



Rev. Christ Taylor - 03.29.2020

Darkness

The resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh and final miracle performed by Jesus in this Gospel. It not only points towards Jesus' own resurrection which is soon to follow, but is also a symbol of that gift of life that Jesus gives to all who place their trust in him. It is his greatest miracle, and it is immediately after this that the religious leaders decide that Jesus must die.

This eleventh chapter, then, serves as a kind of fulcrum around which the Gospel moves. The first eleven chapters are focused on Jesus' ministry and teaching. From this point forward we now trace his movement towards crucifixion and death.

The chapter begins with Lazarus' illness. His sisters, Martha and Mary send a message to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." They don't actually ask Jesus to come. They just tell him there is a need. They assume that if he knows, that's enough. That if he knows, he will come.

In his commentary on this text, William Barclay shares a story first told by Gandhi's friend and advisor, C. F. Andrews. Two friends were serving together in the First World War. One of them was badly wounded and lay helpless and in great pain in that terrible void called "no-man's-land". At great peril, the other crawled out to help. When he reached his friend the wounded man looked up and said, "I knew you would come."

That's the kind of friend that Jesus is. Martha, Mary and Lazarus – they just know he will be there once he finds out they are struggling. That's his nature. It is who he is; the same Jesus we encounter all through these pages.

Only Jesus didn't come right away. That's the puzzle here. We are told specifically, vss. 5, 6, that "though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."

What? That makes no sense. He loved them, and so he waited? That doesn't feel like love. It feels unnecessarily cruel. Why would he do that? Scholars offer different explanations, but that is just another way of saying that no one really knows for sure. What is clear is that God was aware and that God was at work. It was God's timing that seemed to be

off. As far as Mary and Martha were concerned, Jesus got it wrong. “If only you had been here...”

So often that’s the way God moves in this world. How many times do we find ourselves praying only to find that God has a different plan, or different timing? What happens to Mary and Martha here is consistent with our own experience. As we read in Isaiah, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9). Or, as novelist James Baldwin once put it, “The Lord never seems to get there when you want him, but when he arrives he is right on time.”

The question then, isn’t whether God is at work or not. God clearly is. No, the real question is whether we will choose to trust God even when God seems to be moving in a way that is contrary to our best understanding of what is fair, and true and right?

Jesus’ disciple Thomas often gets a bum rap. Whenever we talk about him we always add the adjective “doubting.” He always associate him with his response when the other disciples told him that Jesus had been raised from the dead: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” he says (Jn. 20:25).

But here in our text, he is the one who shows surpassing trust. Jesus had almost died on their last visit to Judea. The disciples all knew what would happen if he returned. But in the face of Jesus’ decision to go back and be there for Lazarus and Mary and Martha, it is Thomas who turns and says to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Thomas chooses to trust him. What Jesus is doing makes no sense, but Thomas decides to trust him even if that trust leads to their death. Jesus was very clear about the greatest and most important commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37). Trust is what that love looks like in practice. Thomas chose to trust Jesus because he loved him.

One of the greatest lines in all of Scripture comes to us in this eleventh chapter. In verse 25 Jesus says to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Isn’t this exactly what we are looking for? New life? Not just that life which is all eternity, but new life here and now – the Kingdom kind of life; life at its fullest and at its best; life as God intended it from the very beginning of time. We long to be freed from the binding grave-clothes of self-doubt, regret, fear, anxiety and loss – freed of all those things that hold us back.

That's what Jesus came to offer. That's what we find as we turn towards him – the transcendent power of this One who alone can set us free; who alone can breathe new life into the center of our beings.

And it all begins with trust. The kind of trust that Thomas shows. The kind of trust that Martha reveals, “Lord, if only you had been here... but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask” (Jn. 11: 21-22).

It is our trust that is most pleasing to God; our child-like trust that chooses faith and chooses obedience even when the path ahead makes no sense to us... trust through which we open our lives to God's presence and power at work within.

What a terrible ordeal this Coronavirus has been, and there is still the frightening awareness that the worst may still lie ahead. In the midst of it all, it may feel as if God has turned away. It may feel as if God is saying “no” to all our prayers. But the witness of Scripture is clear: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God is at work even here and even now.

And so my prayer for all of us this morning: may God grant us the grace to place our trust in Him so that on that day when God comes up beside us, we can say with that wounded soldier caught amid the carnage of no-man's land, “I knew you would come.”