

Death in the Family
John 11:1-44
A Sermon Preached in Duke University Chapel on March 9, 2008
by the Rev. Nancy Ferree-Clark

It's an awful thing to have to have endless regrets about the way a loved one has died. Have you ever been caught in that very dark place where you keep thinking over and over about what might have been if only circumstances had been different? "If only the doctor had gotten here earlier." "If only I hadn't left her alone while I stepped out of the house." "If only she hadn't gone out so late at night." If only, if only...

Any of us who have been there can immediately relate to the anguish felt by Martha and Mary after the death of their brother Lazarus in today's gospel. All signs indicate that they were a very close family. Even in our stained glass windows over in the south transept we see the three of them posed side by side in the very center of the top row of all the saints on that wall. Lazarus stands there in his grave clothes looking down on all of us each week while Mary and Martha flank him on either side with their gaze fixed upon him, not us. Their body language alone tells me they must have adored their brother.

Apparently Lazarus had been ill only a few days before it happened. At first Martha and Mary thought they might be able to reach Jesus in time. He was just across the River Jordan from their home in Bethany, trying to escape the death threats that had been made against him earlier in Jerusalem, and so they sent word to him that Lazarus was ill.

Since Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were three of Jesus' best friends, the sisters were confident that Jesus would come right away to help, but he didn't. He waited two whole days before he set out for Bethany. By the time he had arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days, which was without a doubt long enough for his body to begin to decompose but also according to Jewish custom, long enough for his soul to leave his body. Martha heard that Jesus was on his way and ran to pour out her heart to him. "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,*" words that Mary would repeat verbatim only a few moments later. But little did the sisters know about the kind of life Jesus could give to their brother, even after his death. His agenda was much different and so much greater than anything they could have ever imagined.

The disciples were the first to hear just how big his plans were. Jesus tried to explain to them even before traveling to Bethany, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the son of God may be glorified through it." This is code language that John uses in his gospel to point us toward Jesus' crucifixion where his death on a cross would be the hour of his glorification. But even the disciples didn't get his point. They tried to talk Jesus out of returning to Lazarus' tomb because of its close proximity to Jerusalem where he already had a price on his head—all of them except Thomas, that is, who finally said to his fellow disciples, "Let's go, too, so that we may die with him."

When Martha and Jesus began to talk, he said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” She thought he was referring to resurrection on the last day, which was a doctrine advocated by the Pharisees that was widely accepted by pious Jews. But Jesus was actually proclaiming something new and radically different than that. He said to Martha, “ 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.”

Whereas Martha had understood resurrection as something that happens in the future, Jesus was explaining it as something that happens right now. He was not saying that he as God’s representative has the power to give resurrection and life. He was saying that he *is* those things because he is one with Almighty God, the Great I Am, whose life is eternal. In Jesus’ presence, resurrection and life are present. Those who believe and trust in him will never die, no matter what becomes of their bodies, no matter how tragic the circumstances surrounding their death-- because he is one with the source and sustainer of all life.

This must have been difficult for Martha to begin to grasp in the midst of her overwhelming grief. Yet she did not hesitate to respond to Jesus’ question, “do you believe?” “Yes, Lord”, she said. “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” She knew his titles at least, even if she did not yet fully understand the depth and breadth of power they represented. It reminds me of the time one of my seminary professors scribbled a note on a paper I wrote years ago. He gave me a good grade on it but he also asked if I recognized the power of what I had written about. In retrospect, I’ll have to say that I really didn’t. It’s one thing to know the right words to say or write about. It’s another to be transformed by those words.

Martha went to tell her sister about Jesus’ arrival and Mary ran to him , weeping, along with the mourners who had come to console them. But Jesus did not ask the same questions of them he had asked of Martha. The text says that as he watched Mary and the others wailing out loud he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He asked where they had laid Lazarus, and they replied, “Lord, come and see”. Then Jesus himself began to weep.

This is a gut-wrenching depiction of Jesus’ own emotions and his own humanity. No other stories in John’s gospel bear any similarity to it. To say he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved is hardly an adequate translation of the Greek, which is much more visceral. Jesus shuddered. He was angry, agitated, moved with pity. As Dean Wells said once about this passage, it was a “whole body experience”, so intense was this moment.

Why was he feeling this way? Some scholars say it was because the others were crying inconsolably, implying that the grief-stricken mourners had no faith in him, but the fact is Jesus wept, too. Maybe his tears were a combination of both anger and profound sadness. For Jesus to be fully human he must have experienced grief for the loss of his friend Lazarus and for the sadness of Mary and Martha; grief for the frailty of life as we know it and the randomness with which it is so easily snuffed out; grief that no one

seemed to understand what he was about , much less truly believe it. Even more so, Jesus must have felt deep anger and emotional distress that he was about to enter into a direct confrontation with Satan over the wages of sin and death.

