

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

In the movie *Amadeus*, a young Mozart has just debuted a new piece for the Emperor in Vienna. Mozart knows it is pure genius and the Emperor seems impressed, for the most part. But as Mozart pushes him to say more, the Emperor admits that there is something about it that doesn't quite work for him.

“Occasionally it seems to have, how shall one say?” the Emperor asks. “*Ahh, yes...Too many notes!* There are in fact only so many notes the ear can hear in the course of one evening.” To which Mozart replies, “There are just as many notes as I required, neither more nor less.”

It's tempting to think that in our Gospel reading for today from the 11th Chapter of John, there are *too many words* for the ear to hear in the course of one morning. But as one preacher suggested about this long story from John's Gospel, *if you let the full story tell itself, half of your work as a preacher is done already.*¹

Well, I'm taking this preacher's advice and I invite your openness to hear this story in its fullness with a sermon woven throughout the story (you'll see what I mean) and I invite you into one other assumption – that there are neither more, nor less words than are required to tell the good news of God in Christ Jesus for this day – the Fifth Sunday in Lent.

And so, we begin with the Holy Gospel according to John, chapter 11... **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany (the village of Mary and her sister Martha).² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, “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.”⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

¹ Paraphrase of Susan Briehl's lecture *Preaching from the Gospel of John* (September 22-24, 2013).

“Two days longer,” Jesus stays, Jesus *remains*, Jesus *abides* (it’s a common word in John’s Gospel that perks the ears any time it comes up). “Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

It’s a funny way to show that he loves them. Isn’t it? Seems more like *indifference* than *love*, at first glance. Doesn’t it? If your cell phone were to tremble right now with the news that your closest loved-one is ill (laying on their death-bed, even) what would the expected loving response be?

Looking back on the story in reverse, the expectations and the second-guessing are all too easy, of course. And trust me, we will find ourselves at the point in the story soon enough with the second-guessing, with the regret, with the emotions so raw and far beyond control. And Jesus will be there too. But perhaps this is the first clue that in this story, there is an invitation into a mystery much deeper than you can understand at first glance.

Put simply – *the mysteries of love, life and death do not always behave according to nice, neat rules*. Put simply the mystery is that – *you are where you need to be at this moment (remain there for the time being) and not only that, but God in Christ Jesus is exactly where God needs to be (even if it seems as though God is a long way off)*.

The story of God’s love, strange as it sounds though works both in reverse, but also moves forward to new places. So the story continues...

⁷Then after this [Jesus] said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”

⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the [religious leaders] were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”

¹¹After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.

¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” ¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

There are, of course, so many ways to die. I'm not just talking about the obvious ones. In your sleep. Car accident. Lethal injection. Starvation. Heart attack. Suffocation. Illness. Crucifixion. There are so many ways, but this thing we call "life," it contains so many *little ways* to die as well, doesn't it?

Anyone who has *retired* knows that little death of identity, of purpose that can knock on the door of your retirement home. Anyone who has *raised children* knows that little death of putting the needs of someone else ahead of your own (someone who for the first few years, we might add, never says please or thank you). Anyone who has *married* or been in any kind of *relationship* knows that little death of having to say, "I'm sorry" or "Please forgive me." Anyone who has *tried to follow this one called Christ* knows that little death, that little drowning in the waters of baptism and that not-so-little call to die with Christ.

All too often the question of life and death is framed in the hope of avoiding, ignoring or cheating death, isn't it? But all too often new life (whether it's finding a post-retirement way to live, whether it's finding a way to have a life with children or in marriage or any other relationship, whether it's finding new life in Christ...), all too often new life comes only when you let death have its way. Fully. Completely. For four days. Sometimes more.

In Jewish culture a body was pronounced "dead" only after three days to make sure it was really dead. So when it says "Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days," we know that death has had its way and there is nothing left for death to do to Lazarus (or his friends?). And so there's no where else to turn, but to continue the story...

¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "**I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?**" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The [Judeans] who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”

³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So [they] said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Now the regrets. Now the second-guessing. Now the raw emotions that spill out in words you regret whether you say them or you don't: “God, if you'd only been here, my brother would not have died.”

But here too, perhaps the story is an invitation into a mystery much deeper than you understand at first glance. Put simply – *God in Christ Jesus does not come so that we might avoid death.* Put simply – *God in Christ Jesus does not destroy death from the outside of the tomb looking in, but from the inside of the tomb.*

Because this is not the only Mary we will see standing and weeping by a tomb. On this day, Jesus asks Mary, “Where have you laid him.” On another day, another Mary will ask Jesus, “Tell me where you have laid him.” On this day, Jesus weeps with Mary over the death of her brother. On another day, another Mary will weep over the death of her Lord, but Jesus will be there too, laughing that day. On this day the ones around her ask, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” On that day, another Mary will become the apostle to the apostles, proclaiming: “I have seen the Lord!”

As a preacher once said, “Here, at the tomb of Lazarus, death is denied for a time. There, at the tomb of Jesus, death is overcome for good.”² But let's not get ahead of ourselves; because our story today is not just about a far-off eternal life, it is about the life that Jesus brings to us through each little or big death. Now. Because the story continues...

² Audrey West, *Feasting on the Word* (Year A, Volume 2) page 145.

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Robert Capon likes to say that Jesus never met a corpse he didn't like.³

The work of resurrection is God's work. "I am the resurrection and the life," says Jesus. And with a word, life and death are never the same.

But there is work to be done for those who dare to gather around the tomb, for those who dare to gather around the story, the Word. The dead man walks and that's because of the work of God in Christ Jesus. But the dead man walks, bound with strips of cloth, unable to see because the death shroud still covers the dead man's face. And Jesus says to those gathered (around the tomb, around the story, around the Word and the Table):
Unbind! Let go!

Release one another. Free each other. Forgive one another. There's work to be done in this world of ours, wrapped so tightly in its burial shroud. Like a butterfly in a cocoon, like a seed in the soil, like a newborn in the womb, God in Christ Jesus has done the hard work of creating new life. Your job is to proclaim forgiveness in Christ's name, to proclaim freedom in Christ's name, to proclaim release to those who find themselves bound up tight whether by grief; by economics; by racism, classism, ageism or sexism; by one's past, by one's present circumstances, or by an uncertain future; by life or by death itself. You are called to unbind one another.

This is the mystery of death, of life, of love that is at the heart of the good news of God in Christ Jesus. Because listen where the story is going. It's a story that takes us to Holy Week, to the cross, to the tomb. But because we have gathered around this story and taken its invitations, it gives us confidence to know that it's taking us to new life as well.

³ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 1989), page 70-71.

⁴⁵Many of the [Judeans] therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”

⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” ⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, ⁵²and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.

⁵³So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

In a word, it's the raising of Lazarus that leads to the death of Jesus which leads to the good news that we dare only whisper, for now: “*Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed!*”

Word of God, Word of Life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.