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

“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus said to her, **“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?”** She said to him, *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*

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.”* And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.”** When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also **weeping**, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, *“Where have you laid him?”* They said to him, *“Lord, come and see.”* Jesus began to **weep**. So the Jews said, *“See how he loved him!”* But **some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”**

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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.”* Jesus said to her, *“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”* So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, *“Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.”* When he

had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “**Lazarus, come out!**” 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.**”

The raising of Lazarus is the seventh “sign” that Jesus performs in John’s Gospel that reveals his identity as the Son of God. Jesus says, “*This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so the Son of God might be glorified by means of it*” (11:4). The Gospel says that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters so it is telling us immediately that those who are loved by Jesus can and do become terminally ill and die. The words of the message sent to Jesus, “*Lord, he whom you love is ill,*” could be spoken by any Christian about any believer who is ill.

Many of us have watched as a loved one has grown weaker and wondered why God didn’t do something to relieve their suffering either by healing them or taking them swiftly.

Many of us have prayed and pleaded and called and our loved one has died, and we may have felt God was not with us.

If God *had* been with us things would have been, might have been, different.

Many of us have experienced a sense of abandonment.

I have stood before a gathering of family members and friends and said the triumphant sounding words of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:55):

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?”

and then looked at faces contorted in sadness and loss, and thought to myself,

“It seems to be just about everywhere.”

Jesus doesn’t come in time to save Lazarus so Martha and Mary are mourning the loss of their beloved brother Lazarus. They are in grief.

When I was a boy there was a couple in the church where my dad was the pastor called Jack and Helen Sweeney. They always did small special things for my sisters and me for our birthdays and at Christmas. We called them Aunt Helen and Uncle Jack. My parents have been friends with them for 40 years and they did what they could to assist them through the difficult days of Jack’s illness until his death. I wrote Helen a note expressing my love and sympathy and recalling some of the special times we shared when I was young. She wrote me back and part of her note expresses what grief is like. *“Hi Doug, It was so nice to get your wonderful card and letter. It is very hard to lose someone you love, and were married to 57 years. I am still trying to keep my emotions in check, but it has only been a week. The shortest verse in the Bible is “Jesus*

wept.” I don’t know how I would have got through this without Him. I know I am never alone. The days I try to keep busy, but the nights are terrible.”

One of the first radio messages that we did for BBC was about grief and it was brief version of a longer piece written by Author Edgar Jackson describing grief:

“Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children, alone.

Grief is a man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person.

Grief is a mother walking daily to a cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day.

She knows that part of her is in the cemetery, just as part of her is in her daily work.

Grief is the silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes a hundred times a day, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there.

Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years.

Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who has died.

Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will be again.

Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life.”

Because grief is so overwhelming,
we need to experience the life giving promise and power of Jesus not just at times of death, but in the midst of life. **Only when faith and trust in Jesus’ power as the resurrection and the life becomes part of the regular rhythm of our life, can death indeed lose its sting.**

One thing we observe in this scripture is that each member of a family will grieve in her or his own way. Martha and Mary are very different people.

Martha stands and speaks with Jesus and expresses confidence in his power.

Mary also believes Jesus could have made a difference but she falls at his feet and weeps. Both sisters had expected Jesus to intervene on their brother’s behalf.

Both sisters greeted Jesus with the same words dripping with lamenting faith, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Words which those of us who have lost loved ones have often thought or felt even if we didn’t express them, *“Lord, if you cared, my child would not have died before me.”*

“Lord, if you had been here, my spouse would not have suffered so.”

“Lord, if you really were powerful, if you were good, if you really existed, you would have prevented the accident.”

When God doesn't act when and how we think God should, most especially in matters of life and death, our faith can waver, stagnate, crumble, or even be lost. Martha and Mary knew Jesus loved their brother and yet Jesus didn't come when they called for him. Martha's mature faith in Jesus is such that even after her brother has been dead for four days she can say,

*“**Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.**”*

Jesus responds with among the most important words he ever spoke.

“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.”

Believing in Jesus impacts our life and death.

When Jesus says, “I am the resurrection,” that means our future is determined by our faith in Jesus, not by our death.

The question Jesus asks all of us is, *“Do you believe this?”*

God has offered us this gift -

Do we believe our life and our death can be transformed, if we believe in Jesus?

Martha says with her lips, *“I believe.”* But like many of us, what she says and what she feels in her heart may not be exactly the same. Martha returns to get her sister and says, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” She calls Jesus teacher because he still has more to teach them about who he is.

Mary comes to Jesus and doesn't stand and talk with him like her sister Martha rather she falls at his feet, eyes filled with tears. Confronted by a friend he loves who is weeping at his feet, a gathering of mourners, who do not necessarily share the confidence of his friends and disciples, Jesus sheds some tears. Perhaps Jesus' tears are an acknowledgment of the pain that death causes in human life. They are natural given the feelings of his friends, even though he knew they would happen when he delayed in coming.

When Jesus says, *“Take away the stone,”* Martha protests there will be a stench. Jewish burial did not involve embalming so by this time the odor of the body's decomposition would be acute.

Martha represents the growing edge of our faith. All of us have growing edges to our faith. There are some things we can believe readily, other things can be more difficult, and some things really are on the edge of faith for all of us.

Faith is always being stretched beyond its own limits.

Faith can never be stagnant.

We can make statements of faith that are correct, and still not be freed by the truth that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus offers a prayer of thanksgiving when the stone is taken away, before Lazarus comes out. That is confidence in God. Jesus' prayer also directs the eyes of those who gather at the tomb, like his own eyes, toward God, not toward Jesus himself, so that God's glory will be seen in the miracle.

Jesus models a relationship with God in which one trusts one has been heard, before one has seen any evidence of that fact.

Jesus offers all who believe a vision of life in which one remains in the full presence of God during life and after death. Eternal life is the relationship with God that begins in the present through faith and endures beyond the death of the body, leading into the final and future resurrection.

Being a believer does not mean denying the very real loss we experience when a loved one dies. It does mean however, that we do not mourn in the same way as those who have no hope.

God's life-giving power in Jesus is the force that shapes a believer's existence, not the power of death. We are all like Lazarus in that we are dependent on the love and care of Jesus to achieve freedom from the grip of death.

Jesus' commanding voice gives us the power to rise and walk.

Jesus' voice calls us out of the darkness of death and into the light of life.

Jesus invites out of bondage to fear and into the joy of freedom.

Jesus says to the fear of death which grips some of us

"Unbind him, and let him go."

Jesus says to the grief stricken heart,

"Unbind her, and let her go."

Jesus says to those of us who believe, when you see a soul who is bound by doubt and skepticism, "unbind him and let him go."

When you see a soul wrapped in the cloth of despair, "unbind her and let her go."

Jesus says Lazarus' illness will lead to the glory of God.

As believers we are invited to consider how God is seeking to be glorified through our health and sickness, our joy and sorrow, our living as well as our dying.

In the face of the challenges of life and the mystery and seeming finality of death, Jesus says *"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 shall never die.

Do you believe this?"

Prayer: Creator God, the giver of life, we thank you for the hope that we have in Jesus, the resurrection and the life, that encourages us to remember that death is not the end of our loved ones or ourselves and that one day we will be in your presence in a way we cannot fully imagine or grasp.

Blessing: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1: 3-5