

1 Corinthians 15:50-58
Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 11:1-57

March 6, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?
SOMETHING MORE THAN SOOTHING WORDS**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When Nancy and I graduated from seminary in May 1983, we were called to be Associate Pastors at the First Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. We began our work on June 1. Shortly after we arrived at the church, the Senior Pastor went on his annual vacation and continuing education trip to Maine. Nancy and I were now responsible for our own jobs plus additional preaching, worship leadership, and pastoral care situations.

One day Ann, the church secretary, buzzed me on my phone to let me know that a church member had died. After I hung up the phone, I sat at my desk paralyzed by fear. I didn't know what to do! Actually, that's not entirely true. I knew what to do — get up and go see the surviving family members. What I didn't know was how to make everything OK for the family. I didn't know the right words to say to take away all of their pain and sorrow and fear. Because I didn't know how to do that, I was scared.

Thirty-three years later, I'm not embarrassed or ashamed to share that story. It didn't take long being a pastor to realize that ***I*** can't make everything OK — ***I*** can't take away all of the pain and sorrow and fear that come along with a loved one's death. But, that doesn't mean I don't have something important to say when someone dies — whether it's in the hospital room or at the person's house or in my study when I meet with family members or at the funeral or memorial service or when we stand by the graveside. And that something important to say is what Jesus said to Martha when she went out to meet him on the outskirts of Bethany: "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." (John 11:25-26)

Folks often tell me, "I don't know what to say when somebody dies." My guess is they are worried about the same thing that paralyzed me at my desk in Rocky Mount. How do you make everything OK? A few years ago I attended a gathering of pastors as part of the Pastor as Spiritual Guide Program. It was something of an alumni reunion. A minister and church staff member had been invited to share their story with us. The staff member's child had been killed in an automobile accident after a Friday night football game. They both shared their experiences of grief — one as a pastor and family friend, the other as a parent and church member. I'll never forget the mother telling us, "When you go to see somebody who is grieving, say only what you know is true!"

That might mean saying, “I don’t know what to say right now!” or “My heart is breaking for you” or “I’m here for you” or “God loves you and so do I.”

This long story from John’s gospel is one of the most intimate scenes from Jesus’ life. Obviously Jesus was close friends with Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Apparently he stayed with them from time to time. When he visited Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus used their house as home base since it was only a couple of miles outside of the capital city. John makes it plain throughout the story that Jesus and this family were close and that Lazarus’ death deeply affected Jesus: Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Jesus began to weep. Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. In this story, Jesus shows us the importance of what is sometimes called “the ministry of presence.” At first, the most important thing Jesus did was, he showed up and cried with Martha and Mary. Someone has said, “[Mary’s and Martha’s] relationship with Jesus does not mean that bad things do not happen. But Jesus is ultimately present with them.”

This Lenten sermon series is designed to tell the stories of different Bible characters who met Jesus and had to decide how to answer his crucial question, “Who do you say that I am?” Today’s sermon was supposed to focus on Mary and her reaction to Jesus. Just a few minutes ago, we heard “Mary” begin her comments to us this way, “Who is this Jesus? Well, I thought I knew.” What an honest statement!

Actually, this story from John’s gospel is full of characters who, in one way or another, make a decision (either by what they say or do) about who Jesus is. And their decisions/reactions sound a lot like many of the other characters we’ve heard about so far during Lent.

First, there are the disciples, who don’t get what Jesus is talking about — “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” So Jesus had to tell them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.” Although they had tried to warn Jesus against going back to Bethany because it was a dangerous place for him, Thomas steps forward and says (reminiscent of Peter), “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Next, there is Martha, who runs out to meet Jesus. Maybe it’s because she knew him so well. Maybe it’s her grief speaking. Maybe it’s a combination of the two. Whatever, Martha confronts Jesus and bluntly says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” True statement — but Lazarus **did** die! When Jesus offered her the assurance of the resurrection, Martha confessed her orthodox belief for the future — “I know he will rise again.” Then Jesus gave her more than she bargained for (and perhaps ever hoped for) when he said, “I am the resurrection and the life — right now! Do you believe this?” Martha’s answer sounds so much like Peter’s confession of faith, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah/Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Just a few minutes later, however, when Jesus tells her to take away the stone from Lazarus’ tomb, Martha protests with one of the most honest and down-to-earth statements in the Bible. The King James Version says, “Lord, by this time he

stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.” Jesus says to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Then we come to Mary — today’s featured character — who knelt at Jesus’ feet. Was she worshipping him? Was she pleading with him? Was it both? But, through her tears, she said the same thing as her sister, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In her honest statement you can hear a plea for help: “Lord, do something now!”

