

Lessons:

Ezekiel 37:1-14,  
Romans 8:6-11,  
John 11:1-45,  
Psalm 130

Sisters Mary and Martha were getting really desperate. -- Let's put ourselves in their shoes, shall we?

There they were, sitting by the bed -- watching their dear brother Lazarus grow sicker and sicker by the hour -- The Vernors was not working -- (anybody else's mother give them Vernors when they were sick?)

Two sisters were ministering to their dear brother -- in this small, but close-knit household that had given everything to following Jesus.

The Bible leads us to believe that all three had started following Jesus early on, and were practicing what Jesus preached.

Just look at how they lived -- They had taken Jesus' advice and remained single. -- They lived together, sharing everything in order to free up money for the poor.

And in one case, that we're all familiar with, that episode when Mary had saved up enough money to buy some expensive oil to anoint Jesus' feet.

These were people who not only listened to Jesus and heard his words -- but they "got it" -- they had bought into his radical teachings and had changed their entire lives because of Him.

And these three were not only some of Jesus' closest disciples -- these three were, arguably, Jesus' best friends.

And there they were -- sitting in Lazarus' bedroom -- as he became more infirmed with each passing day, -- and then one day, he slips into a coma.

Sure, it was no easy decision to call for Jesus -- Mary and Martha and Lazarus knew He was doing some really important things -- they'd been praying for him, we imagine they'd even been sending Him cards and food and money.

But things had gotten desperate -- Lazarus was dying -- And when they called for Jesus, they must have been really confident that He would come -- as the text just told us, they knew that Jesus really loved them.

And so they called a messenger and sent him on his way -- and the three of them waited -- and waited, and waited...

You and I can imagine the sisters comforting Lazarus while they were waiting -- "Don't worry, Jesus will be here in no time -- "We've sent out the messenger, it won't take long.

"After all, we have all seen Jesus heal people before, total strangers -- "Of course He will be here any time now and bring you back to health."

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Of course Jesus would be here soon -- Not only did Jesus really love them -- but the sisters knew that Jesus was aware of the social circumstances surrounding this family.

As we all know, this was a man and two sisters living together in a patriarchal society -- If Lazarus died, what would happen to Mary and Martha?

There were no marriage prospects -- They couldn't make a living on their own -- There was only life without a man to care for them -- This left begging or prostitution.

Jesus knows Lazarus is the breadwinner -- that Lazarus is Mary and Martha's Social Security (Dylan Breuer) -- and Jesus would never leave these faithful sisters to a life of poverty and harlotry -- would He?

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We can only imagine the myriad of thoughts that went through their minds... -- ...as they waited and waited and waited.

Soon the day came when their messenger returned -- And he assured the Mary and Martha and Lazarus that Jesus had received the message.

He did!? -- Then where is He? -- Where is Jesus?

With every tick of the clock -- with every passing hour -- Where is Jesus?

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And you and I can imagine that that was the overriding question for this entire family.

We can guess that they may have even been Lazarus' final, dying words -- as he lay there, gasping for breath, life slowly slipping away from his weary body as he wondered where his best friend might be:

“Where is Jesus?” -- This question had probably become Mary and Martha's daily litany.

As they, now all alone, wrapped their brother's body -- Watched it born from their home -- As they sat quietly weeping through the funeral -- (Yes, Jesus even missed his best friend's funeral!)

As the body was laid in the tomb and the stone rolled across the cave -- sliding into place with a resounding thud -- an exclamation point to their lingering doubt, growing anger and disappearing faith:

“Where is Jesus?”

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And for any of us who have ever felt like our best friend Jesus wasn't there -- that Jesus wasn't listening.

For any of us who have ever felt abandoned by God -- after a miscarriage, a car wreck, an abortion, a divorce, a lay-off, a flunked test, being dumped by a best friend -- we all know the question well -- “Where are you Jesus?”

For any of us who've ever reasoned -- “C'mon Lord, I've done everything I'm supposed to do... “I give money to the church, I help my neighbors, I come to church on Sunday -- “Why aren't You hearing me?”

“How could you abandon me in my hour of need -- We've all asked the question:

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"Where is Jesus?"

Yes, if you and I think about it, we too can put ourselves in Mary and Martha's shoes.

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As we all know, it was two more days before word finally came that Jesus was on his way.

And unable to contain herself any longer -- Martha violated all sorts of social and moral customs by scandalously, dangerously, impetuously, and angrily marching right out by herself to meet Jesus.

You and I can only imagine the depth of her anger at God as she let go with both barrels: "Where were you Jesus?"

"We were hurting, Lazarus was hurting, Mary is still hurting so badly that I had to come without her -- "And if you had been here my brother would not have died."

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And Jesus' response is, for you and me, the latest installment -- the day's latest edition of an assurance that he gave Martha -- and an assurance that he gives you and me -- that Jesus is up to something in their lives and in our lives that we don't know anything about -- that we can't imagine.

Jesus is up to something far more important than the pains and problems that overwhelm us... even this morning.

"Your brother will rise again"- was Jesus' assurance to Martha.

And Jesus tells her, and us, in no uncertain terms:

"For all who believe in Me will find life."

"All who believe in Me will find a meaning and a purpose and a fulfillment in their lives that transcends our present pain and suffering."

Something dramatic is going on. -- Our pain, our suffering, our anger and our disappointment is not irredeemable -- There is something else happening -- And that "something else" is a new way of living.

It's the Jesus Way of living that provides our lives with an incredible ending, -- a happy ending far better than we could ever imagine.

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And so Jesus heads toward Lazarus' home -- Mary now hears He's on his way -- And, like Martha, she goes out to meet Him -- and asks the very same question that her sister had asked: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

So Jesus asks to see the tomb -- And we all know what happens here.

