

“God’s Grace In Unlovely Times” – John 11:1-45

Can anyone tell me what happened to the month of March?! One day it’s February, the next it’s April! The year is rushing by, and even now we’re counting down the days to the end of Lent. Next Sunday we celebrate the triumphant arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem, cheered on by the crowds and his path softened with palm branches but today we get a preview of what lies beyond all that noisy and cheering welcome. In what would turn out to be the “last straw” in offending the Pharisees, Jesus performs his most powerful miracle, raising Lazarus from death. Understandably, however, the story is not so much about Lazarus as it is about Jesus, and who he is. With Easter on our minds we can hardly hear this story without the events of Jesus’ own death and resurrection crowding through, and in a bit we’ll see why that is a good and powerful thing.

But first, let’s take a look at the details of the story. If you’re like me, and read a bit of the text that leads up to today’s reading, you’ll have been reminded that following the healing of the blind man Jesus was challenged by the Jews as he walked in the Temple. Never one to shy from controversy, he told them plainly that he and God were intimately connected: “the Father and I are one”. Naturally enough the Jews reacted rather negatively to this outright blatant blasphemy in the Temple and took up stones to stone him. In response Jesus challenged them with “Believe the works I do, if you can’t believe me” and then escaped their wrath by crossing the Jordan River.

This is where we enter today’s reading, for it was while he was there in the back country that word came to him that the one he loved was ill. This was Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, the same Mary who had anointed him with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; with such familiarity and closeness we naturally would expect that Jesus should have immediately rushed to Lazarus’ side, to heal him. I think if we had been there we would have gone nuts with the frustration ... here is his close friend, the one he loved, critically ill and close to death, and he’s rambling on about God’s glory, and pontificating about the Son being glorified, and refusing to move. Two whole days he waffled, and I’m sure the whisperings and mumblings were already starting in the back rows of the people around him. “What’s he up to?” “Why hasn’t he gone to them?” “Doesn’t he care?” They would eventually see, and so would we, just how much he cared, not just from his weeping but by his own death and life experience, but we’re getting ahead of ourselves again.

And if his delaying wasn’t frustrating enough, now that it’s too late to do anything Jesus finally declares “we’re off!” and heads for Judea, where the Jews are ready to stone him on sight. The disciples try to talk some sense into him, pointing out how dangerous it will be to head into that part of the country, but he’s adamant. “Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to wake him”, Jesus tells his followers. “Oh, that’s all right, then, if he’s just asleep”, the poor disciples chorus, once more recruited in the text as straight men, and once more being straightened out by Jesus with his sharp, clear declaration, “Lazarus is dead.” This is the point, and it will be confirmed by more details in a minute: let there be no confusion by anyone hearing this story, Lazarus was not asleep, Lazarus was not in a coma, Lazarus was not in some state of suspended animation: Lazarus was good and truly dead.

Now in case any of us are so incautious as to think that Lazarus and Mary and Martha were treated casually by Jesus as simply so much grist for the glory mill, John is careful to point out in great detail the emotional cost of this miracle on all involved, including and especially Jesus. With great skill in the use of poignant details, John brings alive the heart-wrenching drama of the encounter of Jesus with the grieving sisters. “Lord, if you had only been here, my

brother would not have died”, cries Martha. In the dust of that roadway, in the midst of all the grief, in the center of the confusion about what he means, Jesus makes perhaps the clearest declaration of who he is, and what he has come to offer. “I am the resurrection and the life”, he declares. “Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” To us, who cannot hear these words and this story without seeing the cross and then the empty tomb, his meaning is perfectly clear. But to most of those around him that day, absorbed in grief, the meaning and power of his words were still distinctly unclear. Not so for Martha, who professes, “I believe you are the Messiah” and then goes to share the news of his arrival with her sister Mary.

More tears in the dusty roadway, as Mary falls at his feet. Pain upon pain, the grief builds, and all including Jesus are moved to tears at the loss of their beloved Lazarus. In the shortest verse in the bible, we hear the affirmation that Jesus shared the grief and pain of his people – and he wept. “Is he powerless?” the people ask. “Could he not have saved him?” they puzzle, with just under the surface the nasty implication that his power was hit-and-miss, or inadequate.

