

Introduction:

In John's Gospel there are seven events, which John calls "signs". Like a billboard, these "signs" point to something beyond themselves. In other words, the miracle points to the One who performs it, revealing Jesus as the Messiah. The first of these, is Jesus' changing the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. This last "sign"—the raising of Lazarus—is the final miracle Jesus performs, before his own death and resurrection.

Also notable is the fact that when Jesus tells the disciples they are returning to Judea (v.7), they wonder aloud why that would be a good idea, since they left there after Jesus was nearly stoned to death! Why risk going back? And following the raising of Lazarus, the remaining verses in this chapter indicate that Jesus' return has sealed his fate. The Sanhedrin convene and... "So from that day on they plotted to take his life." (v.53)

John 11

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha....<sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."<sup>4</sup>When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."<sup>5</sup>Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.<sup>6</sup>So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days,<sup>7</sup>and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

<sup>8</sup>"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

<sup>9</sup>Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. <sup>10</sup>It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

<sup>11</sup>After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

<sup>12</sup>His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."<sup>13</sup>Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

<sup>14</sup>So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead,<sup>15</sup>and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

<sup>16</sup>Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

<sup>17</sup>On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

<sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, <sup>19</sup>and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

<sup>21</sup>“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

<sup>22</sup>But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

<sup>24</sup>Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

<sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; <sup>26</sup>and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

<sup>27</sup>“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

<sup>28</sup>After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” <sup>29</sup>When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

<sup>32</sup>When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. <sup>34</sup>“Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied. <sup>35</sup>Jesus wept. <sup>36</sup>Then 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>Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. <sup>39</sup>“Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

<sup>40</sup>Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

<sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

<sup>43</sup>When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

## PRAY

There are three themes I want to lift from this passage today: Love, Lament, and Life.

We are living in a season of lament. Being bombarded with the impacts of CoVid19 in the daily news cycle has an effect on all of us. While we may not have personal acquaintance with those who have died from this virus, we realize that they are not numbers. These are individuals with families, with stories, with loved ones, not unlike our families, neighbors and friends. This pandemic has thrust us into a season of social isolation, a season of illness and death coupled with economic hardship which is unprecedented for the majority of us.

Anytime we experience loss, we grieve. Sometimes the losses are small and insignificant: we lose our car keys, we misplace our glasses. Of greater consequence are the losses we experience when are socially isolating. We have literally “lost touch”—we cannot hold the hand of another, put our arms around another’s shoulders, least of all, hug one another!

We experience loss when we or a friend move from one community, school, or job--to another. The most significant losses are those which we perceive as more long-lasting or “permanent”—the loss of a loved one to death.

Grief and lament go hand in hand...denial, sadness, depression, bargaining, anger, and eventually acceptance, are among the various emotions one might experience during such a time. Biblically, lament is recorded for us in numerous Psalms. The Hebrew people were unapologetic in expressing their angst, and yes, even their anger at injustice, even anger at God. (The following represent communal psalms of lament: Psalm 44, 60, 74, 79, 80,85, and 90.)

The Gospels record that Jesus stayed with his friends—these siblings, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—on more than several occasions. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. Not only was this a close family, they were close to Jesus and John is explicit: Jesus loved them. When Lazarus becomes ill, the sisters send word to him: “Lord, the one you love is sick.” (v.3)

It appears that Lazarus dies shortly after the message is sent. At the time, people were buried within 24 hours of death. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days.

The grief we bear is proportionate to the love we shared with the one who dies. When Jesus observed the two sisters weeping for their death brother, and the distraught neighbors, John writes that he was “deeply moved and troubled in spirit.” (v.33) Then, upon arriving at the tomb of his friend, Jesus wept.

What I personally find hopeful in the midst of this sad and sometimes confusing story is that Jesus experienced the very same emotional upheaval that you and I do. When John says at the beginning of his gospel, “the Word became flesh and dwells among us”, he is saying something remarkable: The Creator, the God of the universe, comes to us wrapped in human flesh. In doing so, this God is not remote and unfeeling. Quite the opposite, as we see demonstrated here.

Jesus loved Lazarus. Lazarus dies. Jesus grieves. Jesus wept.

