

5th Sunday in Lent March 29, 2020
The Rev. Emily Zimbrick-Rogers
St. David's Church, 9.15 am livestream

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” Martha says to Jesus, when he finally arrives, too late.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” Mary says to Jesus, when they speak.

The mourning friends and family who come to comfort these prominent sisters say, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man kept this man from dying?”

This the central question in any pandemic—malaria, flu, coronavirus, any catastrophe, death of a child, loss of employment or housing, chronic illness, violence, depression, or anxiety.

Could not have Jesus have kept this pandemic, this tragedy, this loss from happening?

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus does not answer the question for Martha and Mary and the crowd of mourners.

I wish he did give them an explanation that would make them feel better. I wish I had better answers to people experiencing grief and loss. But Jesus remains with them through their grief, through the trauma of uncertainty and death.

Grief often cannot be answered, only experienced. Grief cannot be rushed or ignored. Jesus meets his disciples where they are and honors the place or stage in their grief journey.

You may remember Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, acceptance. I was thinking of these stages and Jesus' friends Martha and Mary when my therapist, a Jungian analyst in Philadelphia, sent me an article titled "That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief."

I almost laughed, since I was writing a sermon about the grief of Martha and Mary and the crowd of their friends. Yes, grief is at the heart of this story, and at the heart of our contemporary moment. Grief that life as many of us know it, will never again be the same.

I've been thinking about people's stages in grief in tandem with my own feelings. I am probably stuck in the anger phase of grief at this global pandemic, while others I've interacted with have been in other places—*bargaining* "Isn't it good we can have some time to slow down?" or *denial* "I'll keep going to the store but won't tell my niece you said I can't," or *sadness* "My job, my spouse's job is suddenly ended." "We can't have a funeral for my husband."

Martha and Mary seem to be at different stages in their grief journey too. Maybe you connect to one or the other—and perhaps you can allow Jesus’ response to speak to you.

Martha is a disciple a lot like Peter, bold and active. Someone who is not afraid to have an honest interaction with Jesus.

When she’s faced with death and loss, she heads straight for Jesus to ask him *why*? This story is often called the Raising of Lazarus but if we call it that, we actually miss the heart of the story. The heart of the story is Martha’s Confession.

In fact, her confession of faith in Jesus is the center of the whole Gospel of John and mirrors the Confession of Peter in the synoptic gospels. She says, “Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Jesus as Savior of the world stands in the center of all that is broken in the world—and Martha exemplifies for us how to respond to the truth of Jesus’ identity.

She believes—before the miracle.

She has hope—that is not dependent on her brother coming back to her in this temporal world.

She confesses—Jesus is the Messiah and that makes all the difference.

Martha has a belief in what's called the general resurrection of the dead at the end of time. This was a common Jewish belief for those who followed the teachings of the Pharisees. But when Jesus explains that *he* is the resurrection and the life, Martha gets it.

Martha's grief stage needs explanation and meaning making, and Jesus is able to meet her in her need. And she is able to respond with this great confession of faith.

Yet when Jesus encounters Martha's sister, he responds in a very different way. Jesus weeps with Mary. The pain and suffering of his disciples is real. He doesn't tell them to just focus on the future when all will be made right and Lazarus will rise again. He loves this family right where they are, ministering to each of their needs.

And how does Jesus interact with Lazarus?

When Jesus brings Lazarus back from death, he does it with a simple call, "Lazarus, come out." The voice of the one who created the heavens and the earth calls out one from beyond the grave to be restored to his family. "Unbind him and let him go."

Jesus is revealed as the resurrection and the life. The one worthy to be followed and believed and trusted in for eternal life. This story is an anticipation of

what is to come for all of us. All of us will mourn the loss of those we love. All of us will die.

Lazarus died again. Martha and Mary died. But this story tells the early Christian followers of Jesus that while death is part of discipleship, it is not the final answer. Grief and suffering do not control us forever.

A song from my evangelical college days has been running in my head for a week or so. You can look it up later on iTunes or YouTube. It's a little dated but brings together the truth of Martha's confession, the raising of Lazarus, and where we may find ourselves today.

It's called "Resurrection" by Nicol Sponberg. In it, she sings *"Here I am, once again, I'm in need of resurrection. Only you can take this empty shell and raise it from the dead."*

The people of Israel in Ezekiel needed resurrection. Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and all those around this family needed resurrection. Those who are sick and dying now need resurrection. Those unemployed. Those living alone and feeling the pain of isolation. Those with fears and anxiety making it hard to cope.

For some, resurrection will come now through the ministry of medical workers, or calls and letters to those who are alone and isolated, or the prayers of friends.

For others, resurrection will not come in this earthly life. And even if resurrection doesn't come in this life, *we will never be left alone*. Jesus never leaves us alone in our grief, our loss, but walks with us, accompanies us throughout all the experiences of grief.

In the fifth week of Lent and the third week of the pandemic in Pennsylvania, it feels almost too much. We look toward Jesus' resurrection, toward Easter, toward some good news. We can trust that resurrection will come. Jesus can and does take the empty pieces and raise us from the dead.

But for a good portion of this story, Lazarus was truly dead. He experienced death, and his sisters experienced the finality of his death. That was a truth of their experience and a truth of many people's experiences now and a truth of walking with Jesus to the cross. Maybe you can spend some time today or this week reflecting on where you are in stages of grief and what response you need to hear from Jesus. Ask him to speak to you.

Sometimes there is no way to get through other than to experience the grief. But let us keep going—Jesus walks with us and we are not alone. The grief will end—but none of us know how long it might last. The resurrection will come.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.