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John 11:1-44
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The Death of Lazarus

Christian theologian and writer Dallas Willard wrote, “Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day.”¹

Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom said, “If the devil can’t make you sin, he’ll make you busy.”²

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung said, “Hurry is not of the devil: hurry is the devil.”³

And pastor and writer John Mark Comer said, “The problem isn’t when you have a lot to do: it’s when you have too much to do and the only way to keep the quota up is to hurry.”⁴

I think by now we have gathered that Jesus was not in a hurry and in fact invites us into his unhurried rhythms of grace. But sometimes his slowness is down right confusing and troublesome. Sometimes we need him to be in a hurry but instead he seems to take his sweet little time.

Why might that be?

This is what we are going to explore today in our scripture story in John as we are introduced to a close friend of Jesus named Lazarus. Lazarus was deathly ill and his sisters, Mary and Martha, desperately needed Jesus to come heal him. But he did not.

Join me as we read from John 11:1-44.

11 A man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village where Mary and her sister Martha lived. **2** Mary would later pour perfume on the Lord. She would also wipe Jesus’ feet with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was sick in bed. **3** So the sisters sent a message to Jesus. “Lord,” they told him, “the one you love is sick.”

4 When Jesus heard this, he said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory. God’s Son will receive glory because of it.” **5** Jesus loved Martha

¹ Dallas Willard quoted in John Mark Comer, *Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (NY, NY: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 19.

² Corrie ten Boom quoted in John Mark Comer, 20.

³ Carl Jung quoted in John Mark Comer, 20.

⁴ IBID, 27.

and her sister and Lazarus. **6** So after he heard Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was for two more days. **7** And then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

8 “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short time ago the Jews there tried to kill you with stones. Are you still going back?”

9 Jesus answered, “Aren’t there 12 hours of daylight? Anyone who walks during the day won’t trip and fall. They can see because of this world’s light.

10 But when they walk at night, they’ll trip and fall. They have no light.”

11 After he said this, Jesus went on speaking to them. “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,” he said. “But I am going there to wake him up.”

12 His disciples replied, “Lord, if he’s sleeping, he will get better.” **13** Jesus had been speaking about the death of Lazarus. But his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

14 So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. **15** For your benefit, I am glad I was not there. Now you will believe. But let us go to him.”

16 Then Thomas, who was also called Didymus, spoke to the rest of the disciples. “Let us go also,” he said. “Then we can die with Jesus.”

17 When Jesus arrived, he found out that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. **18** Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. **19** Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary. They had come to comfort them because their brother was dead. **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, “I wish you had been here! Then my brother would not have died. **22** But I know that even now God will give you anything you ask for.”

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

24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again. This will happen when people are raised from the dead on the last day.”

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even if 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. I believe that you are the one who is supposed to come into the world.”

28 After she said this, she went back home. She called her sister Mary to one side to talk to her. “The Teacher is here,” Martha said. “He is asking for you.”

29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. **30** Jesus had not yet entered the village. He was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** Some Jews had been comforting Mary in the house. They noticed how quickly she got up and went out. So they followed her. They thought she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

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

33 Jesus saw her crying. He saw that the Jews who had come along with her were crying also. His spirit became very sad, and he was troubled. **34** “Where have you put him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then the Jews said, “See how much he loved him!”

37 But some of them said, “He opened the eyes of the blind man. Couldn’t he have kept this man from dying?”

38 Once more Jesus felt very sad. He came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone in front of 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 smell. Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days.”

40 Then Jesus said, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?”

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up. He said, “Father, I thank you for hearing me. **42** I know that you always hear me. But I said this for the benefit of the people standing here. I said it so they will believe that you sent me.”

43 Then Jesus called in a loud voice. He said, “Lazarus, come out!” **44** The dead man came out. His hands and feet were wrapped with strips of linen. A cloth was around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the clothes he was buried in and let him go.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

As I pondered this text there were several questions looming in my mind. What was the context for the story? What was the significance of the distance between Bethany and Bethany of Jordan when he heard that his friend was sick and the reason he delayed traveling between the two? What was the Jewish notion of resurrection that Martha professed? If Jesus knew that he would raise Lazarus from the dead, why did he weep? What does this tell us about the need for slowing down and waiting for the Lord? How is the Spirit of God speaking to us today?

The story just before this one tells us that Jesus was in Jerusalem when some Jewish leaders tried to stone him for blasphemy. He and his disciples fled to the opposite side of the Jordan River to an area known as Bethany of Jordan which was also the place where John the Baptist baptized Jesus.

Now the distance from Bethany of Jordan to Bethany where Jesus’ friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived was approximately 58 km or 36 miles. Walking 3

miles per hour meant that it would have taken Jesus about 12 hours in total. This is why Jesus said, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble for he sees this world’s light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.”

The scripture tells us that when Jesus learned that Lazarus was sick, he remained on the East Bank of the Jordan River for two more days. Then on the third day, he must have spent the entire day walking to Bethany. So that by the fourth day, Jesus would have gone to the Lazarus’s home to visit with Mary and Martha.

Needless to say, when he finally arrived, the sisters, full of grief, were a little put out.

Notice how both of them said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

I think this tells us a lot about petitionary prayer.

Mary and Martha had called on the Lord to come and heal their brother who was deathly ill. That was prayer.

Jesus heard their petition. And he had in mind how he was going to answer their prayer.

Let’s think for a moment how Jesus could have answered their prayer.

Yes, I’m on my way right now.

