

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year A
4/2/17 • Lent 5
John 11:1-41

The beautiful story of the raising of Lazarus is a story about grief. It's also a story about love. But first it's a story about grief. It begins with Mary and Martha, sisters in the midst of the experience of grief and loss. And their grief is amplified because their friend, Jesus, didn't come when they called him. They imagine that if Jesus had shown up on time, their brother might not have died. So along with grief and loss, it's also a story about blame. Blame often accompanies grief. In the midst of pain or loss, we often want to assign blame to push away the pain. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Notice that Martha and Mary both say this to Jesus at different points. "Jesus, if only you had come when we called you, my brother would not have died."

Martha and Mary aren't the only ones experiencing grief and loss. Jesus is also experiencing grief and loss at the death of his friend. "Jesus began to weep," we're told as he approached the tomb of Lazarus. The one who, in John's gospel is presented as the Lord of Heaven and Earth, weeps at the death of his friend. The Lord of Heaven and Earth himself experiences the pain, the sorrow, the suffering, of human loss.

Grief is as much a part of what it means to be human as joy. Joy, we welcome. Grief, we push away. But we need both to have the experience of being fully human.

David Whyte is one of my favorite living poets. He lives on Whidbey Island and if you ever have the opportunity to hear him read his poetry, run don't walk, to get there. Here's a short poem of his called

The Well of Grief.

Those who will not slip beneath
The still surface on the well of grief
Turning downward through its black water
To the place where we cannot breathe
Will never know the source from which we drink,
The secret water, cold and clear.
Nor find in the darkness glimmering
The small round coins
Thrown by those who wished for something else.

What a beautiful and profound image. If the bottom of the Well of Grief is the source of life, the secret water, cold and clear. But you have to slip deeply into the well, you have to slip into the well to the point where you feel as if you can't breathe. If you stand outside the well, throwing your coins in, hoping for a different result, you miss out. And does running and hiding from grief lessen the pain of grief? What do you think? Slipping into the well of grief – going all the way down – means you are fully alive.

So the story of the raising of Lazarus is a story about grief and loss. The grief of Martha and Mary and the grief of Jesus too. Jesus' experience of grief – God's experience of human grief – means that we are never – ever – alone in our grief. God knows the pain of our grief.

And this is also a story about love. About how love breaks into the midst of grief and loss. "I am the resurrection and I am life," Jesus says. And then he turns to Martha and asks her if she believes him. "Yes Lord, I believe," she replies. Do you remember last week when we said that the turning point of the story of the healing of the man born blind wasn't the healing itself, but the man's declaration to Jesus, "Yes Lord, I believe"?

I think something similar is happening here. Martha says "Yes Lord, I believe that you are resurrection and you are life." In John's gospel, faith isn't understood as agreeing with a set of propositions. No, faith is believing, trusting in Jesus as the Word made flesh. Trusting that in Jesus, God has come into the world. Faith is when we come into relationship with Jesus and allow Jesus' life to be the pattern for our own lives – when we allow Jesus to become the **blueprint** for our lives. Drawing close to Jesus' heart, we draw close to God's heart. And when Martha and Mary do that, grief becomes joy.

In John's gospel there are seven miracles – which are signs – of how God in Christ works in the world. This is the last of them. These miracles aren't important as miracles – Lazarus, after all, will eventually die a human death – but as signs of God's action. The raising of Lazarus is Jesus' last sign before entering Jerusalem to face his own death. And it is the final sign that the Lord of Heaven and Earth is also the Lord over Death. When we allow Jesus to walk alongside us through the pain of grief and loss and death, we carry with us our hope for resurrection and new life.

I'll share a story with you about grief and loss and love. I had a brother named Tommy who was 18 months younger than I. He was happy, filled with life and energy, a very sweet toddler. He was also a Down's Syndrome child. My mom and dad used to tell me that Tommy and I were inseparable. And then the summer when I was 3, Tommy caught pneumonia and died. A terrible loss that was the source of considerable grief in our family. And then, in November of the same year, four of my cousins whose ages ranged from 6 to 18 months were killed in a tragic accident. You can only imagine the grief. Now I certainly had to imagine the grief because to this day, I have no conscious memory of either of these events. Of course I

would have experienced the deep pain and separation and loss from my dearly loved brother and the cousins whom I played with two or three times a week. But I have no memory of that either.

Now fast forward to my college years. The summer I was 20, I was working as a counselor at the Diocese of West Virginia's summer camp, a place called Peterkin, much like our Camp Houston here in this Diocese of Olympia. It's in a place of sublime natural beauty in the Allegheny Mountains, near the headwaters of the Potomac River in the Eastern Panhandle of WV a couple hours east of Washington. D.C.

One late summer evening, I found myself on a rough-hewn log bench on a hilltop overlooking verdant farm land. In the distance I could see the South Branch of the Potomac River arising out of the Alleghenies. The gentle breeze, the hum of the cicadas, the farmer in the distance cutting summer wheat – the whole scene was speaking to me deeply of the glory of Creation – I remember that scene and that feeling to this day. And then completely without warning, completely out of the blue, I began to cry. To really cry. At first, for a few moments, I couldn't understand what was going on. Then, again without warning, I saw my brother Tommy's face. And then I saw the faces of my four cousins, all of these faces that I only knew consciously through old photographs. And gradually I realized what was happening. I was grieving. Consciously grieving the tragic events of pain and loss that had happened many years before. It was cathartic to finally grieve openly and consciously. And then as the tears stopped, I began to experience an intensity of light and a sense of deep and powerful peace. A sense that all was well. A sense that Tommy and Roberta and Billy and Robby and Mary Beth were well. That they were whole and that I was whole. They were at peace and I was at peace. They were with Jesus, and I was with Jesus.

That knowing of the deep peace of Jesus that I experienced in the midst of grief and loss was and is a knowing deep in my bones. Deep in my soul. In the midst grief and loss, Jesus was there. Carrying me down into the Well of Grief. Carrying me to the secret water, cold and clear. The source of my life and the lives of Tommy and my dear cousins. I had to go down, all the way down, down through the black water of the Well of Grief to find that source of new life. To find resurrection.

As we follow Jesus through Holy Week, we will be following him down into the Well of Grief. Saying good bye to his friends, and his betrayal by one of them and abandonment by the rest of them. His unjust trial and then his brutal execution. We will follow Jesus all the way down through the black water cold and clear – all the way down to the bottom of the Well of Grief. See the way down to resurrection and new life. This is what we mean when we say Jesus is the pattern or the blueprint for our lives. He has pioneered the path for us. Down, all the way down into the Well of Grief. Which is always the way to new life. Amen.