In weeping Jesus demonstrates both his divine and human natures: God’s heart is broken by the same things that break ours. Jesus loves as we do, Jesus grieves as we do.

Jesus is grieving that he and Lazarus will never again break bread together, they will not laugh together over a corny joke or go fishing together again or share a cool drink in the shade on a warm afternoon.

I do not know for sure, but I wonder if Jesus is also grieving for all that leads to death...not just illness but sin, the brokenness and fallenness of the world in which we live. I wonder if Jesus is not grieving how this affects all our relationships, both with God and with one another.

I do not know for sure, but I wonder if Jesus is not grieving over the threats against his life and those making them; knowing that the cross is looming on the horizon, which will lead to his own death. I wonder, if in part, Jesus’ tears are an acknowledgement of his own mortality.

Through his tears, Jesus demonstrates human vulnerability, compassion, and empathy. Lazarus is worth crying for and his sisters are with crying with. Life is precious, as are the ones with whom we share it. Nothing can diminish the pain and grief of loss of ones so loved.

I don't know about you, but I find hope in this tearful Jesus, because it means that this Jesus can identify with our human experience...with what it means to be living through this pandemic...with the multi-faceted sense of loss and grief that we are experiencing. Jesus understands our tears. Jesus understands our feelings.

**Love and lament** are not the end of the story.  
Love and lament are an integral part of **LIFE**.

This episode is filled with questions:

Why do the sisters not request that Jesus come immediately? Their message is simply: "The one whom you love is ill."

By any calculation, it is quite likely that Lazarus died while the messenger was on his way to Jesus. Other than a long distance intervention, there is nothing Jesus could have done, and it was customary to bury the dead in less than 24 hours.

It seems pretty lame to say that Lazarus died: "So that God will be glorified." Yet throughout John's Gospel Jesus makes repeated references to his own glorification, which is another reference to Jesus' own death.

Similar to the instance of the man born blind, whose blindness was not caused by sin (his or his parent's), the restoration of his sight becomes the occasion for God's glorification. Same here. Lazarus dies. His resurrection is cause for rejoicing and for God to be glorified.

In the course of my ministry I have conducted many more memorials than weddings. (Everyone will die. Not everyone marries!) I have stood at the foot of numerous graves, including that of my own mother. In those moments, there is nothing I want to believe in more than the words Jesus speaks to Martha:

***"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; <sup>26</sup>and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.*** (v.25-26)

On Easter, we observed that in hearing Jesus call her by name, Mary Magdalene "sees"/recognizes the Risen Christ.

Here Jesus calls the dead man by name: "Lazarus, come out!" And his life is restored, but I dare say, his life will never be the same. There is no going back to the way things were before. He will be, ever after, the one remembered as the one Jesus raised. (John 12:10-11)

Jesus calls himself the Resurrection and the Life, promising to those who believe, a quality of life that excludes death. In Revelation John tells us that a voice is heard in heaven saying:

*“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ \*or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:4, \*Isaiah 25:8)*

Friends, here is hope! In the midst of pandemic, of what has become a scary “new normal” of daily statistical reports of new infections and deaths, we are called to new life in Christ!

This life to which Christ calls us is one which does not deny these realities, but mourns them. I believe our tears mingle with Christ’s tears as we watch the evening news.

Jesus’ tears exemplify what it means to be truly human.

They are an invitation to us to declare our deepest loves, to lament and to grieve our losses, and to express our sorrows authentically, even with tears.

We can do so, while at the same time confessing our faith, as did Martha: *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” (John 11:27)*

We can love, grieve and lament while affirming that Jesus is the Resurrection and the LIFE!

Friends, we are Easter People! Easter is more than a day, it is an ongoing celebration of this reality of resurrection life, which is ours as we place our faith in Christ, the Risen One.

Jesus is calling us to new life even today. Do you hear him calling your name?

Jesus is calling us—from darkness to light,  
from sorrow to joy,  
from death to life.

One thing I know for sure: Life will never be the same when we hear Jesus call our names!

Pray with me:

God of Grace: How thankful we are that Jesus felt the full range of emotions that we do. He loves and grieves deeply. Thank you that Jesus’ love is stronger than death and that he calls us to a new way of living and being, even today.