

March 6, 2022

John 11:1-44

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What are you doing?

I'm Catholic. Is that okay?

This is my first Ash Wednesday.

What's up with these ashes?

Nice sign.

Are you hot in that robe?

I watch you on TV.

What are these ashes about?

I just found out I have breast cancer.

I've already been ashed at my church, will you ash me again?

I am on my way to work. Can I have some ashes?

We are all so blessed.

Just pray for me.

I'm so glad to finally meet you in person.

These are some of the things Anna and I heard Wednesday when we did Ashes to Go. On the way over to Unity Square, we wondered what we were getting ourselves into. Would anyone want the imposition of ashes on the sidewalk in downtown Bartlesville? Would we be heckled? We were a little surprised to find that, even people who did not stop for ashes, seemed to appreciate our presence. People driving by waved and smiled. Scooter riders and walkers smiled as they passed. But the real affirmation of the value of our presence was in the stories we were told by the ones who came for the ashes and for the assurance that they belong to God, and for the words, "From dust you have come and to dust you will return." Every single ashy, oily cross we imposed was sacred, the same was true that evening when we worshiped here together.

Anna and I discovered as we chatted Wednesday that we had a similar experience the first time we were each responsible for the imposition of ashes in the first congregation each we served. It was completely unexpected. We were taken aback by the holiness of the moment as people we were growing to love came forward, one by one, bearing their foreheads, acknowledging their mortality and their belonging. That first Ash Wednesday as a minister was, for me, when I

realized what a gift it is to be allowed into people's lives and into their moments of vulnerability, to be invited into their pain and into their joy and everything in between.

Often people I talk to, knowing I have spent a significant amount of time with dear ones navigating illness and death, have confessed to me that they avoid situations where they must confront big emotions, especially deep sadness. Usually they say, "I just don't know what to do or say and I know whatever I say, it will be wrong." I always tell them that very often there is no task to be done and no words to say. It is presence people need amid suffering. And that is the very thing we deny them when we worry too much about getting it wrong. The only way we can get it wrong is by not being there at all, not making the call, not ringing the doorbell. And that is exactly what happened in our story today.

Today's story starts out, it seems, with Jesus getting it very, very wrong. This is John 11:1-16:

11 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.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

As a minister, these words really jump out at me: “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.” What? Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to know their brother was very ill. They wanted him to be with them, to be present. They didn’t want to face their brother’s death alone. I imagine they were exhausted from caring for him, traumatized from witnessing his pain, afraid of what would happen to them when their brother, the man of the house, was gone. And yet, Jesus stayed two more days where he was.

I don’t know if you have ever waited on someone or something while you were tired, traumatized, and afraid, but it is excruciating. Waiting for a phone call, waiting for an ambulance, waiting for the doctor, waiting for a parent, waiting for your child...physiologically, the pressure of trying to hold it all together in those moments builds, while your hands turn ice cold, but you sweat, your face feels flushed and when the phone finally rings, the sirens are finally heard, or the door finally opens, the pressure releases and, for me, the tears flow...tears of relief, tears of terror, tears of sadness. I’ve been imagining that this is how families in Ukraine are feeling right now as they wait for the next air raid siren, the next gun fire, the next missile overhead...where will it land this time? And it isn’t just one time or one day or even one week, it is over and over again. The suffering must be so intense.

Mary and Martha waited a long time for Jesus. Maybe they even figured he wasn’t coming at all. He didn’t have a phone to call them. Did the messenger who brought him the message that Lazarus was sick go back and tell the sisters, “I don’t think he’s coming. If he is, he doesn’t seem to be in a hurry. I overheard him say that Lazarus’ illness would not kill him. That would have been comforting to the sisters maybe, had they not been watching their brother fade away and then actually die.

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise

again.”²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.³¹ 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.³² 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.”³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, some of the Jewish religious leaders were already there comforting the sisters and probably performing death rituals. Martha went to the edge of town to meet him and she met him with a complaint, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” I imagine the unspoken or unwritten dialogue, “Where were you? Why did you take so long to get here? I thought you loved my brother. I thought you cared about us.” She and Mary were angry that Jesus apparently didn’t understand that to them he was family, and family shows up. The implicit assumption behind Martha’s statement, echoed later by Mary as well, finds voice through the mourners who meet them at the tomb, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the man who was blind have kept this man from dying?”

