

Theme: Moving beyond self

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, today we recall Jesus' dramatic demonstration that death is not final; we thank you for the Christian hope given to us by your son and may we always be alive in Christ in what we do for others, through him who broke the bonds of death, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Today is the last of the ancient baptism teaching texts from John's Gospel. For John, this is the precipitating event that leads to Jesus' arrest.

Jesus is in the area of the Jordan where John the Baptist once was. He went there to escape being stoned to death by the religious authorities. It is here that Jesus receives a message from close friends of his, Mary and Martha of Bethany. Their brother Lazarus is ill.

Jesus is very close to Lazarus. Jesus loves this family of siblings. There must have been something in the note that indicated Lazarus was not only ill, he was very ill. The sister's request for Jesus to come is urgent. Jesus says Lazarus' illness is not fatal. Instead, it will be a way to glorify God and the Son of God. Remember that Jesus gave the same reason for the lack of sight in the man born blind that we heard last week.

In spite of Jesus' love for the siblings of Bethany, Jesus dawdles for two more days. Jesus has a price on his head. The people that want him dead are in Judea. Bethany and Jerusalem are in Judea.

When the disciples object to Jesus' intention to return to Judea, Jesus responds with more light and darkness metaphors. The disciples may have asked themselves, "What does any of that have to do with going to Judea?" In the agrarian society of the time, people worked when it was light and then they quit for the day. To walk with Jesus, the Light of the World, means to walk on a lighted straight path where one cannot stumble.

Jesus says that Lazarus is sleeping, a euphemism that is lost on the disciples. Jesus then speaks plainly, "Lazarus is dead." People in this country don't like to say someone is dead. Instead, euphemisms are used. The person passed (as if they were driving in a hurry). The person was lost (as if they

wandered off somewhere). Jesus came that we need not fear death. Death is the gateway to eternal life. Death may be hard on us, the living. But death is good news for those who have died.

Jesus still doubts that the disciples have the necessary faith to carry on his work. Jesus won't be with them much longer. They and we will need to continue Jesus' ministry. So raising Lazarus might turn the tide in their lack of faith.

Thomas volunteers the group to go with Jesus so they can all die together – a suicide mission. By the time they reached Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Some rabbis said that the soul hovers near the dead body for three days. So John wants us to know that Lazarus is *really* dead.

Bethany is about two miles from Jerusalem. The two towns are separated by the Mount of Olives. Jesus' arrival will get back to the Jerusalem authorities. There were already many people from Jerusalem tending to Mary and Martha in their grief. When Martha heard that Jesus was approaching, she left the house to meet him. Jesus' arrival is already working through the grapevine. Here John seems to reverse Luke: Martha is the disciple, while Mary is distracted by many things.

When Martha meets Jesus, she expresses deep faith – the kind of faith that Jesus wished his entourage had. If Jesus had gotten there sooner, her brother would not have died and her brother will rise again at the resurrection on the last day. Any Pharisee would have taught this about the resurrection.

Jesus goes beyond the standard teaching of the Pharisees on the resurrection. Martha, Lazarus, or anyone else do not have to wait for the last day. Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. Jesus *is* the one who raises people from death. Anyone who has faith in Jesus will live after they die.

When asked if she believes Jesus, Martha gives a great statement of faith, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” Note that Martha doesn't say that Jesus is in the world – Jesus is coming *into* the world. We may ponder what Martha means here. Jesus doesn't correct her. This may mean that Jesus doesn't come into the world until he is raised. It could also refer to Jesus' second

coming. I suppose it could also refer to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that we will recreate next Sunday.

Mary seems to be unaware that Jesus had arrived, because when Martha tells her that he is there she gets up and hurries to Jesus. Not only does Jesus love these siblings, but they love Jesus. When Mary leaves the house, the mourners follow her. If Jesus' arrival was supposed to be a secret, it isn't any longer. Mary repeats the statement of faith that Martha previously said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (CEV)

At a funeral or similar occasion, when we see someone cry it affects us deeply. Jesus is affected the same way. After Jesus asks where Lazarus' body is, Jesus weeps, too. The crowd notes what John has already told us about Jesus' love for Lazarus. But others were critical saying that Jesus gave sight to a man born blind, so why couldn't he heal Lazarus? The Greek word for love used here is not *agapè*, but it is *philia*, brotherly love, affection, or deep feeling.

Jesus was still very upset when he approached the tomb, which was a cave with a stone rolled over the entrance. This sounds like another tomb that we will hear about next week and the week after. This was a common way to bury people in first century Palestine. Jesus orders the stone to be rolled back.

In spite of Martha's great statements of faith earlier, she objects to the removal of the stone. She believes in physical laws. Her brother's body is decaying. Jesus answers her by saying that through faith she will see the glory of God.

Jesus prays for God's intervention to nullify physical laws. The reason for this nullification is to show to everyone there, disciples and non-disciples alike, that Jesus was sent by God and has God's ear.

Jesus then commanded Lazarus to come out. The shepherd has called the sheep by name. Lazarus walked out with the burial bands around his body and the burial cloth over his face. Jesus ordered the crowd to unbind him and let him go. Death no longer has dominion over him. Lazarus is free. Many of the people who witnessed this came to believe in Jesus.

Unfortunately, a lot of people are like mummies, all wrapped up in themselves. And they don't want to become unwrapped. All they do is come unwound at the thought of coming out of their safe tomb or stepping out in faith. But Jesus calls us out of the tomb, sets us free and calls us to move beyond ourselves into a life of faith, commitment, obedience and service.

“On the old Merv Griffin Show. There was a time when he was interviewing some body builders. As he was standing there looking at these guys with all these muscles, he asked a powerful question: "What do you use these muscles for?"

“One guy answered by flexing his muscles in one of those body builder stances. But Merv said, "No, you don't understand. What do you USE all those muscles for?" The guy said, "I'll show you." And he flexed again in another stance.

“Again Merv said, "No. You still don't understand my question. Read my lips. What do you USE them FOR?" The guy posed again.

“Jesus calls us out of the tomb, sets us free and calls us to move beyond ourselves into a life of faith, commitment, obedience and service. When we just come to Church and sometimes read our Bibles and just enjoy the fellowship but nothing else, then we're like those body building guests. We're like mummies, still wrapped up in ourselves. Jesus calls us to move beyond self to a life of faith and committed service.”¹

Text: **John 11:1–45** (NRSV)

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, ^a “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^b 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

¹ Billy D. Strayhorn, Resurrection Living

^a Gk *him*

^b Gk *he*

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,^c said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus^d had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles^e 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.^f 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,^g 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?”

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

^c Gk *Didymus*

^d Gk *he*

^e Gk *fifteen stadia*

^f Other ancient authorities lack *and the life*

^g Or *the Christ*

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.”

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ²

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 11:1–45). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.