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John 11:1-44
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“I am the resurrection and the life...do you believe that?”

I have some very sad news this morning. My Daphne Odora is dead. Deader than a doornail. Again!

For those of you who don't know who or what Daphne Odora is, it is a species of flowering plant native to China, later spread to Japan and Korea. It is supposed to be an evergreen shrub, grown for its very fragrant, fleshly, pale-pink, tubular flowers, each with four spreading lobes, and for its glossy foliage.

I have it planted in my front beds so that when you enter the house at this time of year you are met with overwhelmingly sweet fragrance noticed immediately upon getting out of the car. For me, it is a wonderful reminder that when everything else around us seems dead, that new life is about to be sprung.

Except this year, it's not. This is a picture of a healthy Daphne Odora at my friend's house. I gave her a clipping from mine several years back and her's is doing what it's supposed to be doing. Absolutely gorgeous.

This is a picture of mine. Destroyed by the freezing temperatures earlier this winter. It's the second year in a row that I forgot to cover it when I knew that extreme temperatures were coming. And so this is the second year that I will have to miss out on its welcoming fragrance.

Very sad.

But I have hope.

Last year when this happened, I cut it way back and it came back again. So my hope is that if I do that again, and I wait, patiently, that maybe, just maybe, it will come back to life. And this time next year, I'll be able to enjoy those beautiful pink flowers once again.

Hope. That's what we are talking about today.

The dictionary describes hope as a feeling of expectation and desire that something positive will happen. A feeling of trust.

That is what Jesus addresses today in our scripture story when his friend Lazarus dies and Jesus asked Lazarus' sister Martha, what gave her hope in the face of grief?

To set the context, tensions had come to a head between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders who were threatened by all the signs and wonders that Jesus had been doing. He had become too popular with the people and needed to be dealt with. Exterminated. That was the greeting that awaited him upon his return to Jerusalem.

When this story unfolds, Jesus was with his disciples at another Bethany beyond Jordan on the other side of the Jordan River, where John the Baptist ministered. To leave where he was currently and go to Bethany in the South where Lazarus lived, or about two miles outside of Jerusalem, would have put him smack dab in the middle of the lion's snare, something that both he and his disciples were well aware. In John's Gospel, this would have been Jesus' last miracle before turning his face toward Jerusalem and what awaited him there.

Join me we read this story for the Gospel of John 11:1-44.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **2** (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) **3** So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." **5** Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. **6** So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, **7** and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

8 "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. **10** It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

11 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

12 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." **13** Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

14 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, **15** and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

16 Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. **18** Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, **19** and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

27 “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

28 After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” **29** When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. **30** Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

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

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. **34** “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then 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?”

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. **39** “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

40 Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

In my nineteen seasons of ministry here at Cascades I have officiated some fifty seven funerals. Most of these were for people with whom I had relationship and dearly loved. A very few, on rare occasion, I didn't know at all. Still I have either read part of this story at their death beds, at their memorials, or at their gravesides. I takes a lot of confidence to speak these words over people who are deeply grieving. I either believe these words with my whole heart or I am a darn good politician.

This morning I want to dive into the story as we consider Jesus' question and answer a few others as well. What was the significance of Jesus waiting to come to Lazarus when he knew that his friend was very sick? Why four days? What is the reason behind Jesus' display of emotion at Lazarus tomb? What is the difference between knowing and believing Jesus' truth claim? And finally, what situations in our lives today seem so hopeless that we struggle to believe that God could resurrect it?

As I mentioned, Jesus and his disciples were in Bethany beyond Jordan just south of the Sea of Galilee and east of the Jordan River. It was approximately 90 some miles from Jerusalem. The Bethany where Lazarus and his sisters lived was a different town only two miles east of Jerusalem, and much farther south of where Jesus was located when he got word from Lazarus' sisters that he was sick.

Notice that Jesus was not in a hurry. The text tells us that he stayed where he was for two whole days before before deciding to return to Bethany in Judea where Lazarus was.

So let's do some math.

A person walking ninety some miles at a pace of three miles per hour assuming ten hours of sunlight each day would get there in approximately three or four days. As an avid hiker, let me tell you that is hoofing it! I say this because I think we need to give Jesus some slack here. Even if he had left immediately when he got the word, Lazarus could have died and been buried long before Jesus had gotten there.

But Jesus wanted his friend to die, so that he could demonstrate, one more time, his power as the Messiah by raising Lazarus from the dead.

