

“Do You Believe This?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Fifth Sunday of Lent – April 2, 2017

John 11: 17-27

We are one week away from Palm Sunday, from the beginning of Holy Week, from the climax of the Christian narrative in Jerusalem. We are two weeks away from Easter Sunday, when the darkness of Good Friday will be pierced by the light of resurrection hope. We are nearly there. We are almost to Jerusalem.

It seems fitting, then, that we hear a story from John’s Gospel that is like a primer for Holy Week. The death and raising of Lazarus is the ultimate foreshadowing of the events that will take place in a few short days in the Holy City. It’s almost as if John doesn’t want his readers to miss the point of this incredible story he’s been telling. So, he recounts this miracle from Jesus’ ministry that mirrors what will happen to Jesus himself.

This story is not only a primer for Holy Week and Easter. It is also a gut-check for each of us as to how we see death as a part of life. It is a reminder that there are moments in life when we must all answer the question: “Do you believe this?”

The Jews who came to console Mary and Martha were no doubt saddened at the death of their brother, Lazarus. Mary and Martha were no doubt grief-stricken by the death of their brother, as well. Yet they also had emotions of anger and resentment toward Jesus. Earlier in this story from John, they had made a point of getting word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, and needed the healing touch that only Jesus could provide. When Jesus did not arrive in time, they let him know how they felt: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). We could compare their anger at Jesus to the anger or frustration we may feel toward a doctor who is unable to save our loved one: “How could you let him die? You said you could save him!”

In a deeper sense, death is a sign of our own mortality and humanness. It is a force that brings into plain view our inability to change everything for good. We cannot prevent death, for it is an inevitable part of living. And yet we so often feel helpless in the face of death because we think we can change so many things. But death is unchangeable. It cannot be reversed. We are forced to cope and live and deal with its outcome. Perhaps that is why at times of death, we feel shocked and confused and out-of-sorts. It is not something we humans deal with very well, and our emotions usually run the gamut in its aftermath.

If there is one trait of this story from John that stands out, it is the human side of Jesus that is so apparent. Leading up to his arrival at Bethany, Jesus continually says that Lazarus’ death was so that the glory of God might

be shown through him. But once he meets Martha and Mary, and observes the Jews with them weeping and grieving for Lazarus, something changes in Jesus. After our passage today, John says that Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11:33). Then we read that as he moves toward the tomb, he openly weeps and continues to be greatly disturbed. For some reason, Jesus’ demeanor changes from calm and determined to upset and somber once he arrives at Lazarus’ tomb. It is one of the few instances in the gospels when the human side of Jesus is revealed to us.

What makes Jesus seem even more human in this story is possibly the fact that in Lazarus’ death, he foresaw his own death which was to come. The mourners all around him, the stone covering the tomb — death seemed to be very much in control in Bethany. Perhaps this is when Jesus knew death was in his near future. Perhaps he realized that what lay ahead would be painful and excruciating. He must have been at least scared, or fearful, or anxious about his future. Death was everywhere. There seemed to be no escaping its grip.

In the midst of such sadness and despair and darkness, Jesus gives life. He has made it clear from the beginning of the story that Lazarus’ death is not meant for sadness, but rather “for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (11:4). He has overcome many obstacles to reach this point at the tomb: the disciples’ misunderstanding and confusion, the Jews’ skepticism at his loyalty and power, Martha’s wish not to roll the stone away because of the foul odor of the body. He pushes ahead through all of these obstacles, for nothing will prevent God’s will from occurring in this place. He has already told Martha what he is there for: “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” (11:25). That is his purpose in this world, and he has come to show it. After our passage, the story reaches its peak, as amid all the death which surrounds him, Jesus provides life, raising Lazarus from the dead.

It is very easy for us to think there is nothing after death, nothing after this life, nothing after the emotions and experiences and people of this world. It is difficult to believe in something that we cannot see or taste or touch or hear. But in the foul odor of death, in the torn pieces of cloth wrapped around his body, in the loud voice of Jesus calling out — in the raising of Lazarus we smell, see, and hear the promise of eternal life. It is a promise that Jesus is prepared to offer to us if we believe that he is the resurrection and the life.

Christine Chakoian, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Lake Forest, Illinois, writes the following: *We all know darkness and futility; this is inevitable. And it is exactly this hopelessness that (John’s) lesson lifts up with poignant accuracy.*

One of the most vivid, realistic aspects of this passage in John is that sorrow and grief are allowed to emerge full bore. Martha is resentful of Jesus’ delay, and in the same breath she trusts in the power of his compassion. Mary

blames Jesus, and at the same time kneels at his feet. Jesus himself is deeply moved and troubled; he weeps alongside the beloved sisters and their compassionate friends.

As was promised from the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is not God's ethereal, disembodied presence, but rather God's Word that has become flesh, dwelling fully among us (1:14). Jesus weeps; he groans; he grieves; in the end, he will suffer and die alongside us and for us.

*A cynic might well ask what difference any of this makes. If death is the last word, then it is romantic folly to debate whether to set our minds on the flesh or on the Spirit - whether to seek first to defend ourselves or to give God glory. But of course, death is not the final endpoint. Jesus says to Martha, and to us, "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. Do you believe this?" The word believe fails to capture what Jesus is asking . . . Do you trust this? Do you rest your faith in this? Do you live toward this? (*Christian Century*, March 15, 2017, 18).*

That's it. That's the question we have to ask and answer. We can say we believe in Jesus and God's love for us. Sure. That's easy. But what Jesus is asking Martha - and all of us - is much deeper: Do you trust this?

In the midst of life's struggles, do you trust that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? When you are faced with an ethical dilemma at work, or a decision related to your loved one's care, or the challenge a child presents every day, or uncertainty about whether you want to face another day - amid these and all of life's struggles, where do you turn? It's not enough to say you just believe something. It's about trusting in something, relying on someone, living toward what your faith embodies.

We say what we believe in times that aren't full of crisis. We have heady arguments about theology over cups of coffee or in Church School classrooms. We flippantly cast off others' beliefs when we are reading news articles or social media.

But when you come face-to-face with trials, with chaos, with death, your faith is no longer about words or arguments. It's about what you trust and rely on and what you've been living up until that point. Do you trust that God loves you, even when you don't love yourself? Do you trust that God will grant you peace, even when you are full of discord and unease? Do you trust that God will grant you and your loved ones everlasting life, even when you are staring at a closed tomb?

We are almost at Jerusalem. As we walk through Holy Week - and through life - with our Lord, whom will we trust? "I am the resurrection and the life . . . Those who live and believe in me will never die." May God strengthen our belief and trust in the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.