

Sermon :: 22-Mar-2026
Lent 5, Year A

“ [A]fter having heard that Lazarus was ill [in Bethany],
Jesus stayed *two days longer* in the place where He was ”

Two *days*. Two *whole days*.

We can, if we want, explain it all away ... gloss over or excuse Jesus' seemingly baffling ... unfeeling ... and perhaps even rather cruel delay: He receives word that Lazarus, a beloved friend ... and brother of the equally beloved Mary and Martha ... is quite ill. Although we don't *hear* the messenger say it in so many *words* ... the sisters' message is, clearly: *Please, Jesus ... come as fast as you possibly can ... so you can cure him—keep our brother alive*. But even though Jesus is *already* one whole long day's journey away from Bethany,¹ where Lazarus and his sisters live ... rather than setting off *at once*, Jesus—rather *incredibly*—stays *right where He is* ... for another *two whole days*.

Now, as I say, we *can interpret* our way out of this disheartening glimpse of Jesus' apparently rather callous ... rather blasé ... response to a heartfelt request from a trio of dear friends. In the overall 'arc' of the Gospel according to St John,² the raising of Lazarus is the *final* ... and also the most *astounding* ... of the exactly-seven³ miracles Jesus performs. He's turned water into wine (2:1-12) ... healed both a little boy (4:46-54) and a paralyzed man (4:46-54) ... fed the five thousand (6:1-15) ... walked on water (6:16-21) ... and, as we heard last week, restored the sight of a man blind from birth (9:1-12). All increasingly convincing signs of Jesus' godly provenance and power ... but *also*, all tucked safely on '*this*' side of the veil: wonders wedded to this *material* world ... firmly rooted in the land of the *living*.

But the *point* of Jesus' miracles in John's gospel is to demonstrate unequivocally—and *before* the Crucifixion—that Jesus, the *Word*—capital W, possesses God's *glory*—capital G. And the raising of Lazarus from death into life is the grand finale ... the 'deal-closer' ... the 'big finish,' as it were. And so, we *can* ... if we want ... 'explain away' Jesus' inexplicably sitting on His holy heels for two whole days before He sets off for Bethany: If the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead is going to '*work*' ... going to '*take*' in the eyes of those who witnessed it ... then everyone has to be absolutely convinced that Lazarus truly *is dead*: "not only *merely* dead | [but] *really*, most *sincerely* dead!" as the coroner of Munchkinland would put it. If Jesus were to arrive in Bethany too quickly ... suspicions would arise that Lazarus had only been *sick*, and has now *recovered* ... or this was all a ruse or a stunt: Lazarus somehow *contrived* a way to survive one or two days, inside his cramped, suffocating tomb.⁴

Just as the Wicked Witch of the East is not just hit by some flying bits of debris, but has a *whole house* fall on her ... so Jesus' dilly-dallying ... for *two whole days* ... means that by the time He arrives in Bethany, everyone is *sure* that Lazarus is "not only *merely* dead," but really and reliably ... for-sure and undeniably ... *dead*. Therefore ... because Jesus can *restore* Lazarus to *life*, Jesus *must* be the

¹ It is a fourteen- or fifteen-hour walk from the traditional site of John the Baptist's ministry on the far side of the Jordan (where the most recent report of Jesus' whereabouts have placed Him (Jn 10:40)) to Bethany.

² Or, more specifically, the first *half* of this gospel.

³ Seven being a number, in the Jewish culture, of perfection and completion.

⁴ This is, in fact, the same concern that would attach to Jesus' own death; hence, the passage of three whole days (at least in the Jewish custom of marking time) before the Resurrection.

'real deal' ... the Glory of God really *does* rest upon Him. He really *is* the Messiah ... the Son of God.⁵ Two days' delay 'buys' Jesus, so to speak, assurance that His revelation as the Son of God will '*stick*' ... thus making the Sacrifice of the Cross the the most supreme act love God ever does.

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So, OK ... *yes*: We can explain it all away. If we say this story is *solely* about God's ethereal *glory* emanating from Jesus' earthly *ministry* ... we can 'paper over'—*theologically*—the thorny *pastoral* conundrum of Jesus' waiting two unnecessary days before going to visit Lazarus.

But there are two problems with this 'excuse.' *First*, it ignores the rough, raw *humanity* of this story: It neatly *elides*—refuses to *recognize*—the *agony* of Mary's waiting and Martha's fear of *rejection* ... when Jesus refuses to come to them, and to Lazarus, as soon as He's called. *Second*, although the Jesus we encounter in Scripture can be enigmatic ... inscrutable ... even, at times, a little bit tetchy ... He is *never cruel*: He never *willfully ignores* the plight of the suffering or *fails to pity* the distressed. This is the Jesus Who, we hear today, *weeps* at the death of His friend. No, there *has to be* more going on here than *just* the revelation of *glory*.

