



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
 Asheville, North Carolina  
 7 November 2021  
 Sermon: All Saints  
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

John 11:32-44

### John 11:32-44 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>32</sup> 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.” <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup> 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.” <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> 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.” <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup> 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.”

What if the tragedies of our lives never happened? Or rather, what if, in the moment before the tragedy, time stood still, frozen in place? What if I just had enough time before the accident, a moment to think before choosing a wrong direction, more time to tell my loved one how much they meant to me in our last conversation? What if, before the doctor opened her mouth, time stopped, and she never uttered that diagnosis? What if I could have just kept on sleeping instead of getting the call I’ll never forget? These are the questions that former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins poses in a poem published in the New Yorker a decade ago.

Collins talks about a paradox by the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno. The paradox is this: When an archer shoots an arrow, that arrow must always first go half the distance to its target before hitting that target. But once the distance is cut in half, then the arrow must then go half of the remaining distance. And so on; the distance is always cut in half, to smaller and smaller increments. But if this is true, if the arrow is always traveling half the next distance to its target,

then there is always another half distance to go, however small. It will never actually reach its target. It will remain suspended in the air, always traveling more half distances. What if the tragedies of our lives never happened? Here's Billy Collins' poem "Table Talk":

Not long after we had sat down to dinner  
at a long table in a restaurant in Chicago  
and were deeply engrossed in the heavy menus,  
one of us—a bearded man with a colorful tie—  
asked if any one of us had ever considered  
applying the paradoxes of Zeno to the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.

The differences between these two figures  
were much more striking than the differences  
between the Cornish hen and the trout amandine  
I was wavering between, so I looked up and closed my menu.

If, the man with the tie continued,  
an object moving through space  
will never reach its destination because it is always  
limited to cutting the distance to its goal in half,

then it turns out that St. Sebastian did not die  
from the wounds inflicted by the arrows.  
No, the cause of death was fright at the spectacle of their endless approach.  
St. Sebastian, according to Zeno, would have died of a heart attack.

I think I'll have the trout, I told the waiter,  
for it was now my turn to order,  
but all through the elegant dinner  
I kept thinking of the arrows forever nearing

the pale, quivering flesh of St. Sebastian  
a fleet of them perpetually halving the tiny distances  
to his body, tied to a post with rope,  
even after the archers had packed it in and gone home.

And I thought of the bullet never reaching  
the wife of William Burroughs, an apple trembling on her head,  
the tossed acid never getting to the face of that girl,  
and the Oldsmobile never knocking my dog into a ditch.

The theories of Zeno floated above the table  
like thought balloons from the fifth century before Christ,  
yet my fork continued to arrive at my mouth  
delivering morsels of asparagus and crusted fish,

and after we all talked and ate and lifted our glasses,  
 we left the restaurant and said goodbye on the street  
 then walked our separate ways in the world where things do arrive,

where people get where they are going—  
 where the train pulls into the station in a cloud of vapor,  
 where geese land with a splash on the surface of the lake,  
 and the one you love crosses the room and arrives in your arms—

and, yes, where sharp arrows will pierce a torso,  
 splattering the groin and the bare feet of the saint,  
 that popular subject of European religious painting.  
 One hagiographer compared him to a hedgehog bristling with quills.<sup>1</sup>

I happened upon that poem in a magazine a decade ago, and it has stuck with me. I think it is those images in the middle paragraph, the arrow suspended in the air, the acid never reaching the face, the Oldsmobile never hitting the dog. It's absurd; its fantasy; and yet the image is striking. I find myself drawn to a world where such disasters remain eternally deferred.

There have been times in my life when I have approached Scripture in the same way, as a fantastic vision I long for, but have difficulty believing. Perhaps that has happened to you too.

When John of Patmos says, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them. God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4).

When Paul says, "For the Lord, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16).

When Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2).

I am drawn to these beautiful visions of God's future. Some days, I just want to rest in them. I've found myself, lately, reading my Bible as I go to sleep. But they also seem remote, don't they? In this world of death and decay, where arrows reach their targets.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus's friends in the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John were caught in a similar pessimism, as they mourned the death of Lazarus. In the verses right before our passage, Martha complains to Jesus, "Lord, if

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Collins, "Table Talk," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 4, 2010.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/11/table-talk-poetry-billy-collins>

<sup>2</sup> Here and in the proceeding exegesis, I am indebted to Cynthia A. Jarvis's work in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 4*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 236-241.

you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary, when she sees Jesus a few verses later, complains, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But now that is passed, they seem to say. Death has had its say. Jesus tells them, “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.” A beautiful, fantastic vision.

And Martha and Mary want to believe, and yet they cannot. When Jesus tells them to roll away the stone, Martha warns, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Surely this man Jesus does not have power over the stench of death.

And then there is the weeping. You know it, the shortest verse in the Bible, the one all good Baptist children like me growing up memorized first: “Jesus wept.” Why did Jesus weep? The crowd thinks it is grief. They are astonished by his tears, “See how he loved him!” This may be the interpretation you have heard in the past as well. It is a good one. Jesus weeps for his friend. Jesus, fully human, fully divine, weeps alongside us in the tragedies, in the griefs, in the losses of our lives. God with us, Immanuel.

But there are layers to Christ’s tears, as there are layers to all our tears. The NRSV says Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” But the original Greek word *em-bri-mao-mai* is more specific than that. Jesus is not just disturbed. Jesus is frustrated.<sup>3</sup> The NLV translates it, “anger welled up within him.” Because those around him cannot see that “the resurrection and the life” stands before them. “Did I not tell you,” he says, before raising the dead man back to life, “that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

“If you believed, you would see the glory of God.” Mary, and Martha, and the crowds cannot see it, until Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb, still wrapped in his burial clothes.

There are days I have trouble seeing it, even in recent days. But then, then I think of the ways I too have seen resurrection in my life. The way the Saints make their presence known in my life.

The feeling I get, when I walk through our church’s memorial garden, and I read the names on the wall, and feel the history, the love of that great cloud of witnesses surrounding me.

The way I know, I know, when I look at a photo on my bookcase, of my grandmother, and my great-grandmother, and my two great uncles, all passed, sitting reflectively on the beach, that they are still with me, that their love surrounds me, and carries me.

The way widows, widowers, and grieving partners in our congregation tell us they see reminders of their beloved every day, in small things, like a favorite song; the faces of grandchildren; in the strength that moves them to keep on keeping on, even when grief is heavy.

The Gospel of John offers no systemic account of life after death. The Bible itself offers many and conflicting visions of life after death. The raising of Lazarus offers more questions than it does answers.

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<sup>3</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*. Sacra Pagina, Vol. 4. Ed. Daniel Harrington (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 330.

But the one answer it gives is this: to trust, to trust, that in life and in death, we belong to God. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life...Do you believe this?” he asks Mary. Do you trust in me?

So, when I get so caught up in my own worries, in my own doubts. When night comes, and the unknown stands before me. When grief hangs so heavy, as it does these days. When suffering and death surround me. When arrows hit their targets and tragedies unfold.

I hold onto those words, “I am the resurrection and the life”; “I am the resurrection and the life.”

And Lazarus stumbles out of his tomb, still wrapped in his burial clothes.

Today, we remember the Saints surrounding us, surrounding me and surrounding you.

Thanks be to God.