As our Savior who was both fully human and fully divine, Jesus had to prepare himself for the fact that his own death was near and that the action he was about to take would only hasten it . Since John's gospel does not mention any struggle for Jesus on the night of his arrest, perhaps this represents his Gethsemane-- his time of anguish, his acceptance of the reality that by calling Lazarus out of his tomb, he would then take his place. Jesus said it as plainly as he could: one cannot give life unless one dies, and he made no exception for himself. As John writes at an earlier point in the gospel, Jesus laid down his own life and no one took it from him. (10:18). For Jesus to embrace his hour of glorification without looking back, he first had to acknowledge his grief and the grief of the whole world so he could then go forward to greet death unafraid, triumphant and without tears.

When Jesus finally reached Lazarus' tomb he told the onlookers to take away the stone. But Martha quickly interrupted him to say that after four days the stench of death would be strong. That's actually not a factor many of us think about when we view a body in an elegant casket in a softly-lit funeral home. We have licensed embalmers, make-up artists and hair stylists to thank for doing their part to protect us from such up-close exposure to death, and it works, at least for a time. Haven't you ever heard the comment made about a dead person in a casket, "She looks so good!?" That's definitely not the reality of death which Martha was talking about. Seen in those terms, we can understand her hesitance to accept that even Jesus, the Son of God, could overturn the physical evidence of death and decay.

Jesus refused to be sidetracked, so he called on Martha once again to trust, and then they took away the stone. After thanking God for what was about to happen, Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!". And as the dead man came out, with his face wrapped and his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, Jesus said to those who had gathered around, "Unbind him, and let him go." With that it was over. Lazarus was free to walk on the earth once again.

It's a miraculous story that you've probably already figured out looks and sounds a lot like Jesus' own death and resurrection, almost as if it were a dress rehearsal of sorts. The tomb is near Jerusalem; it is a cave with a large stone covering it; the stone is rolled away; Jesus cries out with a loud voice; and the grave clothes are removed from the one who was dead but is now alive. Fred Craddock has suggested that if you held a light beneath a piece of paper with this story written on it you'd see the resurrection of Jesus shining through, and it's true. Mary and Martha asked for their brother's life back, which Jesus gave to them. But by swapping places with Lazarus, he also offered life to the whole world through his own death and resurrection. The two stories are so artfully woven together that one illuminates the other, and we see Jesus, both fully human and fully divine, as the one who brings forth life out of death, a presentation of the entire gospel.

Soon after the miracle took place, the three siblings expressed their gratitude to Jesus for all he had done for them by hosting a proper dinner in his honor. That was the time when Mary anointed his feet with costly perfume and wiped them with her hair. But even as they enjoyed the fellowship around the table, a crowd of onlookers gathered outside, curious to see both Jesus and the man he resurrected from the dead. The chief priests took it as a signal that both should be killed since it was because of Lazarus that many believed in Jesus.

Beyond that evening, we do not know what became of Lazarus or his sisters, which leaves us with many unanswered questions. I wonder how Mary and Martha made sense of Lazarus' resurrection if he was almost immediately confronted with threats of assassination because of it. I wonder how they endured the paralyzing grief of both losing their dear brother a second time and watching their beloved Jesus suffer on the cross. I wonder how they sustained their belief in Jesus in the midst of fear and unfulfilled hopes.

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table today, we, too, can relate to the challenge of sustaining our faith in times of grief and distress. We know that we must all eventually die. Even so, we go to great effort and expense to forestall it. Like Martha and Mary, we pray fervently for Jesus to protect us from it. Like Jesus, we weep from the depth of our being with sadness and anger at it.

This week a blogger for the Duke Chronicle wrote an anguished response to the horrendous murder of Eve Carson, the remarkable UNC student shot to death in a quiet neighborhood near campus. In it she said "If there is a God, I don't understand him." It's a question perhaps not that different from some of our own. Tears run down our cheeks as we wonder how many promising young lives have to be snuffed out by human treachery in the streets of Durham and Chapel Hill, on local college campuses and campuses around the country, in the seminaries and streets of Jerusalem, in the marketplaces and neighborhoods of Iraq and in so many other places on earth before the world completely self-destructs.

Far better to shout, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?" than to shrug our shoulders in numbed complacency or to cry ourselves to sleep. We know that the patriarchs and prophets and even Jesus himself have shared in these feelings, and we have no reason to try and hide them. Jesus is well-acquainted with grief. He has absorbed the world's pain into himself, and he can carry our burdens when we lay them at his feet. He has poured out his love for us on the cross and offers to us his broken body and blood to heal and sustain us. He has called us into community to be his living, breathing body on earth, empowered to call life out of death's dark places ourselves until He comes again.

Jesus knows, and we know far better than we ever wanted to know how death will come in unimagined ways, but none of them are the kind of death that separates us from God. Physical death is robbed of its power because in Christ there is life on both sides of the grave.

Let us go forth to live as those for whom death has been past ever since the day of our baptism so that living or dying, our lives are in Christ. Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life, the source of eternal life, not just on the last day, but this very day, in this very place- if only we believe.

Nancy Ferree-Clark
Senior Pastor
Congregation at Duke University Chapel