**Ben Lattimer**

**Stone Church of the Brethren**

**Sermon**

**March 29, 2020**

**John 11**

***If Only You’d Been Here...***

**Scripture**

**Nina: Narrator, Disciples**

**Brooke: Mary, Martha**

**David: Jesus**

**NARRATOR: Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus - the brother of Mary and Martha. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus:**

**MARY / MARTHA: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”**

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

**JESUS: “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.”**

**NARRATOR: 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...**

**JESUS: “Let us go to Judea again.”**

**DISCIPLES: “Rabbi,” the disciples said, “the Jewish leaders were trying to stone you just the other day! And you are going back there again?”**

**JESUS: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”**

**DISCIPLES: “But, Lord - won’t the sleep help him get better?”**

**JESUS: “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. Let us go to him.”**

**DISCIPLES: “Fine. If he’s going, then we’ll go too. We can die *with* him.”**

**[*pause...*]**

**NARRATOR: When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for 4 days. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus,**

**MARTHA: “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.”**

**JESUS: “Your brother will rise again.”**

**MARTHA: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”**

**JESUS: “*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?”**

**MARTHA: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”**

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

**MARTHA: “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”**

**NARRATOR: When she heard, Mary got up quickly and went to him. Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him,**

**MARY: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”**

**NARRATOR: When Jesus saw her weeping, and those who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said,**

**JESUS: “Where have you laid him?”**

**NARRATOR: “Lord, come and see,” they said. *And Jesus wept.***

**Those who were with Mary and Martha said, “See how he loved him! But, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”**

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

**JESUS: “Take away the stone.”**

**MARTHA: “Lord, already there is a stench. He's been dead for 4 days.”**

**JESUS: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”**

**NARRATOR: So they took away the stone. And Jesus said,**

**JESUS: ““Lazarus, come forth!!”**

**NARRATOR: And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them,**

**JESUS: “Unbind him, and let him go.”**

**Sermon**

*Interrupting Chicken*

We miss the library. A few weeks back we stumbled upon a book there called, *Interrupting Chicken.* The story has this rooster reading bedtime stories to his little chick. He starts out reading *“Little Red Riding Hood,”* but just when he gets to the part where she meets the wolf in the forest, the little chicken cries out, “It’s a trap! Run!”

Then the rooster tries to read *“Hansel and Gretel.”* But just as they are about to eat some of the candy house, the little chicken shouts, “Don’t do it! A witch lives there!” The little chicken knows how all the stories end, and wants to give a heads up to the characters living them out.

In our story today, Jesus gets word from Mary and Martha that their brother, his friend Lazarus, is sick. Now Jesus seems to know the end of the story. Right there at the beginning, he tells the disciples, “Just so you know, this doesn’t end in death.” And then he tarries for 2 more days.

When he finally gets there, we find out that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days, so Jesus couldn’t actually have made it “in time” anyway. But for Jews, the spirit kind of hovers around the body for the first 3 days before drifting away for good. So, Jesus’ delay means that by the time he gets there, Lazarus has gone from being only “mostly dead” to “all dead.” (Which, if the Princess Bride has taught us anything should mean there’s nothing you can do except go through his pockets and look for loose change.)

Perhaps, as David Lose suggests, Jesus tarries because he wanted to make sure that nobody missed what was really happening. Whatever the reason, it gets worse, before it gets better. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus is dead and buried.

*Martha*

Martha hears that Jesus is coming and rushes out to meet him. Her words both inform and accuse. “If you had been here, my brother would not have died…”

“Your brother will rise again,” Jesus tells her.

“I know,” she says. “I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” She knows the end of the story, the hope of resurrection in the sweet by-and-by. But it is small comfort in the midst of the pain of here and now.

Then Jesus speaks words that begin to turn the story… But they don’t make sense yet. “*I* am the resurrection *and* the life,” he says. Then he asks her, “Do you believe this?” I wonder if something isn’t lost in translation… The idea of belief is so much bigger than intellectual assent to a particular theology… I wonder if Jesus is really asking her, “Do you trust me?”

Martha answers the theology question. She says, “Yes, Lord, I *believe* that you are the Messiah… My theology’s right. I believe. I really do. You are the Messiah. My brother will rise again on the last day.”

Her theology, her beliefs about the Messiah, are right - but she doesn’t quite grasp the implications… She thinks Jesus is offering some hopeful platitude. Her faith, her hope for God’s action in the world is confined to some future promise. And so she misses Jesus’ real question. Her hope is only in the future. She has conceded the present. And who could blame her? Her brother is dead and buried. Where was Jesus when they needed him? When something could be done?

What would *you* tell her? If you were like the little “interrupting chicken” that knew the end of the story? What would you tell her? What good news would you offer her that she could possibly believe?

*Mary*

Martha gets Mary, and Mary comes to Jesus. “If only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Again, information and accusation. Faith and lament. They go together to the tomb. Jesus sees her weeping. And Jesus himself weeps…

Even Jesus, who knew the end of this story before it began… Even Jesus weeps.

*Lazarus*

And then he tells them to take away the stone. “Lazarus, come forth!”

And in that moment the whole story changes. The story was over. Lazarus was dead and buried, and yet somehow, impossibly, Jesus rewrites the ending. We usually miss the wonder of it, because we know the story too well. You probably can’t *remember* the first time you heard this story.

But imagine what it would be like to hear the story for the first time. Imagine what it was like to *live* the story. Lazarus is dead. All dead, not just mostly dead. And then the teacher calls him forth… Everything changes… “I am the resurrection and the life…” Not just some future hope. Jesus brings life, here and now...

*Foreshadowing*

This is the last Sunday in Lent… In John’s Gospel, the raising of Lazarus sets in motion the councils that will decide to kill Jesus. In the very next chapter, Jesus will share a meal with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus - on the day before Palm Sunday. Martha will serve. Mary will anoint Jesus’ feet - in preparation, he will tell them, for his burial. So many people hear the story and come to see Lazarus, that the leaders will seek to kill him too. Next week we will find ourselves in Jerusalem, the beginning of the end.

Death isn’t finished. It will get worse before it gets better. But the bringer of life isn’t finished either. Bringing resurrection, new life, even here and now.

Amen.