



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: John 11:1-16

Background

The best way to understand this chapter is to first emphasize the objective of John. Why is John telling us this story of Lazarus?

Well Jesus himself says: Lazarus would die in order for God to show the real identity of Jesus, namely that He is God. And, because of that, that God would be glorified for doing such great things.

So let us delve into this very touching tale. Lazarus was Jesus' friend and he stayed with his two sisters Martha and Mary of whom we learn in the Gospel of Luke. They lived in Bethany, a village on the south-eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, about 2 miles east of Jerusalem, on the road to Jericho.

Jesus was in Perea, in Jesus' day ruled, like Galilee, by Herod Antipas—and well outside the jurisdiction of the religious leaders of Jerusalem. Antipas did not like any interference in his territory not even of the religious leaders. But over 20 miles from there, a day's journey in those days in Bethany, was his friend Lazarus who was ill. His sister Mary who poured oil over his feet and dried it with her hair, sent a message to Jesus telling him about his friend's condition. Although Jesus got the word He still stayed two more days which resulted in Lazarus' death. But Jesus knew that Lazarus had died without anyone saying one word to him. He then said it all happened for them to see who He really is. It was meant to be for him not to be at Lazarus side when he died in order for them to grasp the true miracle that was going to happen. So Jesus and his disciples then left for Bethany in Judea.

When Jesus and his disciples eventually reached Bethany, Lazarus was already 4 days in his tomb. There were a lot of people supporting the two sisters because visiting and consoling the bereaved in the days immediately following a close relative's loss was an essential duty of Jewish piety. The neighbours would provide the first meal after the funeral. Lazarus would have been buried on the day of his death. The first week of deep grief after a close relative's burial would be spent mourning in one's house, sitting on the floor and visited by friends. This custom, called shivah (for "seven" days), is still practised in Judaism today and is very helpful for releasing grief. Mourners abstained from adornment for the next three weeks and from common pleasures for the next year.

Martha first approached Jesus and said that she believed that God would give to him whatever He asked. Jesus responded by saying that her brother would rise again but she did not understand that Jesus was referring to the near future. The common belief of Judaism in this period was that the dead would be raised bodily at the end of time. Then Martha went back to the house and told Mary that Jesus the teacher had arrived. She went out of the house with all the well-wishers and when Jesus saw them He was deeply moved. Jesus then went to the tomb which had a big stone at its entrance. Jesus ordered them to remove the stone. The obvious reaction of the practical sister Martha was that they could not do it because there would be a nasty smell. Again it is emphasized that Lazarus had already been dead for 4 days! John emphasized this by pointing out that Lazarus had been dead and buried for 4 days. According to popular Jewish belief, the spirit of a dead person did not finally desert the body until 3 days after death. So Lazarus was unambiguously dead.

Then Jesus prayed that God his Father would reveal His true identity namely that He is God himself by raising Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus then ordered Lazarus to come out of the grave. The miracle happened when he came walking out of the tomb with the grave clothes still wrapped around him! Then because of this a lot of the Jewish mourners came to believe that Jesus is the Christ.

Some of the Jewish religious leaders started plotting to kill Jesus.

By stressing both Jesus' love for Lazarus and his sisters and the fact that Jesus risked his own life by helping them, the narrative foreshadows the way Jesus was soon to sacrifice his own life in order to give eternal

life to those he loves. The remarkable stress on Jesus' emotions may indicate not only his participation in the sorrow of the family he loved, but also his awareness that his act of helping them is going to lead to his own death. In the sequel to the raising of Lazarus, it becomes the event which determines the decision of the Jewish authorities to put Jesus to death. It also leads to a plot against the life of Lazarus himself. Jesus gave his life not only to Lazarus but to each one who believes in HIM!

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is 4: *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."*

In Africa we would put a face to everything even abstract things like joy, poverty, grief or pain in order to make sense of the things we cannot put into words. Grief has a face – quite a stern looking one who never ever smiles. It is a face that tells us of hardship, pain and suffering. It is a face that cannot be covered by a mask. It is a face that tells a story of missing memories and loss. It is a heavy laden face that lasts forever. It is a face that does not respond to clichés such as “time is a great healer” or “things will be ok”. It is a face that everyone carries – from the richest to the poorest, It is a face that even royalty knows well.

It was also a face that Jesus knew. It was such a hard face to look into, that He started crying too. He felt compassion for Mary and Martha. He experienced the grief of a human but also had the Divine wisdom to know his pain and suffering was close at hand. This story foreshadowed Jesus' own path of sorrow that would soon become a reality.

Jesus knew that although nothing on earth can take grief away He had to endure death itself in order to overpower death for always and ever. He had to make sure that death did not have the last say as in the case of his friend Lazarus. He gave us a promise of eternal life that can dent the hardship of grief. It is the promise by God through the resurrection of Jesus that human life stretches beyond this earthly realm. It is our hope and our only way to keep going through the pain and hurt.

It is like planting seeds in the winter and waiting for them to come out and bloom in spring. It is only Jesus who can roll away the stone of our “tombs” and give us new life. It is only through the power of God's Holy Spirit that we are able to look beyond our own finiteness.

The Gospel of John used this story as a sign that pointed to Jesus' crucifixion, suffering, death and resurrection. It showed what was going to happen to Jesus himself in his near future.

It is like the signs we find on the roads which reminded me of a holiday Nanda and I had in Namibia. We were traveling towards Luderitz on the skeleton coast when we saw a, what we thought to be a "weird road sign" which said "caution: wild horses". I still remembered how we laughed. I mean wild horses in that desolate piece of land! But to our surprise a few miles further on we did see wild horses galloping in the distance. And then the next signpost said "caution: sand on the road". By that time we were a bit more cautious thinking what on earth could that mean when we came across a small sand dune in the middle of the road. We made a joke afterwards saying to ourselves: if there is a weird road sign in Namibia you do not laugh. You believe it is true and act accordingly!

The same is true of the resurrection of Lazarus and Jesus. We must believe and act accordingly in hope, looking beyond the finality of death, seeing the new future to be with God forever and ever.

The story we read this morning is actually a signpost on our journeys saying: "Believe, there is life after death, have hope and continue your journey in faith". It cautions us not to lose heart and not to desert our faith. It encourages us to carry on despite the hardships, suffering and pain of this life. It helps us in times of grief to seek God's help.

May we trust God enough to know:

- He knows and understands our grief and suffering;
- He knows every tear that roll down our cheeks;
- He has compassion for you and me;
- Daily He still rolls away the stones of our humanly made tombs;
- He is our only hope that can make our pain and suffering manageable.

May we enter with him next week into Jerusalem knowing that there is a New Jerusalem waiting for us all in faith, which is our ultimate destiny!
Amen