

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, April 2, 2017 // Lent 5, Year A

The Gospel: John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 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." Accordingly, 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.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus 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. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When 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." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews 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. When 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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus 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.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The 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.”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Background and general observations

The raising of Lazarus is the last of a series of seven “signs” in John’s Gospel, and this story is found only in this Gospel. We see that the raising of Lazarus provokes two strong reactions — some people end up “believing” in Jesus, and others end up seeking a way to kill Jesus. It seems that no one is left feeling lukewarm or merely curious. This event sharpens divisions.

Throughout the story, there is an emphasis on “believing,” and this is always a verb in John’s Gospel, never a noun (that is, never “belief”). The emphasis, in other words, is on believing in or trusting in Jesus as the One who has the power to bring life out of death. And while many will focus exclusively on this as a physical or biological idea, Christians of course have long believed in the power of Jesus to bring life in other senses of the word (resurrecting a dead marriage or relationship, resurrecting one who has been in the darkness and death of addiction, etc.). Further, the raising of Lazarus invites us to ponder our role in bringing life to each other (“Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine...” “As the Father has sent me, so I send you...”). And although Jesus is the agent of resurrection in this story, he does give others an important role — “Unbind him, and let him go.”

It is often said that the shortest sentence in the Bible is also one of the most powerful, “Jesus wept.” In this translation of the New Revised Standard Version, we see that this verse 35 is translated, “Jesus began to weep,” indicating the imperfect tense (an ongoing action in the past), as opposed to the perfect tense (more simply, an action in the past). In the midst of a Gospel that sometimes seems to depict Jesus as philosophical and detached, this story of the raising of Lazarus conveys Jesus’ deep and real humanity. While Jesus is reassuring to his friends who are grieving the death of Lazarus, he himself ends up being so deeply moved and grieved that those who are standing around take notice (“See how he loved him!”).

Jesus asks Mary, “Where have you laid him?” Later, a different Mary will ask the same thing, “Tell me where you have laid him” (20:15). In this story of the raising of Lazarus, the one who is raised from the dead still has the grave clothes wrapped around him. In the story of Jesus’ resurrection, the grave clothes are cast off to the side. Lazarus’ resurrection is, in this sense, qualitatively different and also temporary. Jesus’ resurrection is the end of death forever.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus is depicted in this story with deeply human emotions. He is “greatly disturbed in spirit” and “deeply moved,” and he weeps.

How do you respond to Jesus's emotional transparency here? Does anything change about your conception of Jesus after reading this passage?

Perhaps, in your mind, Jesus tends to be more aloof, all-powerful, and superior in every way, or one who can control his emotions, suppress his grief, remain stoic. But here we see a much more personal and vulnerable and expressive Jesus. Is it difficult for you to imagine a more emotional Jesus?

2. Consider the ways in which your conception of Jesus affects the way you pray.

Are your petitions, your questions, your secrets with Jesus altered if you consider him as emotional, rather than aloof? Does your tone change if you imagine you are praying to a grieving Jesus rather than a stoic Jesus?

3. What do you know about resurrection?

Have you experienced the death and resurrection of a relationship, for example? Or, have you experienced the death of something in yourself, only to experience the miracle of resurrection later?

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, it is the encounter with Jesus that brings about resurrection. Have you had such an encounter in your life or witnessed such a divine and life-giving encounter in someone else? Has someone else's resurrection in turn resurrected something in *you*?

4. What do you think it means to "believe in Jesus"?

Remember that in John's Gospel, the verb "believing" is used rather than the noun, "belief." What do you think the difference is between a more active, on-going and dynamic *believing*—that is, something you *do*—rather than a more fixed or confirmed belief, as an object or thing you *have* or possess.

5. Interestingly, Mary and Martha both say to Jesus, "If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died," and it suggests that while they have a sense of the power of Jesus, their sense of his power is fairly limited. In other words, they do not seem to imagine that Jesus can bring life out of death; they only seem to imagine that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' death in the first place.

Perhaps it is fruitful to consider times when you might have misjudged the power of the divine. Have your expectations of God been too small, too narrow? Have you, like Mary and Martha, expected too little? When has God surprised you by exceeding or surpassing what you believed was possible?

In his famous book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis says that many Christians tend to think of God as one who comes into our lives to do a little rearranging, when what God is actually trying to

do is give us a whole new life. We expect God to rearrange the furniture of our lives, but God is busy building a whole new mansion.

How do you respond to the idea that God may be doing more in your life than you are aware and more than you could even imagine? What do you think God may be leading you to believe? And how do you think your limited expectations might be binding you to a life that is less open to God, or less willing to fully believe in the power of God?

6. “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Lazarus cannot unbind himself; he needs the help of those around him. This image of Lazarus and the command from Jesus is profoundly metaphoric for all the ways we are bound—by our own doubts and fears and by one another. It is as if we, like Lazarus, need the help of Jesus to be set free.

Can you name whatever is still binding you?

What keeps you from living fully into God and the resurrected life?

How do we keep one another bound and what is our role in helping to unbind each other?

When have you experienced someone or a community unbinding you and setting you free?

When have you participated in the unbinding of someone else?

Where do you see people still living bound in tombs? What will it take to get them out?