

“Raise Us Up”

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Text: John 11:1-45, Psalm 130

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If you would like to turn with me to page 104 in the Greek scriptures, we're going to be looking at John 11:1-45. Now as you know, I ask questions during my sermons. So, how many of you have heard the story of Lazarus sometime before? Okay. For those of you who have not, I thought today was the most appropriate time to have this scripture and somehow it was a God thing because it happens in this scripture that there's a misperception of time. Someone's late...and someone's early. And what better day to have this happen than the day the time changes. We talk about the timing of Jesus, and had I realized that before this morning, the sermon might have been very different. But when we were talking earlier and I was going over things and the Psalm came up, the Psalm “Out of the depths I cry to you oh God” came, and this is kind of how I felt... *(The picture at the left was put up on the screen and there was laughter in the congregation.)*



How many of you have had this happen to you? You literally cry out from the depths and someone looks at you as though you've lost your mind? All of creation at some point or another, I think, calls out to God. “Out of the depths we cry” said the psalmist, “and oh Lord you have heard me, and you hear my cry”. I think maybe Mary and Martha felt the same way as a part of this story. See if you can hear their cry to the Lord. And I also want to see if you can hear Jesus and the time change, as we go through this.

John 11: 1-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill”. ⁴But 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.” ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus 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. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” ¹¹After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³Jesus, however had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” ¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” ²⁸When 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.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The 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. ³²When 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.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then 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."

Now, there are two things that I have picked out. It's a very long text, there is so much going on in this scripture that we could talk about. There are two things I have picked out of this, one is love, and one is disbelief. And sometimes, often times, they go together hand in hand. So I want to tell you a couple of things about John that you may not know regarding these two. In the entire gospel of John, there is much disbelief. Everywhere that Jesus goes he performs miracles, he says things to them that are true, that God had told him, and some believe but many do not. In the gospel of John, usually everywhere that Jesus goes, someone's trying to kill him. Someone doesn't like what he says enough, that they're running him out of town, they're picking up stones, they're throwing them at him, and he narrowly escapes every time. So in this story where the disciples are there and they're saying to him about going back to Lazarus' town, in Bethany, the disciples are saying to him "Lord, we barely made it out of there alive. Why are we going back?" And it's later in John that we find out why. We find out why he had to go back to Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus. It's because of love. And I don't know about you, and I'm sure all of you did this morning in preparation, you may have read through the entire gospel of John getting here to find out what had been going on, right? Yes, yes. All of you say yes, we'll never know. (laughter.) There's only one other time where the word "love", the way in which it is used here, where it says that Jesus "loved him", is used. And it's the way in which Jesus is speaking about the love he has for the Father. It's this intimate kind of love, that is tangible, that is touching. It's the love many of us hope to know in our families. The love we know with the sacredness of a child we hold in our arms. Or a spouse. Or a friend. Or a brother or sister. It's this love that we want to touch and hold and have fill our lives. And so two things were problematic. People could understand why Lazarus loved Jesus like this, and why Jesus loved Lazarus, but they couldn't understand an intimate kind of relationship with God like this. See, God was holy and set apart, pure, unreachable, out there. This was part of the reason they were trying to kill him, because he was saying "No, God is someone that you love. That is a part of every aspect of your life. God is present with us, holy with us, here with us. Do you believe?" And they couldn't quite grasp it. Even though this is a modern understanding for us, we can't quite grasp it either. We struggle. We struggle to find this intimacy with God. Many of us pray, and many of us search, but we find it just a little elusive. But when we see it in someone else, when we see someone else who has this kind of love, this kind of compassion, we often say, "They know God. They are a friend of God. They *know* who God is." And we're somehow drawn to them. This is how much Jesus was drawn to this family. This is what John is trying to tell us, because we have to see things and experience them before we can really grasp it. Before we really know what it is.

I've had this experience when I go overseas, and someone will tell me how something works in another place. Because I only know how things work here, they said to me "If you plug your hairdryer into the outlet, it will flip the breaker box and catch on fire." Now my father is an electrician, I know that this is not so, but there was enough fear to make me go "Hmmm." So I ask someone, "What's this about?" and they say, "You need this little adapter because their circuits don't work the same way and then everything will be fine." Someone else on our tour group did not heed that warning, and learned by experience. Plugged it in, turned it on, BOOM! *Some of us can only learn by experience.* No matter who tells us something, we don't believe it until we can see it, we can touch it, we know that it's real. This is the love of God, at times. We understand it. We see it. We hear people talking about it, but if we have never experienced it that intimately, it doesn't quite seem real.

