



**"EMERGING"**

**SCRIPTURE: JOHN 11: 1-45**

**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

**Sunday, March 26, 2023, Lent #5**

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

**John 11: 1-45**

**MMS:** A reading from the Gospel of John. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother, Lazarus, was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus:

Alexandra: "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

**MMS:** But when Jesus heard it, he said,

Libby: 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.

**MMS:** Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples,

Libby: "Let us go to Judea again."

Rick: Rabbi, the people were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"

Libby: Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.

**MMS:** The disciples said to him

Rick: Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be alright.

**MMS:** Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.

Libby: Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.

**MMS:** Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples,

Rick: Let us also go, that we may die with him.

**MMS:** 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 people 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,

Alexandra: 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."

Libby: Your brother will rise again.

Alexandra: I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Libby: 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?

Alexandra: Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.

**MMS:** When Martha had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately:

Alexandra: The Teacher is here and is calling for you.

**MMS:** And when Mary 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 people 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:

AKKP: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

**MMS:** When Jesus saw her weeping, and the people who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Jesus said:

Libby: Where have you laid him?

AKKP: Lord, come and see.

**MMS:** Jesus wept. And the people said:

Rick: See how he loved him!

**MMS:** But some of them said,

RRC: Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?

**MMS:** Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said,

Libby: Take away the stone.

**MMS:** Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to Jesus:

Alexandra: Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.

Libby: Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?

**MMS:** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said,

Libby: 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.

**MMS:** When Jesus had said this, he cried with a loud voice:

Libby: Lazarus, come out!

**MMS:** 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:

Libby: Unbind him, and let him go.

**MMS:** Many of the people therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

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**ANTHEM (go sing with choir)**

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(crowdsourcing about stories during Lent: started with JC's temptation in the wilderness, then went to Nicodemus, then the woman at the well, then young man who did not have sight, now the raising of Lazarus)

The Gospel of John uses signs—the order of magnitude gets higher and higher. This story is the culminating sign (different from a miracle) These signs are pointing us to who Jesus is—not as much about what he does, but that he can do these things and he does these things to glorify God and that people are beginning to see Jesus for who he really is.

And these signs in the Gospel of John make Jesus a bigger and bigger threat to the religious establishment and to the Roman government.

Distinctions:

- Lazarus raised from dead to live longer—but he was still going to die someday.
- Mary and Martha both already believed Jesus could raise their brother—they just didn't know why Jesus didn't come earlier.
- Jesus' self knowledge—more and more tied to a change of relationship between humanity and death itself.
- Difference between a sign and a miracle
- Jesus' willingness to go into the fray—back to Judea where they almost stoned him and his friends. Disciples don't want to go.
- Disciples are stand-ins for us—for the followers who are struggling to get it—but whose first hand experience fuels our belief.

What is your first hand experience of Jesus?

And if the name Jesus is a tough proper name for you to relate to because of the way Jesus got kidnapped by Empire and has been used to hurt people. Then let's see if we can explore this part, this piece of the puzzle together with a little room to bring some part of us back from the dead—some part of us who decided a long time ago that this whole church thing, this whole Christianity thing, is just too loaded, it's just too hurtful, it's just too harmful, it's just too destructive—so we can't even really get to know Jesus.

Let's try and see if we can work with the jagged edges, the sharp edges carefully.

Take the name Jesus away from this conversation for just a minute--and let's see if we can play with this experience together.

Think about the ground we have covered during Lent. The ante keeps getting upped in these stories--these verses and verses of stories. The Gospel of John has an agenda and it is clear from the very beginning. Do you remember the beginning of the Gospel of John? How does the Gospel of John start? We read these verses on Christmas Eve.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.*

The Gospel of John's agenda is INCARNATIONAL. What does that word mean? Incarnation?

"In" the flesh (carne), go way back in the word's origins (which, by the way, is a word that started to be used in the 13th century, by the church Fathers about God in Christ) and that carne part comes from a root that means to cut with something sharp.<sup>1</sup>

So, the Gospel writer of John wasn't functioning or imagining or storytelling in a world where this word "incarnation" was in the lexicon.

So let's break open this piece of our inheritance if we can.

The Gospel writer is telling these sign stories in a context that is even more removed from the actual earthly life of this human being from Nazareth who actually walked the planet--made friends, ruffled feathers, caused a stir by asking some questions the powers that be didn't want to be asked and then ended up executed by the Roman government.

This Gospel writer is writing out of the "poverty of the past" -- this is a Process theological concept from Alfred North Whitehead. It basically points us toward how the past we inherit--that shapes our present becoming and our future unfolding--well there is always a poverty to it--that is we are always living out of losses.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/incarnation>

When one thing happens, the nature of being finite, of being mortal, is that a bunch of other things didn't happen. With each moment, there is loss of actuality (that is something didn't happen) and there is loss of possibility (that means something can't happen because of what didn't happen).

So, the Gospel writer is writing out of a past that could have gone in a lot of directions—this whole Jesus dying on the cross thing—it was open to all kinds of unique ways that people and communities made sense of it, made meaning out of it.

And the inheritance that gained a lot of steam just a couple of centuries after the death of this human being from Nazareth's death and then the story being told and written down—is the one that Empire invested in and amplified—and that is that this human was God—cut from the flesh, in the flesh.

The Roman Empire was invested in this angle not for theological reasons, but because of politics and power. Jesus' divinity is a way to justify a whole lot of things—but the main one is enforced conformity—enforced compliance.

