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## So That You May Believe

a sermon on John 11.32-44

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Coping with the death of a loved one is different from facing your own death. I have never faced my own death, but my experience with other people suggests this is so. Of course every person is different. A person's faith, life experiences, and temperament go a long way toward determining what the experience will be like. Circumstances factor into the equation too. And yet, from what I have observed, most people meet their own death with greater resolve than the death of a loved one. I hope someday to figure out why.

My best guess right now is this: When a Christian dies, she gives her life back to God. A moment of surrender comes. In it the Christian realizes he does not have to go on under his own power. He is in God's hands, and God will bear him home. Especially if the person who is dying is old, or has been sick for a long time, and is tired, this can be a liberating feeling. "My strength is gone; I am in God's hands." It is like when a child falls asleep in the car on the way home. The child knows Daddy will pick him up and carry him to bed. So the child rests easy.

Letting go of a loved one can be something like that. Especially if your loved one has suffered, you can find peace in trusting her to God's care. Yet there is so much more going on. Emotions start to swirl until you feel dizzy. Peace proves elusive, even the peace your mind says you ought to have, your heart doesn't have it. The phases of grief you go through when you lose someone dear resemble the stages of grief you go through when you are dying. Nevertheless the experience is different, and that difference inspired this sermon.

Today is All Saints' Day, when we give thanks for those who preceded us in the faith. Their lives, their witness helped us get where we are today. Their faithfulness inspires us. And we cannot help but love them, imperfect though they were. On this day we remember that for God the gulf that separates us from them is not so large. They are called saints because Christ has made them holy and given them rest. We are called saints because we have been forgiven, and Christ is making us holy, but we are not at rest, for we the living saints of God are pilgrims and missionaries. We have a road to walk and a job to do. As we journey, as we labor, the witness of the saints who have gone before strengthens us.

Our scripture reading is the hinge on which the gospel of John turns. Jesus hears that his friend Lazarus is sick, but Jesus lingers two days before going to Bethany where Lazarus lived. By the time Jesus gets there, Lazarus is dead. His sisters, Martha and Mary, both greet Jesus with, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And of course they were right. They knew Jesus’ power to heal. Jesus did too. That’s why he stayed away. The gospel states plainly that Jesus delayed on purpose. He *wanted* to arrive after Lazarus was dead. Why?

Because Jesus intended to raise him from the dead. On the way to Bethany, Jesus informed his disciples of Lazarus’ death. He then said, “For your sake *I am glad I was not there, ... so that you may believe.*” That’s Jesus’ motivation: So that you may believe. Jesus planned to raise Lazarus from the dead in order to provide an unmistakable sign of who he was and what he had come to do. Once they had seen it, his disciples would understand. They would believe, and nothing would be able to shake their faith. Martha, Mary, other friends, and don’t forget Lazarus would be illuminated as well.

What is the purpose of this account? Why is it in the Bible? John is the only gospel to tell us about this. Why does he make such a big deal about it?

The story has several purposes. One is: This event triggers the plot to kill Jesus. In the gospel Jesus has long been a person of concern to the authorities. He has upset the wrong people, and they are watching him. Their minds are already made up; Jesus is a troublemaker, a deceiver. His stunt with Lazarus becomes the last straw. If Jesus intended to show God’s glory to an intimate few, his plan was frustrated. Many people are with Mary when she hears Jesus has arrived. When he sends for her, they tag along after her. Many people saw the raising of Lazarus, and many believed. But some, John reports, ran to tell the Pharisees. An emergency meeting is called. The religious leaders meet across party lines. A decision is reached in verse 53: “So from that day on they planned to put him [Jesus] to death.”

I’ve always found this interesting. As I said, the other gospels don’t mention the raising of Lazarus. In those gospels, Jesus cleansing the temple – driving out the merchants and turning over the tables of the moneychangers – triggers the plot to kill him. The authorities won’t stand for him disrupting their business.

Is this a case of irreconcilable conflict among the gospels? Not necessarily. The decision to kill Jesus could have had more than one cause. So while Matthew, Mark, and Luke make a compelling historical case, we should not discount John’s version of things. At the same time, John has an axe to grind. He wants us to understand that the bone of contention between Christians and unbelievers is resurrection. If God raised Jesus from the dead, then we ought to believe in him, regardless of other little things we do not understand. If God didn’t, then why waste our time talking about Jesus? Resurrection

makes all the difference. John tells us this is nothing new. Jesus faced the same thing. Even during his ministry, resurrection – the life-giving power of Jesus – was the difference between his followers and his enemies.