Matthew tells the story of a Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant who had become ill. But this centurion also knew the prohibitions for Jews entering a Gentile home. So he said to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant shall be healed."¹ And Jesus said, 'Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.' And his servant was healed at the very hour."²

¹ Matthew 8:8

² Matthew 8:13

So Jesus could have healed Lazarus from afar, but chose not to.

Instead, Jesus said, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe!”³

Notice that when Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Why is four days significant?

It was common Jewish belief at the time that when a person died that the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope of returning to it. In this case, four, not three days had passed since Lazarus’ death and decay had certainly already set in. One commentator wrote, “If this idea was in the minds of these people, they obviously thought that all hope was gone - Lazarus was irrevocably dead.”⁴

Understandably, Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters, were devastated. One that their brother had died. And two Jesus did not respond with healing as they had hoped.

We don’t see many examples of Jesus’ emotions in the Gospels. But we are told here that when Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews that had come along with her also weeping, that he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

The Greek word for deeply troubled is *embrimaomai*. It implies to snort with anger or to show indignation towards something. The Greek word for troubled is *terrasso*. It means to be agitated or stirred. So looking at the text, we get his sense that Jesus was sort of peeved about having to do what he was about to do.

And yet when he got to the tomb itself, we are told that Jesus wept.

Why did he weep?

The people’s unbelief. They just didn’t get why Jesus had come. Not the disciples. Not Mary or Martha. Nor the people he came to serve.

He certainly wasn’t weeping for Lazarus. Jesus knew full well where he was.

He wasn’t weeping for Mary or Martha’s loss, because he also knew that Lazarus would be alive again shortly.

Let’s back track and see if we can put together the pieces which also leads into Jesus’ question for us today.

When Jesus first encountered Martha, she blamed Jesus’ delay for Lazarus’ death and said, “If you had just been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

³ John 11:14

⁴ *NIV Archeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), see footnote on 11:17, p. 1743.

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

And she said, “Yes, Lord” I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

She didn’t answer his question directly. She made a claim about who Jesus was. But didn’t respond as to whether or not Lazarus would be raised from the dead right then and there.

Twice Martha used the words, “I know that...” In verse 22, “I know that even know God will give you whatever you ask.” And then again in verse 24, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

The Greek word for “I know that” is oida. It means to have a certain knowledge of. You know of someone. You know a certain fact about something. Oida.

But Jesus doesn’t ask her if she knew it. But did she believe it.

The Greek word for believe that Jesus used is pisteuo. It means to put one’s faith in something or someone. To trust in someone. To be committed to something.

The text seems to imply that even Martha, one of Jesus’ closest friends, knew something with her head but struggled to believe it in her heart. When he asked her, “Do you believe this?” He was saying in essence, “Would you stake your life on this? Because I will.”

My friends, I believe that Jesus is asking us that same question today. “Would we stake our lives on the truth of Jesus being the resurrection and the life, that whoever believes in him will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in him will never die.”

If we truly believed that with our hearts, not just kept it as some head knowledge, then we would look at death much differently.

We would join in with the Apostle Paul and shout out, “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵

Can I get a shout of Amen from the people of God?

This is Good News! I know we are still a few weeks away from Easter. But if we truly believe this...if we live this... every day is Easter. Amen!

So as we close, what situations in our lives today seem so hopeless that we struggle to believe with our hearts that God could resurrect them? I don’t mean to make light of our situations this morning. Some of us have tremendous struggles

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

that seem insurmountable...that on our own, we can't overcome them. My friends, we can have all the head knowledge in the world, and it still won't get us to where we want go.

We want to be healed of what ails us? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to live free from addiction? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to live with greater purpose in life? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want a job that has meaning and provides what we need for today? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to live without the crippling fear of failure? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to be more generous with the resources that God has given us? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to save a relationship that seems to be falling apart? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to have hope that a peaceful end is possible with the wars in Israel or the Ukraine? We certainly can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to trust that everything is going to be ok with our country and the upcoming elections? We certainly can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to have joy and peace in life, despite the fact that the prognosis from the doctor's doesn't look good? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

We want to have comfort at the graveside of someone we loved? We can't do it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

Whatever it is that trouble us today...fill in the blanks. We can't solve it on our own, but with Jesus, we can.

All it takes is a little bit of faith, even as small as the size of a mustard seed. God can take that little bit of belief, not head knowledge, but knowing in our hearts that God can move mountains and God will.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus can. And Jesus will!

Let us pray.