No, I’m not coming.

Or, yes, I am coming but not when or in the way you expected.

Clearly Jesus’ response was the option three. “Yes, but not when or in the way you expected.”

Jesus waited until his time had come, showed up when he was ready, and told his disciples, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”

So his point in not immediately answering Mary and Martha’s plea was not so much for their sake but for his disciples’ sake. We know from the scriptures that Jesus’ followers didn’t grasp what he was saying about his own death and resurrection. In order to help them, he would show them exactly what his resurrection would look like. So they would believe that Jesus had to die and be raised from the dead.

When we come to the part where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, what does this sound like? A tomb with a stone laid across the entrance that gets rolled away. A dead man comes out of the tomb alive wrapped in strips of linen.

Easter morning! The disciples got to witness for themselves what would happen to Jesus in just a few days time.

Jesus told them, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

The reason Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead was not to comfort Martha and Mary in their grief. It was to help people believe in him.

I want to return to the moment when Jesus told Martha that her brother would rise again. She said, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” What did she mean by that? What was the Jewish notion of resurrection to which she professed?

According to British theologian NT Wright in his book *Surprised by Hope*, a proper Jewish understanding of resurrection was not about going to heaven when one died or a disembodied afterlife. It was a real hope in a bodily life after bodily death. It was an act of new creation, occurring at the end of history, for all God’s people. This is what Martha believed. And this was the Christian hope up until the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries when our ideas of life after death morphed into a disembodied spiritual existence where we floated around on clouds and played harps in heaven forever.

We are going to touch more on this Easter Sunday. So stay tuned.

But back to our story today, it is here that Jesus makes the statement that would have rocked Martha’s understanding of the resurrection. 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?”

Even today, we hear that question at most funerals. Do we believe this? You see believing that Jesus is the resurrection changes everything of what we believe about death and what would come after death.

By Jesus saying “I am the resurrection and the life.” He is claiming power and dominion over all things in life, even death itself. And he is announcing that His kingdom would come soon, on earth as it was in heaven.

This is a proclamation to which Martha responded, “Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

My friends, if we believe that Jesus is who Martha said he was, then can we trust him with our lives today? Can we trust him in our deaths as well? Could we believe that the resurrection of the body is something worth waiting for?

But if Jesus knew that he would raise Lazarus from the dead, why did Jesus weep? Its one of the shortest verses in the bible and yet tells us so much about what was going on inside Jesus. Was he grief stricken as people assumed or was there something else going on? The Greek word for wept is *edakrysen*. It means to shed tears quietly. This is not a full body, gut wrenching display of emotion. It implies a reflective sadness. Jesus wept because of people’s disbelief in him. Though they had watched him heal the sick, return sight to the blind, feed thousands, make the lame walk, cleanse people of leprosy, calm the seas, and yes, even raise the dead to life, people still struggled to believe in him.

What about us?

What are we struggling to believe about Jesus today?

What if we claimed that he was Lord not only of our bodily life after death but our bodily lives now? Could we trust him? Could we profess like Martha that he really is the Son of God who has come into the world?

Would Jesus weep over our disbelief today?

So what does this tell us about the need for slowing down?

I think a lot.

Author and pastor John Ortberg said, “For many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.”⁵

So as we take time to slow down today, both in our spirits and in our bodies, let us hear God’s wisdom and hope from scripture.

Psalm 33, “We wait in hope for the Lord;

He is our help and our shield.

In Him our hearts rejoice,

For we trust in his holy name.

May your unfailing love be with us, Lord,

Even as we put our hope in you.”⁶

The prophet Isaiah, “But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”⁷

Lamentations, “The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”⁸

The Apostle Paul, “But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”⁹

Waiting seems to be a common thread throughout all of it.

We wait in hope.

We wait for the Lord.

We wait with patience.

We wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

We wait for our bodily resurrection from the dead.

⁵ John Ortberg as quoted in John Mark Comer, *Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 27.

⁶ Psalm 33:20-22

⁷ Isaiah 40:31

⁸ Lamentations 3:25-26

⁹ Romans 8:25

We wait for God's kingdom to come and for God's will to be done through us on earth just as it is in heaven.

John Mark Comer says, "Jesus doesn't offer us an escape [from this life]. He offers us something better: 'equipment.' He offers his apprentices a whole new way to bear the weight of our humanity: with ease. At his side. Like oxen in a field, tied shoulder to shoulder. With Jesus doing all the heavy lifting. At his pace. Slow, unhurried, present to the moment, full of love and joy and peace. An easy life isn't an option; an easy yoke is."¹⁰

Our waiting is not passive. It is expectant. It is active. It is hopeful.

That's how we wait.

Maybe some of us need to slow down and leave our frenzied pace of life behind.

Maybe some of us are awaiting for God to come through on a prayer that we've had for years.

Maybe some of us are going through an illness and our recovery seems to be taking forever.

Maybe some of us feel stuck in our careers and are waiting for a new job.

Maybe some of us are waiting for a loved one to come home.

Maybe some of us are waiting for peace to come to the world.

Maybe some of us are waiting to be reunited with loved ones who have gone ahead of us into glory and who are also awaiting for their own day of bodily resurrection.

However we are waiting this season, may we know that God is with us as we intentionally slow down to the pace of Jesus. May we know though God hears our prayers that God may not be in as much of a rush to answer them as we are. And may we patiently trust in hope that however God acts or doesn't act, He always has our best in mind.

Amen.

¹⁰ John Mark Comer, *Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 88.