

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 3/9/08
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: John 11:1-45

Today's Gospel passage is an example of a preacher's second worst nightmare. The first worst nightmare is when the appointed text seems to offer absolutely nothing to which its readers can personally relate, leaving us wondering what its relevance could possibly be. The second worst nightmare is when the text is packed with so much great stuff, offering so many possible paths to follow, that we're in danger of missing its central truth. That's the case with the story of the family of Bethany – Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, who falls ill and dies. This is a compelling narrative, full of people and situations to which we're drawn, and upon which our imagination can be unleashed.

The concerned sisters send word of the crisis to their dear friend, Jesus, expecting that he'll come and heal Lazarus. Jesus delays, apparently with a greater purpose in mind. (What happens to our faith when our expectations of or hopes for God aren't met?) When Jesus does decide to travel to Bethany – not far from Jerusalem, the seat of religious power - his disciples are worried about his safety and theirs. Because of what Jesus has been saying and doing, he has drawn a great deal of attention to himself. Crowds of people have been gathering to hear his teaching and to witness or be touched by his healing. (In what areas of our lives are we yearning for a healing touch?)

Jesus' growing popularity makes the religious authorities very nervous. Not only do they suspect Jesus of fraud and blasphemy; they also know that their own positions of power and influence depend upon playing it safe; maintaining the status quo of the religious system as it's been working. They're in a fragile, precarious relationship with the occupying Roman Empire. In verses just following this text, but not included in today's reading, their conclusion is this: "If we let Jesus go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation" (John 11:48). (In what ways are we playing it safe, colluding with systems that oppress and exploit?)

Jesus does not play it safe. He risks his life and the lives of those closest to him, when he journeys toward Jerusalem. He is confronted by the grief-stricken Martha and Mary, who don't understand why Jesus didn't prevent Lazarus' death. Jesus weeps with them and the other mourners at Lazarus' grave. (When we're suffering, does it matter that Jesus suffers with us? Is that enough?)

Then the story takes a most dramatic turn. With details entirely too similar to another resurrection story to have been unintentional, we find Jesus standing before the tomb where Lazarus' body has been laid – a cave, with a stone lying against it. Jesus commands that the stone be rolled away. The grave clothes are disturbed. The one who was dead is raised to life.

Yes, there are many aspects of the story to which we're personally drawn and which would be meaningful to explore further. But this story's location within the Gospel of

John and its timing in our lectionary cycle signal that there's something here that's really important. In John's Gospel, the behavior of Jesus in this story is what finally tips the scales of his fate. When word gets out that Jesus has raised Lazarus, the wheels are set in motion for Jesus' arrest and subsequent crucifixion. And the lectionary cycle offers us this particular story to consider just before launching us into the drama of the texts of Holy Week.

I believe that this story, with its abundance of places from which to draw meaning, is ultimately about one thing. If I could choose its title, it would be this: "Death and Resurrection: The Way of Jesus." In this particular story about a physical death and a bodily resurrection, we're invited to understand death and resurrection as the very fabric of Jesus' life – not just what eventually happened to him. We're given a glimpse here of death and resurrection as a metaphor for a way of life – Jesus' life, and our lives as followers of Jesus.

Jesus lived without fear of giving his life away because he understood resurrection as both ongoing life with God, even after death, and resurrection as present reality. In challenging the political, economic, cultural, and religious injustices of his day, Jesus not only moved way outside his own comfort level and risked his reputation; he knowingly and willingly lived in a way that would eventually become so threatening to the powers of his time that he would be killed for it.

As Christians, we proclaim that the life of Jesus is what a human life full of God looks like. For us as Christians, what we see in Jesus is what we believe to be the intention of God revealed in a human life. And what Jesus' life was about was the way of death and resurrection – dying to an old way of being, and born into a new way of being.

As Christians, the way of Jesus – the way of death and resurrection – is what we have chosen to give our heart to. It's a relationship and a way of life – not a set of beliefs or doctrines. In following the way of Jesus, we're called to give our lives away. That's resurrected life - authentic life, life in its absolute fullness. Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says that following the way of Jesus liberates us from the mediocrity of a life without vitality.¹

The way of Jesus – the way of death and resurrection - means giving up our lives for others, and it brings about transformation – our own and the world's. It involves telling the truth, practicing mercy, easing our grip on what we think we can and should control, consuming cautiously, sharing generously, and making the first move toward reconciliation. The way of Jesus means being present, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoners, housing the homeless, and taking a stand for justice, however inconvenient or unpopular. It's time-consuming and potentially dangerous.

Biblical studies professor Frederick Niedner writes:

... Jesus' summons at the tomb where each of us will one day lie sounds something

¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year* (Orbis Books, 1997), p. 63.

like this: “Come out of there, friend. Come with me. We’re going up to Jerusalem. So much for ordinary dying from disease, accidents or plain wearing out ... Let’s go instead to where we can give our lives away. Come die with me.” This command comes, of course, not merely in some final moment in a grassy graveyard, but every day of our lives. [“Come die with me.”] We die every day, as each day wears us down, defeats us and brings us ever closer to the first tomb Lazarus knew ... But [as Christians] we also die ... with Christ ... [and] rise and respond to the call to head out for some place in space and time where we can give our lives away.”²
Amen.

² Frederick Niedner, *The Christian Century* (February 26, 2008), p. 21.

