

There are many Biblical stories that you want a Preacher to explain how to connect with the story. As a child did any of us ever fight to the death with a Giant? Have any ever been swallowed by a Whale? Who has walked on water? Have any had Leprosy? Have you ever lived in Exile? Okay, let's try easier one, this morning we have the story of a loved one being terminally ill and dying... Can any of identify?

I was present with my own father the 3 days and nights before his death. As a pastor I have routinely been called in the middle of the night and before dawn, to be with parishioners as they passed. Among the most holy of moments, has been to be present with couples, when they have shared years of marriage, and to share with them in what they always knew was coming but never went through before. My favorite story, was a man who described that because of his partner's illness, they had not been able to share a bed for the last two years, where they always fell asleep in each other's arms. The Hospice Nurse and I said we could fix that, and pushed their twin beds together making up the double bed with larger sheets, positioning one with their head upon the other's chest. The next morning he described having slept better than in years, and woke with his partner looking up into his eyes. She died 12 hours later.

What is especially striking in this story from John's Gospel are the VERBS that are used.

As most of us learned in Grade School, VERBS are what make stories work. While character development matters, it is the VERBS of what people do and feel that moves the story forward.

In the story of The Raising of Lazarus, the VERBS help us break down the events into units, and better understand what this is all about. AND in the Raising of Lazarus, the VERBS are surprising.

When Jesus first learns of Lazarus' terminal illness, Jesus WAITED two additional days.

There is a great deal of waiting when we are dying.

After diagnosing and trying everything possible to treat symptoms, there is a family meeting deciding if we are in agreement to not continue heroic measures. That can be a terribly hard time for families, getting our hearts around the fact that we do not want them to die, but our bodies are mortal and there are times when we cause more suffering than healing. And often, individual family members feel differently.

I was privileged to sit with my wife's Mom for hours after she and the family agreed to stop intervention, before she died. At one lucid point, she spoke up quite harshly, "Why is this taking so long? I made the decision not to prevent dying, why am I still here? Death is hard work!"

That decision to WAIT requires preparing ourselves to not anticipate a miraculous recovery.

JESUS WAITING represents one of the turning points of this story, because Jesus' disciples, Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary, all believe that if Jesus had not WAITED, Jesus could have prevented Lazarus death.

Jesus did not challenge the 10 Commandments.

Jesus did not come to overturn the LAWS and the Prophets. Jesus did not challenge GOD's plan for our Creaturely mortality. Martha, Mary and the Disciples all believe Jesus could have.

JESUS WAITED for Lazarus to die, not just minutes or hours, but it was 4 days before Jesus came.

Judaism believed that the spirit of the person lingered for 2-3 days after death, but after 4 days no one would have had hope of his recovery.

SO Raising Lazarus is about something other than Preventing Death, the point is assured by JESUS WAITED.

The Second key Verb is used in the shortest sentence in the Bible. JESUS WEPT.

Jesus and the twelve came to the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. MARTHA who throughout the Scriptures was rushing about after many things, rushes out to greet Jesus, stating that if he Jesus had not waited, Jesus might have prevented Lazarus death, and when questioned states her belief that in the end at the last Day all of us will be resurrected. MARY accompanied by the mourners then also greet Jesus, and Mary the woman disciple who had sat at Jesus feet, states that if only Jesus had not waited, Lazarus

could have been saved, but she too believes on the last day we will all be raised. Jesus accompanies the sisters to the tomb where Lazarus was buried. And being one with those who loved LAZARUS, Jesus WEEPS. In all of the world's religions and literature, I do not recall any other reference to a GOD WHO WEEPS, especially weeping for a person! God is described as WALKING through the Garden, as having a STRONG RIGHT HAND to rescue, a BOSOM to carry Israel, there are references to GOD'S ANGER, and to GOD REMEMBERED, but one of the reasons for JESUS BEING HUMAN (EMMANUEL=ONE WITH US) is that through Jesus GOD experienced WEeping. Regularly, we have people who apologize for weeping at church...What better emotion could there be at church than to WEEP? What more human expression?

I need for us to pause here, because we need to question why the Gospel of John tells this story?
Why does Jesus Raise Lazarus from the Dead, before Jesus' Resurrection?

The simplest solution is that the two are not the same. Raising LAZARUS is not preventing DEATH, but demonstration that DEATH does not need to have the last word! DEATH DOES NOT HAVE TO BE FINAL... But Jesus' Resurrection is for all the WORLD, for Death and Evil to be conquered by ETERNAL LIFE, HOPE & FAITH.

There is also belief that JESUS' WEEPING, is Jesus standing at the TOMB and recognizing what will be before him. Jesus brings Lazarus out of the Tomb, because Jesus is going into the tomb.

AND 3RD, Jesus has been pushing the Religious Authorities over and over. Questioning their Authority. Healing on the Sabbath. Religious leaders work very hard to prepare a couple for Marriage, to Baptize and Confirm Believers, to Bury the Dead, we do not like it when somebody interferes in our accomplishments!

The title for today's sermon comes from Martha. Jesus tells them to Open the sealed Tomb, and Martha responds "LORD, THERE WILL BE A STENCH!" The King James had translated this as "HE STINKETH", the New English Bible "THERE WILL BE AN ODOR". Our staff, who choose illustrations for the Bulletin, really wanted to have a photo of a man going...(SNORT)... However, the point is not Martha's Reaction, but the reality that DEATH STINKS and RESURRECTION IS MESSY. As human creatures we value closure. We like to have circumstances, especially difficult circumstances fully resolved and wrapped up with a bow. But DEATH has no closure for us, there can be no reconciliation. Death is the ultimate Cut-Off to relationships. I have lost track in recent years, how many e-blasts we have had to send out asking people to be careful and to understand the mess as Painters had ladders against the building, as the Parking lot was resealed, as Roofers replaced tile, as Air Conditioning units were raised by a crane, as Scaffolding and lifts were brought into the Sanctuary for the Sound System and the Organ. Resurrection is messy. CHANGE IS MESSY.

SO, Who are we to identify with in this story from John? Are we Thomas, who misunderstands whether Lazarus is dead or just sleeping? Are we Martha or Mary, believing in a Resurrection at the end of time but not really in our lifetime? Are we Jesus, commanding the Dead to rise? Imagine, we are Lazarus... There comes a certain time when we are going to die and nothing prevents death. But do we believe in something greater than Death, something after? What do we imagine DEATH to feel like? How would it feel to be Resurrected? When Jesus calls, will we respond, knowing that resurrection like death is messy (?) we will have a lot to clean up that we had left behind.

The FINAL IMPORTANT VERB in this passage comes from JESUS: "UNBIND HIM!" In the church we are really good at binding things up. We create policies and procedures for everything. We put baby girls and boys into BAPTISMAL DRESSES. We have Weddings where everyone wears uncomfortable clothes. Prior to days of embalming and cremation, as here with Lazarus, those burying the dead tied their hands together and bound their feet, wrapping the body in grave clothes to prevent muscles constricting. Yet what Jesus instructs the church is: Our responsibility is to remove the bindings and restrictions.