“Where have you laid him?”, Jesus asks. “Come and see”, they reply with an ironic use of one of his own favourite expressions. Little could they realize how prophetic that invitation was, for it would not be long before Jesus did indeed see for himself the inside of his own tomb. Did he weep also because he knew that with his actions here he would set in motion the inevitable chain of events leading to the cross, and the tomb? Were his tears at least in part because he knew that the time he had to spend in the flesh with these close friends, companions and loved ones was rapidly drawing to a close? I’d like to think so. His tears were for more pain and sorrow than we could ever begin to understand as well. This Son of God was no unfeeling, impassionate, uncaring divine figure aloof and above it all – this Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ was and continues to be the very essence and embodiment of God’s love and compassion made flesh and bones and tear ducts. If ever there was an affirmation of just how deeply God loves us, it is indelibly expressed in that wee, tiny verse: “Jesus wept”.

But as comforting as compassion and shared sorrow are, they can’t change the way things are – at least usually. “Take away the stone”, Jesus commands. “Lord, are you out of your mind? It’s been four days, and already there is a horrible smell!”, Martha protests. What a gruesome and grisly detail to be included in our bible, eh? We like to think that the scriptures are only about nice things, and clean things, and pretty things, and gentle emotions and love. How quickly we skip over odious details like Martha’s protest about the odor of death, and in doing so how we miss the profound insight that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just for the good times, and the sweet times, and for perfumed people. How much clearer can it be that the good news of God’s reaching out to his people in Jesus was for the un-lovely times as well? The same is true in the Old Testament as well – remember that Ezekiel’s vision of new life being breathed into the reassembled dry bones was an affirmation to the Israelites in exile in Babylon that they would soon be revived also.

The good news of the resurrection and life in Christ is for all of life and living, and does not shy away from the dark and dingy and smelly parts of life. The light of God’s love shines into the dark corners where the unloved cower; his soothing voice reaches into the noise and pain of death and oppression. Martha’s statement about the smell is a reminder that the gospel is very much targeted at real life. It’s also a reminder that there can be no confusion, no arguing that the resurrection of her brother by Jesus was anything other than from death. This is no sleight-of-

hand trick by Jesus, reviving a Lazarus from a coma or from sleep. Four days, and the unmistakable stink of death was confirmation enough that Lazarus was truly dead.

“Lazarus, come out!” With that simple command, the dead man is brought back to life. No incantations, no magic crystals, no thunder and lightning, no smoke and mirrors, just a simple display of the power of God at work in Jesus. Can we explain it in scientific terms? No, not any more than we can explain why gravity exists. Surely, however, the Creator who wrote the laws of physics and chemistry is capable of using them to his own purpose. This incident is about faith. Remember what Jesus said in the Temple, “if you don’t believe me, then believe in the works that I do.” This is about recognizing and believing in the one who could not only give sight to the blind and make the lame walk, but who could even call forth the dead to life again.

Now, I would love to know what happened after the people followed Jesus’ command to unwrap poor Lazarus, wouldn’t you? I mean with Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus, and Jesus. Can you imagine the joy, the excitement, the tears and laughter? I also wonder if any of them caught on then that the price of Lazarus’ exit from the tomb was that Jesus would enter it? We do see Lazarus again, this time at the table with Jesus as Mary anoints him and wipes his feet with her hair, but we don’t ever hear him speak. What could he say? With what words could he describe his experience, and the incredible way he had been touched by the Son of God? Maybe it’s best to see him in silent adoration, for mere words might well cheapen the profound significance of what happened to him.

Of course, plenty of other words would soon follow about this profound event. Words of accusation and condemnation by those who were threatened by such power so evident in Jesus, and who vowed to kill him and Lazarus too. Words of mocking, as Jesus hung dying on the cross; “could he who saved Lazarus not save himself?”, the people asked, still not understanding the breadth and depth of God’s love for even them in Jesus’ own death, and resurrection.

But we can, can’t we? Understand, I mean. Understand just how powerful and complete God’s love is for us? Surely we can see that the power of God so clearly demonstrated by Jesus in calling Lazarus out of the tomb was a sign of hope that we too will share in the resurrection and life promised by him. Surely we can see that same sign of hope confirmed in Jesus’ own death for our sakes, forging a path of forgiveness and reconciliation between us and God. Confirmed especially in his rising again victorious over even death itself, sealing the promise of life everlasting for us, all because we believe in him. As we kneel in the dusty pathways of our own lives, at the feet of this man who not only raised Lazarus but emerged from his own tomb bringing life everlasting, perhaps we can also respond to that ultimate sign of hope by echoing Martha’s words: “We believe, Lord, that you are the Messiah, the Christ. Thank you, Lord Jesus.”