This is also the resurrection story that was coming. John knew, for the gospel and the community that he knew, that they weren't gonna believe that Jesus had been resurrected until they heard a story about someone that they *knew* being given new life. And so he's getting them prepared. He's telling them of what is to come. He's trying to explain it to them in terms that they can understand, they can see, they can touch, so that when it happens they will know that it's real. They will know that it's there. It's still hard to wrap your mind around, isn't it? Because like many of you, I've grown up with the resurrection story. I know it. I believe it. If Jesus were standing in front of me and said, just like He was standing in front of Mary and Martha, all of us would say to him "Yes Lord, I believe". But there's something about what we experience, that I have never seen someone dead rise. Now I have seen people on medical tables, as a volunteer in the ER, when they bring them back to life. But I've never seen someone four days dead,

decaying, the stench of death in a tomb, raise. It's something that I can't quite wrap my head around. It's a mystery. I have to have *faith* to believe it. We have to have faith to believe in the promises of God. Jesus had said the same thing to the disciples earlier, "Praise for those that have not seen and have not heard, for they believe. Even though you have seen and heard and believe." That's what we're left with.

But this resurrection story means something different. It's also about hope and promise. Hope and promise in a different way. Most of us don't believe that our lives, our circumstances can change, because we live in reality. We live on what we know. If we've had broken relationships in our family and we've tried again and again to heal them and they don't and someone says "Maybe you should try...", we go "That really can't happen. We've tried everything we know." If someone says to you "We need to have hope that something new can come out of this, that God can do a new thing with us. That we can be different." The fear of the past grabs hold, because that's what we know.

This scripture will never be the same to me because of something that happened when I was in college. I don't know about many of you, but the way in which we teach children is to have them role play. Have any of you ever done this? We teach them to be the characters in how we do this. When I was in college, a group of college students were leading a VBS. And they were working with kids, trying to get them to memorize stories, and to have the scriptures alive and told in front of the people. And so they were using this text. All the kids came up and picked a part out of a hat...they said it was "God's will". They picked a name out of a hat and that's the character they played.

So there were a group of teenagers participating in this script, and one guy named Chris, who was about 17, took a lot of razzing for being Mary. But his older brother Jeff was Martha, so it seemed appropriate. (laughter) So they were coming down to practice, and my group had finished, so I was sitting at the back of the sanctuary watching them, wanting to see what other people did. So they came down, and the youth minister who was a part of their group came and was playing the part of Jesus to help them along and get them there. So the part of the story where Mary comes down and falls at the feet of Jesus and says, "My Lord, my Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died." And God, through Christ says, "It is for the glory of God that this is done." We wonder how comforting that was to Mary. How comforting that is to us, when someone that we love so wonderfully says, "It is the will of God." And whatever happened to Chris, it flew all over him, and none of us had known that his best friend had died. And he said to the youth pastor, "No, you had to be here. You could have saved him." And all the pain and all the anguish, all of that came rushing forward and this brief little time lapse in the scripture to us, took 45 minutes for them to get through. Every time the youth pastor kept saying "*Do you believe?*", Chris would ask another question and then it got personal. It came out of the scripture, and it said "I don't know. I don't know if you can do this. I don't know if it can happen." And all the compassion of Christ came through Mark as he knelt down with him and said "Come and see. Come and see what can happen. Let me show you a different experience. Let me show you what God can do." It came time for me to go back to my group. I had no idea what happened. I left before they ever presented their script that Sunday, I had things to do. But that, in the moment, became the Lazarus story for me. Do you believe? Are you willing to get up off your feet and follow Christ? Are you willing, in the midst of the pain and suffering, the fear that everything in reality has told us, that it won't be any different, that it can't change. Are you willing to follow Christ for the *hope* of something different? Amen.

Will you pray with me?

Oh God, there are times in our life when the fear, the despair, and the reality of the world in which we live, overtakes us. There are times when we want to cling to you with every breath of our being, but we can't seem to get up off the floor and to say "yes". Everything has told us that it can't be a different way. Death will come, and that we can't change it. But in you, oh Lord, in you oh Lord ***there is resurrection***. We may have to experience the stench of death to find it. But oh God, through this scripture and the story of Easter you have said, you have promised us that it will be different. And oh Lord, if we can only believe, we can live into that hope, into that promise, and be an Easter people. Amen.