It may make us uncomfortable to think about coming face to face with Jesus and immediately issuing a complaint, but it's important to note that complaint is not incompatible with the Jewish tradition. There are examples throughout the Hebrew Bible of God’s people complaining (lamenting) to God. While Martha makes her disappointment in Jesus clear, it is also clear that she still saw the

possibility for something more as she said, “Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.” Jesus’ response, promising her brother will rise again, did not surprise her. And her reply, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” was the truth for some within Judaism and certainly true for John’s community. That wasn’t what Jesus was getting at though. Martha still didn’t understand, so Jesus tried again. “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?” he asked.

That’s a pretty bold question, considering Lazarus was dead and her grief was still so fresh. In some respects, Jesus’ question reminds me of an altar call at a funeral. I admit, it seems pushy to me. Here Mary is, devastated at the loss of her brother and he is asking her for a confession of faith. And she gives it to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” The whole scene just reeks of sadness and grief.

In the meantime, Mary’s grief, and maybe her anger, kept her at home until Jesus called for her directly. She went to him, followed by the Jewish leaders who had been with her. It was then that I think a truly beautiful thing happened. Met by the sisters’ tears and gut-wrenching sadness, Jesus finally cried too. Suddenly, amid a gospel that has in so many ways insisted on and pointed us toward Jesus’ divinity, Jesus is one of us. The author of John, who places the equals sign so strongly between Jesus and God, helps us see the ways in which God turns toward us in our pain and grief as we witness Jesus’ very human response to his beloved friends amid their deep suffering.

John shows us that Jesus knew what love looks and feels and sounds and smells like in the flesh and blood truth of life as human beings live it. This is the Jesus that loses his cool and flips tables in the temple. This Jesus finds himself deeply disturbed here at the sealed-up tomb of Lazarus as he stands beside the grieving sisters who refused to let him minimize the awfulness of their pain and the depth of their love. “You weren’t here, Jesus, and you should have been.”

Jesus doesn’t need to issue an “I am” statement to comfort these women who love him to trigger their trust and faith; in the words of this Gospel author, the Word just needs to become flesh. He just needs to be present. At the door of Lazarus’ tomb, the spiritual metaphors of light and darkness and sleeping and

waking are confronted by the enduring realities of tears and regret and doubt and hope and grief and smells, all the things we experience when we enter into the suffering of others. And in these completely earthbound moments, the demanding love of these women and the appalling absence of Lazarus draws Jesus more deeply into his humanity, if only for a moment, turning him from friend into family, from “Lord” and “Teacher” into brother and mourner.

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² 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.” ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ 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.”

At the entrance to the tomb, Martha, though she had confessed her belief in Jesus as the Messiah, still didn't quite get it, “Jesus, this is going to smell really bad,” she said. I have an idea about how awful that would smell. I think about smells like that every time I mistakenly walk in the room when John is watching the Walking Dead. The smell of death, the sense of despair, the pain of deep sadness, it's all there. And then the stone is removed, Jesus thanked God for what was about to happen and said, Lazarus, come out!” And. He. Does. Just like that, Lazarus is called by name and death turned to life; despair turned to hope.

This, Jesus' final sign in the Gospel of John, shows us that resurrection is not just a future thing (like Martha thought), but a now thing. Experiencing resurrection, witnessing hope turn to despair, seeing new life springing forth from ashes, isn't a far-off future promise, it lays claim to our lives today. In the next chapter of the gospel, we will find Lazarus (this story's symbol for death) sitting around the table with friends, including Jesus, sharing food and community, LIVING. Jesus is the resurrection and the life and not just any life; abundant life, with tables overflowing with food, freedom from fear and violence, plenty of clean water to drink, access to healthcare, equity, belonging, and all the love being shared. And it

is a promise for today, amid a world that, at times, seems more like a tomb than a table. Friends, we have to turn toward the suffering, turn toward each other and our neighbors...that's how we make resurrection and life happen.

Jesus turned toward his friends, Mary and Martha, and there was life. For Jesus, though, there was a cost. In this story he has also turned toward Jerusalem where we know there will be death. Those Jewish leaders who were there comforting the sisters, they saw what happened. And, as is the case so often when human beings encounter a God thing, it scared them. They weren't bad people. They saw themselves as the protectors of the Jewish people and tradition. Jesus was drawing too much attention. The Romans wouldn't like it. They needed to fly under the radar...resurrecting dead people was not that. Something would have to be done if they were to protect tradition. There will be more twists and turns in this story, but I will leave it here for now. For this week, I invite you to do some turning of your own. Turn toward life, God's abundant life, however that looks for you this week. Maybe it is taking better care of yourself, being present with a friend amid a dark time, or keeping a list of the evidence of abundance you see all around you. Turn toward life because I promise, God has already turned toward you. Amen.