And there *is*. And it lies, I think, in the identical line⁶ both Mary and Martha use when they take Jesus to task: "Lord, if You had *been* here"—that is, if You'd come in *time*—"my brother would not have died" (11:21*b* & 32*c*). His sisters had sent for Jesus to *heal* Lazarus ... to *cure* Lazarus ... to *save* Lazarus ... to *preserve* him among the *living*. They know⁷ Jesus has worked medical miracles for *others*. Why did He *not* come and do the *same* for his dear friend Lazarus? You can't help but hear, in their confronting Jesus ... the dismay ... the anguish ... maybe a sense of *disbelief* or even *betrayal*: feelings that have grown and festered for *four days* now ... as the *hope* of Jesus' saving *presence* ... slowly decayed into the *grief* of His seemingly selfish *absence*.

But *then* ... in His *reply* to the sisters ... Jesus says ... in effect:

AIM HIGHER. ASK MORE OF ME. EXPECT the UNEXPECTED ... and then PRAY for it; IMAGINE the IMPOSSIBLE ... and then DARE Me to PROVIDE it. For My compassion is wider than the cosmos ... and My power transcends—soars boundlessly beyond—the limits of human thinking. I waited those two days because they'll enable Me to show you that My power can accomplish "*infinitely more*" than you ... [*to people*] than *we!* ... can "ask or imagine" (BCP, p 102).

When he was ill (Jesus continues), you wanted your brother not to *die*, and you asked for My help. But when he *did* die ... did you ever ask Me to *restore* him to *life*? ¶Let your faith in Me be *large* enough ... to encompass what is *mortally* impossible but *divinely* doable! ¶Let your grasp of My grace be *great* enough ... *strong* enough ...

⁵ Indeed, many who witness Jesus' resuscitation of Lazarus do come to believe in Jesus, as a consequence, and they begin following Him (16:45).

There is, in fact, something of a turning point here. The religious authorities come to see that if someone who can raise the dead to life is left to roam about Judea of [H]is own free will, then the Romans may clamp down on the Jews and put an end to Jewish toleration (see 11:47-48).

⁶ In the Greek, what each sister says to Jesus differs by only one two-letter (and grammatically unnecessary) word; and the word order is *ever* so slightly different.

⁷ I surmise this; it's not in the text. If they're beloved friends of Jesus, they've undoubtedly heard of His earlier miracles.

trusting enough ... indeed, *miraculous* enough ... to vision *past* what you know *can* be, in *your* realm ... and peer into what *might* be, in *Mine*.

In the end ... Jesus' resuscitating⁸ Lazarus—bringing him back to the land of the living, only *after* he's died—restoring him to the bosom of his sisters' love and companionship, only *after* he's buried ... is a lesson ... an invitation ... indeed, a *calling* ... for us to pray more *courageously*, into God's *power* ... to pray more *faithfully*, into God's *compassion* ... to pray more *boldly*, into God's *love*. For, what Jesus is saying to Mary and Martha ... and to *us*, as well ... is

- If I seem to *delay* in answering your prayers, it's *not* because I want you to *suffer* ... but so that you may draw *nearer* to Me ... ask *more* of Me ... lean *harder* on Me ... in your waiting and your longing
- If you don't pray to Me 'big enough'—'boldy enough'—I don't mark it a *failure* on *your* part... but as still *another* opportunity for Me to *delight* you with the unimaginable magnitude of My *mercy*; and
- If you don't recognize, at first, how I *have*, in fact, answered your prayers, it's not because I *want* you to be *disappointed* ... but so that you may discover ... in your own time and your own ways ... *still more* of My *grace* flowing, ever abundantly and ever assuredly, through the whole of your life.

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¶Two days for *glory* and two days for *miracle*. ¶Two days for *love*, and two days for *grace*. ¶Two days for prayer answered in a way we couldn't *imagine* or ever *ask* for: A lot can *happen* in two days ... and *all* of it happens, *every* time we pray.

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⁸ Technically, this, and not RESURRECTION, is the accurate term for Jesus' miracle here. While Lazarus is brought back from death (as someone who dies (medically speaking) on the operating table, only to revive minutes later), he is not (yet) brought into *eternal* life, as Jesus has not yet died and been raised again Himself.