Wouldn't the authorities have believed in Jesus if he raised Lazarus from the dead, though? I mean, raising the dead is fairly convincing as signs go. They may have changed their minds about Jesus, *if* they believed the reports. They would be more likely to suspect a hoax. Wouldn't you? In any event, they didn't believe, and this latest business about raising the dead pushed them too far. They decided they had to act, lest Jesus' popularity grow to the point where he could lead the masses to do something stupid and dangerous.

Another purpose for this story grows out of the first: that axe John was grinding. John wrote his gospel for an embattled church. His church suffered persecution. They were constantly in conflict with a certain group. The identity of that group may surprise you if you haven't studied the New Testament much. It was the synagogue – the Jews. Many people today struggle to get their minds around this because when we think of religious persecution, it usually goes the other way. We are familiar with the sad, sickening history of Christian persecution of Jews. Most people do not realize that during the first century, the power structure was reversed. Once authorities in the Roman Empire figured out there was a difference between Christians and Jews, Christians had a big problem. Judaism was not usually popular, but it was protected by law. Christianity was neither popular nor protected. That changed in the early fourth century, but for a brief while – and John lived through it – Jews persecuted Christians. Think Saul of Tarsus.

John's gospel reflects this reality. It was written from and to a persecuted minority. Consequently, John talks about "the Jews" as if they are the enemy – even though Jesus and his disciples were Jews. His rhetoric may have contributed to later Christian persecution of Jews. And this is tragic, although there is no excuse for it. If Christians follow Jesus, we will never persecute others for their faith or lack of it, especially not Jews. If John had written under different circumstances, he may have been more cautious. But he wrote from his experience. His experience was a storm of controversy, and right at the heart of it was the resurrection of Jesus. Those who believed became Christians. Those who did not opposed the Christians.

Perhaps our experience is not so different. I have never met or read a person who believed God raised Jesus from the dead who was not a Christian. Unfortunately, I have met some Christians (they identify themselves as Christians anyway) who do not believe that. I do wonder why they bother. The vast majority of people who do not believe are not Christians. Did Jesus rise from the dead? Is Jesus God? Is he the resurrection and the life? Do we have eternal life in him? These are all really just different ways to ask the same question, and it is the most important question. It is for

us. It was for John and his church. John wants us to see that this always has been *the* question, even during Jesus' ministry when people talked with him face to face and saw him raise the dead. Resurrection is everything. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." He wanted desperately for his friends to believe that. Whether you do or not makes all the difference.

Still another reason this account has been passed on to us is: to comfort us when we face the death of someone we love. If you have lost someone precious, you probably went to Jesus with the same accusing question Martha and Mary implied when they said, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." *Where were you?* Why did you let this happen? Again, it's all the same question. Like Martha and Mary, you trust that God could have created a different outcome. He did not. Why?

This story doesn't answer that question. How could it? But it invites us to believe anyway. You have to love Martha. She's so practical. I love to get people like Martha on the session; they make great elders. When Jesus tells bystanders to open the tomb, Martha protests, "Lord, he's been dead four days already. Think of the odor." Jesus replies, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ... He challenges us to exactly the same faith. If you believe, you will see the glory of God. That's the comfort. You don't know when. You don't know how. All you know is Jesus and the confidence you have in him and the feeling deep down in your gut that your confidence is not misplaced. You do not understand his ways any more than Martha did, but do you trust him as she did? That's the rub. If you believe, you will see the glory of God.

As for the question why, you may never get an answer – until you see the glory of God. By then the question won't matter anymore. Once you see the glory of God, all those questions that seemed so important have a way of falling by the wayside. God is enough. His glory is enough. Now, we walk by faith and not by sight. When we start walking by sight, uncertainty disappears.

If you are grieving, you will be quick to point out to me a big difference between the family from Bethany and you, namely they got Lazarus back. Fair enough. But realize, Lazarus was a special case. Jesus raised him in order to give a compelling sign at a crucial moment in the history of salvation. Lazarus was raised to die again. His family got him back for a while, but eventually they suffered his loss a second time. When Jesus raised him, he raised him as he was before, mortal. He did this to show God's glory and give us hope. He demonstrated his power over death. He proved he is the resurrection and the life.

