesn't show up in our time?"

I really like the relationships that Martha and Mary have with Jesus. We read in the gospel of Luke of the time when Jesus reminded Martha that busyness – even for the right reasons – like hosting a guest – isn't as important as listening and presence. Often when we think of Martha in the Bible – THIS story of a busy hostess is what we think. Martha is chastised and her sister Mary is glorified.

Yet in today's story chastised Martha ran to meet Jesus without shame. And, typical of Jesus, there was no comment about how she, a woman, was even daring to question him, a man, her superior and, as she proclaimed, "the Messiah". Her relationship with Jesus was such that she could go to him with her

doubt and her anger. Martha spoke to Jesus like he was her brother and, to be sure, their relationship was one of love and respect.

“Where were you!” “Why didn’t you hurry to come!” “If you were here, he would not have died!” and then, in a few breaths, perhaps she collected herself, “Even now, I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you.”

This isn’t shallow optimism but brave faith. She was honestly grieving her brother. Yet, as we know, when we grieve, there are still moments of clarity, of calmness, of surety and of faith. Having faith does not mean that one doesn’t have doubt.

You can trust God and still ask hard questions. Faith is showing up with our whole selves – our doubts, our fears, our anger, our impatience, our distrust. Faith is showing up anyway.

And what does Jesus say to Martha? He says, “Your brother will rise again.” Not at the resurrection on the last day, as Martha assumed. No. Jesus corrected her. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Jesus said this to Martha and here, Martha proclaimed, in a time when grief is most fierce: “Yes Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, God’s Son, the One who is coming into the world.”

And what about us? This season of Lent asks us to reflect on what we really believe about God’s power to resurrect. Maybe, in reflection, we meditate on the buds that are forming on the lilac and consider Jesus as the Springtime and the sap and what that would mean for you? For our church? For our world?

Later when Mary arrived on the scene, she also confronted Jesus. “If you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” But Jesus, when he saw her crying, became deeply disturbed and troubled and wept.

What’s interesting here is the narrative shift from instruction or teaching – first to the disciples and then to Martha – to a personal and emotional response to Mary. He didn’t use an “I am” statement or parable or theological correction to her accusing tone. No. Here Jesus was deeply disturbed, troubled, perhaps angered at death, perhaps moved to compassion for the family, perhaps even grieving, and he wept.

“Jesus Wept” This is not weakness. This is divine love fully embodied. This is one of many stories – but perhaps the most memorable story that we witness Jesus, the Christ entering into suffering. God does not stand at a distance while we grieve.

Faith cannot and should not ever cancel sorrow because sorrow is a feature of love. We can believe with deep faith that God is the God of resurrection AND lament and grieve and weep. This does not make our faith weak. This means that we love fiercely. And God is right there in the middle with us weeping too.

The season of Lent asks us to let go of our assumptions of weakness. Be these whether we find emotional expression unprofessional or embarrassing when we witness it in ourselves or others or whether we ought to doubt our faith when we ask questions of God's nearness.

After the stone was removed, Jesus prayed – trusting that God heard what he said and then called out, “Lazarus come out.” And miracle upon miracle, Lazarus came out.

But here's where the language gets lovely. Scripture says, “the dead man came out still bound by his grave cloths.” And Jesus said, “Unbind him and let him go.” Set him free.

God can make us alive again, but unless we are free, we are still bound by death. The community must do the unbinding. Freedom is work that is done by community. New life needs to be welcomed and nurtured and set free, else it cannot truly be alive.

We see this in all sorts of places in this world. Christ calls us to new life, but churches still preach who's in and who is out - that some people are more to be valued than others. Unless the community acts together to unbind, people will still bound to a system that is killing them. Unless we forgive each other, we are still deadened by our grudges.

This season of Lent, witness around you and within you that which is coming alive again. Set it free. Ponder who is still wrapped in grave clothes because of us? What bindings is Christ asking us to cut loose? Let go of old grudges and welcome new perspectives. Release old identities and welcome a new name with new meaning. Forgive. Welcome. Release. WE do not resurrect, but we DO help one another live.

Lent is not a time of clarity and quick fixes. It begins at a tomb that smells like death. It begins with accusations and grief and prayers that feel unanswered, tears that fall freely and love that doesn't rush to resolve what is broken. Lent begins with a God who doesn't work on OUR hurried time – yet this God never deserts abandons.

The story of the resurrection of Lazarus is a story rife with dissonance and tension. The tension of love and grief – A Jesus who loves deeply and yet still delays. We have held the tension of faith and despair – a Martha who believes with fierce courage while her heart is breaking. We are witness to the tension of glory and tears – A Christ who proclaims resurrection and still weeps. And we have held the divine and the human together – a God who gives life, and a community entrusted to set it free.

It's hard to be in this season of dissonance and fully engage the tension. We don't like living in tension. And yet sometimes living in the tension produces strength and endurance and resistance to living only on the surface.

Today's account of Lazarus' resurrection reminds us that God's presence is with us – stays with us – accompanies us always even when prayers feel unanswered, when grief lingers longer than we want, when our faith feels both strong and fragile at the same time. The dissonance of Lent reminds us that God's presence suffuses us when resurrection has been promised—but the grave clothes are still wrapped tight.

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Dwelling in the Dissonance
John 11:1-44

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Because the good news is this: Christ meets us **in** the grief, Christ does not shame our tears nor scold our questions. Christ stands before the tomb and calls life forth even if it's been really stinky. And then Christ turns to us and says, "Unbind him. Let him go."

So, this Lent, dwell here. Stay in the unresolved spaces. Trust that God is at work—even now, even here. Because the glory of God does not bypass tears. It rises through them. And remember the promise Jesus spoke—still echoing in the dissonance: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"