Throw in a doctrine of hell (not biblical, but generated by the church Fathers as well) and you've got yourself a cultural force to be reckoned with and a great money making scheme.

That is the poverty of our past as Christians—that the most amazing, the most impactful and Beautiful and intense part of our story was scooped up and jacked up so that people with power could accumulate more and more wealth.

We can't go back and undo that past—nor can we erase the impact of the past, the imprint it has left on us, on the church, on our psyches, even on our imaginations. But as we become more and more aware of the poverty of our past—the deaths of actuality and possibility that are a part of our heritage, the more we can live into the conditions of possibility for something new, for a new kind of flourishing for what it is to be believers today.

So, this is an exercise in collective Holy imagination. This is a practice of faith that is being persuaded to become more robust, more true, more Beautiful by Divine Love in our midst.

So back to that earlier suggestion—if the name "Jesus" is just too loaded down with the poverty of the past, then let's try something else on for size.

The signs that all these stories in John are pointing us toward is how Divine Love inhabits human life—how Divine Love walked around with hair follicles and toe nails, with hunger and thirst, with emotions, with friends and family, with big questions and novel ideas and

old, ancient hopes, and with a rag-tag following of people who were hurting and who wanted the world to be different.

What is your first hand experience of Divine Love with skin on it, of compassion that is embodied, of seeing Divine Love in the flesh in our midst?

Where have you seen Divine Love? Where have you experienced Divine Love in the flesh— healing, breathing life where we had only seen death?

Where have you been called by Love’s voice to come out of your grave and let those you trust remove the burial clothes and welcome you back to the land of the living?

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Perhaps the most important line in this story is not “Lazarus come out,” but maybe it is “Jesus wept.”

What does it mean that Divine Love weeps with us in the grief of all the death we walk around with—even as Divine Love breathes new life into death, even as Divine Love wants us to glimpse at the ways we participate in eternity—the ways nothing is lost, nothing is wasted—the ways our losses can fold into new possibilities, new life?

We focus on Lazarus being brought back to life in this story, but Lazarus is just given a little more time—he’s still going to die some day. We don’t know how much time he gets—and we don’t know what life was like for him after he came back.

Kinda like the man without sight last week not asking to be healed. We have no indication that Lazarus was asking for Jesus before he died. We have not indication that Lazarus was hoping to be raised. His sisters wanted it.

But Lazarus’ disease was not meant for death, Jesus said, just like the man not having sight since birth—was something Jesus said “was not caused by sin, was not meant to punish” but was to reveal the Glory of God.

Divine Love wants us to be able to work with these parts and pieces—these sharp edges, these shattering moments, these times when life turns on a dime and something we never expected or didn’t even ask for is what ends up happening.

When things fall apart, Divine Love weeps and then calls “get up from the grave” and find the life, the future that unfolds from here.

And we've missed this part over and over again in this story—because we have been so impacted by the poverty of our past—the trauma of Divine Love being co-opted by the powers garnered for our destruction and not for our flourishing.

But what if today, Grace Covenant, we change our relationship with the sharp edges, with the brokenness, with the deaths that we walk around with in our own unique ways? What if we hear this story like we've never heard it before?

Not as a biological challenge (e.g. how could Jesus possibly bring someone back from the dead?).

For goodness sake, we live in a world in which death is more of a process we interfere with and prolong and hasten than we ever have before. Machines can keep a body breathing beyond its capacity to be engaged in life with brain activity indefinitely. So the bringing back from the dead thing isn't the biggest deal for us in this world where death is both so prevalent and it something we find ways to avoid—we are surrounded by it, it is mournful, and avoiding it shapes so much that we do—but in the end, we can't outrun it—it will finally be how we all culminate this experience we call life. So, can we let go of the hyper focus on the how question to this story, and turn our attention to the why.

We can finally encounter this story as a theophany— a manifestation of Divine Love to human beings.

We've come full circle from the temptation in the wilderness where Jesus said no to every attempt for him to diminish the power of God by garnering that power to protect himself.

Now Jesus calls on Divine Love to do something to reveal its power more fully to human beings.

***Jesus didn't protect himself by raising Lazarus—he actually sealed the deal of his own death.***

This raising of someone from the dead was the last straw for the powers that be by some accounts. Jesus now would be better off dead than alive for those with formal power in the government and in the religious establishment.

This man obviously has powers they won't be able to control. So, this decision to raise Lazarus tips the scales—it is Jesus' own life that will end because of it. And Lazarus being raised from the dead will end up to be a low stakes sideshow compared to what happens after Jesus dies. We get to that whole conversation in two weeks!



Let whatever is emerging for you, for us, emerge.

Divine Love is embodied and loose in the world—the pain that we carry is not something we carry alone—Divine Love feels the weight of it, weeps from the sorrow and the pain of it. And Divine Love accompanies and invites us to see the healing opportunities and the life-giving possibilities in the moments when death may be all we can see.

So Divine Love is persuading us to open ourselves up to new ways of relating to death—new ways to see how deaths can be portals to unexpected possibilities, to letting go, to picking up pieces that now have a different shape and possibility.

Divine Love has a unique way of whispering to us about new beginnings.

As a community seeking liberation, we can begin to handle these broken pieces with an emerging kind of care, with a unique depth of patience, with sincere tender mercies and true love—

... and with God's help and Jesus' modeling and Spirit's unfailing guidance we will build something new together. And not just anything new, but something new that enhances life for all of us, not just for the few.

Thanks be to God.