But God wants something better for us than a few more years of life as we know it. The resurrection we anticipate for those who belong to Jesus will not be like the resurrection of Lazarus. It will be like the resurrection of Jesus. When the Father raised Jesus in the

power of the Spirit, Jesus arose with what scripture calls a glorified body. We don't know exactly what that means, but it says, for example, our resurrection bodies are immortal. When we are raised to eternal life, we will never die again. I say all this to make a simple point: God does not give us our loved ones back in the short term, although we might want that. We might wish for another year, another day, even just one more hour. God could do that, but he never does. I can't pretend to know why, but I do know that God plans something even better. Jesus promised we will see God's glory. Maybe it would be terribly unkind to take our loved ones away from that. Once they have seen God face to face, it would be wrong to bring them back here. Maybe they are not worried about us or about something we wish we had said, because they see God's glory, and all other concerns fall away. They do not have to worry about us, because they now walk by sight, and not by faith, and they know God will care for us as he has cared for them. Perhaps the faithful dead have an easier time trusting their living loved ones to God's care than we the living have trusting them to his care.

I want you to believe. I want you to know Jesus; he is the resurrection and the life. I want you to have confidence in God's power and grace. I do not, however, want to imply that our hope in Christ makes grief easy or that if you grieve something is wrong with your faith. In this account, Jesus gets angry. He weeps. And it was not a case of he swallows hard while a single tear trickles down his face. He bawls. And nothing was wrong with his faith. So grieve ... but also hope. If you believe, you will see the glory of God. Amen.

[An alternate ending:]

Look again at our reading, and pay attention to the emotions. Twice the text says Jesus got angry. There's a funny story behind this – funny as in odd, not ha-ha funny. In verse 33 Jesus sees Mary and her friends weeps and he ... the word in Greek describes an outburst of anger. Jesus got angry. Our translation claims he "was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." This reflects a tradition in English Bible translation that goes back to the King James Version. Some Christians have always been nervous about Jesus' anger. The Greek word is quite clear, but in English the emotion is almost always sanitized. German translations, by the way, get it right. They follow Martin Luther's translation. Luther was a colorful, spirited, shoot-from-the-hip kind of guy. Jesus' anger didn't bother him at all. Of course Jesus would get angry if he had a good reason! English, German, translations don't matter. What matters is the original text. What did John write? John says Jesus got angry.

Why? What made Jesus angry? Most commentators point to the logic of the sentence and say it was Mary's lack of faith. He had come to show these people God's glory, and they were weeping as if they had no faith at all. I'm not convinced. I have a different theory about why Jesus got angry, a much simpler one. Have you ever lost a friend to

death? Anger is one of those naturally occurring emotions that overwhelm you at a time like that.

A moment later, Jesus weeps. He didn't swallow hard as a single tear trickled down his face. He broke down and bawled. Again, why? Even if no one else outside Lazarus' tomb knew what Jesus was going to do—even if no one else had faith—Jesus did. If we give this account any credit at all, Jesus knew that in a few moments he and Lazarus would be sitting together over a meal laughing as old friends. Knowing this, he wept anyway.

Again, commentators trip all over themselves explaining this. He was really weeping over the lack of faith he found, they argue. He was weeping because he thought about his own upcoming death. Why make things so complicated? Why can't Jesus cry just because his friend died, even though Jesus had faith in the power of God?

I believe Jesus' emotions here show us the heart of God. When he raises Lazarus, we see God's glory. When he gets angry and when we weeps, we see God's heart. Jesus is, after all, God in the flesh. "I and the Father are one," he tells us in this gospel. Jesus' reaction is God's reaction. What then is God's reaction to death? Well, it's not much different from ours. He doesn't like it. Death is not what he created us for. He wants something better. And this, of course, is the whole reason Jesus came. God feels about death much the same way we do, but he has the power to do something about it. And he has done something about it. He has given us eternal life through Jesus Christ, with the promise that when we die, we will be with him in heaven. And, beyond that, someday he will make all things new. He will create a new heaven and a new earth, and these will be the ideal place for us to live because he will raise us from the dead, just as Jesus was raised, with immortal, beautiful, glorified bodies.

Can you believe this? Do you believe The Father raised Jesus from the dead? Do you believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and that all who belong to him have eternal life? It's all the same question. The account about Lazarus is in the Bible for the same reason Jesus raised Lazarus, *so that you may believe*. Jesus says to you, today, right now, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Amen.

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