In fact there is a great depiction of this event printed on our bulletin cover -- take a look if you have one.

It's a black and white copy of an oil painting, done in 1711 by the French painter Jean Jouvenet. -- If you want to see it in color when you go home, the website is printed in the bulletin.

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But for now, take a look at the central character -- Jesus, standing in the right-center.

He's identified by that ethereal light behind his head -- which is called a Nimbus, but all you art scholars knew that.

And the direction in which Jesus is looking takes us to the bottom, left-hand corner of the painting -- this is where we find the second most important character -- Lazarus.

Jesus has just called him from the tomb -- and Lazarus's look of joyous surprise reminds you and me of those stunning homecomings of our own -- Kind of like Barb Veselenak looks when her son Paul surprises her by coming home from college unexpectedly -- "I'm here, can you believe it?" -- And like Lazarus, our college kids too, often bring dirty clothes that need washing...

From here, our eyes move to the right -- first stopping at the man holding the torch directly in front of Lazarus.

Look at this man -- he embodies so well our initial reactions -- He's telling us, in a Norman Rockwell way -- "How can this be! Lazarus, we thought you were dead!"

And as our eyes move farther to the right -- this shared sentiment seems to grace the faces of those two youngsters -- maybe they're Lazarus' small cousins.

Look at them, they are caught between awe and fear -- And it's their mother who they're clinging to -- who gives us the very first clue as to what this miracle is really all about.

It is not so much that a dead man has been brought back to life -- it is that God incarnate is in our midst -- and is up to something really cool.

This woman is not looking at Lazarus, who just rose from the dead -- She's looking at Jesus.

She seems to "get it" -- And so does the crippled man lying at her feet, off to the right.

We notice the crutch and the bedding -- His hands are clasped in joyful prayer and are pointed heavenward -- And they seem to say:

"Lord, me next!"

"Do something miraculous in my life too!"

And you know what?

That's a prayer for all of us too. -- You and I are like this man.

Then, as our eyes continue to the right, moving around the periphery of the image -- we see more of Lazarus' friends and the Jewish leaders who the text also tell us about

And they, too, seem much less interested in running to see a now-living Lazarus -- as they are interested in pondering and discussing among themselves the true gravity of this event.

And this, of course, is what this miracle asks you and me to do as well.

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Jesus has raised someone from the dead -- It is the most striking miracle story in John's entire Gospel.

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Lazarus, whose very name, in Hebrew means “God Helps”

- is an archetype for every one of us who are feeling like our lives are in a rut
- entombed in our day to day rituals
- enslaved to habits and tendencies and proclivities that we too want to be set free from.

The challenge of this Gospel is for you and me to put ourselves in Lazarus’ shoes -- to hear the voice of God in the midst of our slumber.

For in hearing Jesus’ voice, you and I are also awakened to new life.

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In what ways do you and I need to be awakened?

Two ways.

First, we need to be awakened to the understanding of who we really are. -- We need to constantly hear what the voice of Jesus is saying about us.

The Bible tells us that we are loved and worth loving.

The Bible is a mirror showing us our true identities as a people who are incredibly gifted and worth dying for -- most all of us have serious self-image problems.

We don’t believe how truly wonderful the Bible tells us we are!

Instead, we believe the many voices inside our heads that tell us differently.

We know what they are:

- a litany of inward and outward voices that trumpet our missteps and mistakes
- voices that may have been with us from childhood
- voices that tell us about our missed opportunities, failed performances, broken promises, and shattered expectations.

“Look at the economy, my waistline, my checkbook, my dirty house, my messy car, my go-nowhere job, my goofy kids, and a city mired in decades of despair.”

These images haunt us -- and little by little make their marks on us and in us -- and convince us that we are not destined to become all that Jesus tells us we can be.

These profound images entomb and bind us in our own bedraggled garb -- which is why we need to hear and heed the voice of Jesus.

Jesus tells us that we are gifts -- that we are inheritors of incredible blessings, and our blessedness as a people called by God to do truly great things.

The voice of Jesus is calling each one of us to come out this morning

- to leave behind the junk
- the voices of self-doubt and failure
- and heed the victorious call of new life.

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In what ways do we need to be awakened?

Two ways, here’s the second.

You and I need to be awakened to a deeper understanding of who we are in the world.

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Jesus' words don't just come booming from the heavens -- Jesus has a human voice.

As you and I know well, the human face of Jesus is found in the poor.

The Bible says, "Whatsoever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me."

You and I are in the top 5% of the world's richest people.

92% of the world doesn't own a car -- I have three. And I'm not alone here.

30,000 children will die today because of easily preventable diseases, most having to do with dirty water.

1 Billion people, one-sixth of the world, do not have access to clean drinking water.

Sure I know the economy in Michigan is poor -- But you and I can never forget that the poor in America die, for the most part, from obesity not starvation.

The voice of the poor is calling you and me and every other Christian in America to wake up -- to come out of our comfortable cocoons and hear the voices of dire poverty that are echoing all around us.

Jesus was not finished with Lazarus. -- That's why He called him from the dead.

Jesus is not finished with us either.

The Lord has an incredible plan ahead for you and me and the world we have been given.

And we need to unstop our ears and tune in to the voice of Jesus, especially through the poor -- who is calling us out to do amazing things.

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As you and I come forward and take this bread and wine -- and we re-affirm, once again, our faith in this Jesus -- and our desire to listen to that call -- let this bread and wine strengthen us to pay more attention to the ways that Jesus is waking us up.

How can you and I strive to hear what Jesus is saying?

How can you and I strive to obey that voice?

How can you and I envision ourselves arising, anew to new life -- new life for the sake of our souls and for the sake of the world?

**Amen.**