The cast of characters continues, with a variety of reactions:

There are the Jewish friends and neighbors who show up to help the sisters mourn and cry with them. Some of them are impressed by how much Jesus loved Lazarus. But some of them seem to be skeptical or even critical, “Couldn’t he have kept this man from dying? Why didn’t he do something sooner?” After Lazarus walked out of the tomb, many of them believed in Jesus, but some of them went and told the Pharisees what they had seen.

And what do the Pharisees and other religious leaders do? They call a council meeting and wring their hands and wonder what to do about Jesus! They’re afraid of the people, but they’re even more afraid of the Romans. Obviously they don’t believe in Jesus, so they plot to arrest him.

One of the leaders stands out, Caiaphas, that year’s high priest. He berates his fellow religious leaders for their wishy-washiness and lays out the most expedient, self-serving strategy for dealing with Jesus. Ironically, although he certainly doesn’t mean it this way, Caiaphas speaks the truth about what Jesus’ death means: “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” (John 11:50) His cynical plan sounds a lot like the mocking of the leaders at the foot of the cross: “Save yourself, and come down from the cross! He saved others; he cannot save himself.” (Mark 15:30-31) That’s the point — if Jesus saves himself, he cannot save others, including you and me. But he did save others, including you and me, and so he could not save himself.

That leaves just one character to hear from — Lazarus himself. But we don’t hear a word from him. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the gospel included some kind of conversation between Lazarus and Jesus? “Thank you, Lord, for bringing me back to life! I believe you are the Christ! I will follow you wherever you go!” But Lazarus is silent — at least when it comes to saying anything. But he does do something that is significant — he obeys Jesus and comes out of the tomb! I wonder if this isn’t a message to us from John about what it means to be one of Jesus’ followers — that Jesus’ call to life and to follow him comes to us even in the midst of pain and sorrow and the stink of death.

The story about Mary and Martha and Jesus and the resurrection and the life is bookended by stories about the threat of death. Before Jesus went to Bethany, the people tried to stone him and the leaders tried to arrest him. After he raised Lazarus from the dead, the leaders gave orders “that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.” When you read a little further in the

story about Jesus' last week, you find out that "when the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus." (John 12:9-11)

One writer has said, "Having Jesus at our tombs also means that we must follow him to his." Lazarus walked out of the tomb to live again, only to have a death warrant written up against him because he was alive again. Jesus would be put to death because he gave life, not just to Lazarus, but to everyone who believes.

The irony is almost overwhelming, but the promise of this story is even more overwhelming. The gospel reading this morning was quite a bit longer than usual, but it didn't seem right to lop off the beginning and the ending of John's story to hear just the part about Lazarus walking out of the tomb. That is the focal point, of course, the greatest of Jesus' miracles or signs — calling a dead man out of the tomb! But the shadow of death — for both Lazarus and Jesus — hangs over this whole story and all of the characters, especially Mary and Martha.

It is often said that funerals are for the living, not the dead. When we gather in this sanctuary for a funeral or memorial service, I almost always include in my call to worship what Jesus said to Martha in her time of grief, "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." Those words don't take away all of the grief and sorrow and fear and pain. But they are something more than just soothing words. They are Jesus' promise to Mary and Martha and everyone who faces death — they are Jesus' promise to you and to me in the midst of death.

During this Lenten season we hear Jesus ask again and again, "Who do you say that I am?"

Today Jesus himself answers that question: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Then he asks us another important question: "Do you believe this?"

How we answer Jesus makes all the difference for our lives — not just for the future, as Martha thought, but for our lives today, right here, right now.

Here is a prayer from the *Book of Common Worship* that I sometimes use at funerals. It sums up very well this story about Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Jesus and death and life and death and life eternal. Let us pray: ***God, give to us now your grace, that as we shrink before the mystery of death, we may see the light of eternity. Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your grace in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.***

Congregational Response to the Sermon

“Shadows Lengthen Into Night”

*Deeper in the garden’s chill, Jesus kneels to pray alone,
wrestling with God’s holy will, crying out, “Let it be done!”
Shadows lengthen into night.*

*All too soon, the silence rends, with a crash of club and sword.
Judas, still received as “Friend,” with a kiss betrays his Lord.
Shadows lengthen into night.*