

Sunday Message 29 March 2020

WHAT WE LEAST EXPECT - Not Dead?

John 11:1-45

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the woman who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was the one who was ill. 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus and told him, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness isn't meant to end in death. It's for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 Yet, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was for two more days. 7 After this, he told the disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." 8 The disciples told him, "Rabbi, the Jewish leaders were just now trying to stone you to death, and you are going back there again?" 9 Jesus replied, "There are twelve hours in the day, aren't there? If anyone walks during the day he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks at night he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 These were the things he said. Then after this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I'm leaving to wake him up." 12 So the disciples told him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will get well." 13 Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was speaking about resting or sleeping. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. 15 For your sake I'm glad that I wasn't there, so that you may believe. But let's go to him." 16 Then Thomas, who was called the Twin, told his fellow disciples, "Let's go, too, so that we may die with him!"

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about fifteen stadia away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 As soon as Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 Martha told Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, he will give it to you." 23 Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha told him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The person who believes in me, even though he dies, will live. 26 Indeed, everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe that?" 27 "Yes, Lord," she told him. "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was to come into the world."

28 When she had said this, she went away and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you!" 29 As soon as Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet arrived at the village but was still at the place

where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who had been with her, consoling her in the house, saw Mary get up quickly and go out, they followed her, thinking that she had gone to the tomb to cry there. 32 As soon as Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell down at his feet and told him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." 33 When Jesus saw her crying, and the Jews who had come with her crying, he was greatly troubled in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He asked, "Where have you put him?" They told him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus burst into tears. 36 So the Jews said, "See how much he loved him!"

37 But some of them said, "Surely the one who opened the eyes of the blind man could have kept this man from dying, couldn't he?" 38 Groaning deeply again, Jesus came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying in front of it. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the dead man's sister, told him, "Lord, there must be a stench by now, because he's been dead for four days." 40 Jesus told her, "I told you that if you believed you would see God's glory, didn't I?" 41 So they removed the stone. Then Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. 42 I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 43 After saying this, he shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet tied with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a handkerchief. Jesus told them, "Untie him, and let him go."

45 Many of the Jews who had come with Mary and who had observed what Jesus did believed in him.

Our Lenten series, "What we least expect," continues today as we consider death and resurrection, or Lazarus is "Not Dead?"

Carl Richards (recounted in NYTimes 2 July 2018) was standing in Terminal 2 of the San Diego Airport when he got a message from his mother. His best friend's mother had just died. Carl's mother had learned of it over social media. Carl called his best friend.

His best friend's mother had been at dinner the night before when she began to feel ill. She had been taken to the emergency room, where she died a few hours later. Carl's friend was in shock. Carl cried with him, right there in the terminal.

As Carl boarded the plane, he wondered if anyone could see his red and swollen eyes. He wondered what shocks or horrors others were holding in a normal looking outside. As he sat down he wondered what stresses the person to his right, or the one across the aisle were experiencing. As the plane took off, he looked out over the Pacific and wondered, "Would I

treat anyone here differently if I knew what they were going through - what they were suffering?"

The disciples didn't have a clue what Jesus was going through, and what he would be suffering, when the word came that Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, was sick. These were the friends at Bethany. Remember, where Mary had washed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair. This was the same Martha who was all upset when Jesus came to dinner and her sister Mary wouldn't help. Remember what Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. Only one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen it.

Because Jesus didn't leave right away, the disciples figured that Lazarus would recover. So when Jesus decided to go, two days later, the disciples weren't in favor. They reminded Jesus it wasn't safe to go that near Jerusalem. The Jewish authorities had picked up rocks to stone Jesus last time they were there. Jesus had barely escaped with his life. Thomas, the fatalist that day, said, "Let's go down and die with him."

They didn't have a clue what Jesus was facing, going that near to Jerusalem. The Jewish authorities would decide Jesus had to die after this last miracle. They didn't have a clue how deeply Jesus was already grieving, knowing Lazarus was already dead, and how deeply Mary and Martha were suffering.

When Jesus and the disciples arrived at Bethany, Martha came out to meet Jesus. She said, "If you'd been here my brother would not be dead." Jesus' response is the one all preachers remember, and use in most funeral sermons, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he is dead, yet shall he live." Martha answered, "well, you're the Messiah, and when the Messiah comes there will be a resurrection." She didn't sound convinced.

Martha went inside where Mary had been sitting shiva (the Jewish practice of keeping your grieving friend company at the death of a loved one) and told her, "The teacher is outside." Mary got up, and her friends followed, thinking Mary was going to the tomb. Mary confronted Jesus. "My brother would not have died if you had been here." Jesus answered her, "Where have you put him?"

There then follows the shortest, and one of the most famous, verses in the Bible, "Jesus wept." The NIV renders it, "Jesus burst into tears." I like the King James Version better. Why would Jesus do that?

Jesus had wept in other accounts in the Bible. Luke 19 records, after Jesus had come down the Mount of Olives, to the "Hosannas" of an adoring crowd, Jesus looked out over the City of

Jerusalem, and he wept. Matthew 20 records, after Jesus had been asked by two blind men for healing help, he was “deeply moved with compassion.” Jesus was deeply moved with compassion for the thousands who he had fed. Jesus’ compassion is what motivated many of his miracles.

Tears are the natural, normal, response to unspeakable grief. Water, the first tangible thing that the eternal Word created, that which is sixty percent of the human body, is integral to the experience of the Word made flesh (Jesus). Jesus was born of the waters of his mother’s womb (as we all have been), and Jesus was anointed and claimed as he came out of the waters of the Jordan River (at his baptism - “This is my Son whom I love and I am pleased with him). So why wouldn’t the tears flow at the inconsolable grief of his friends.

And then Jesus did what only Jesus could do. He said, “Lazarus, come out.” Martha had protested, “No! There will be a stink.” (She was always the housekeeper). Lazarus came walking out of the tomb, and Jesus said, “Take off the bandages.” And Lazarus was free and alive.

Jesus had done this before. Matthew 9 records the day a synagogue ruler had approached Jesus for healing help with his little girl. Jesus went with Jairus, and when he got there the little girl was dead. Jesus went in the house anyway, and said, “Talitha Koum”, which means “Little girl, get up.” And the little girl started walking around and Jesus told her family to give her something to eat.

And then there was a day, recorded in Luke 7, when Jesus was walking into the village of Nain, and a widow was escorting her only son’s dead body out to the cemetery. Once again, Jesus was moved with compassion, for the widow’s desperate situation (no husband and now no son) and taking the dead man’s hand he raised him up alive again.

Jesus can do this. He could and did save others. But he wouldn’t save himself, not if it meant he couldn’t save us.

Alexandra Butler was 10 years old when her parents first had “the talk.” When she was born, her mother was in her late forties, her father was in his fifties. “The talk” was to be certain Alexandra knew what her folks wanted at the end of their lives. Her father was a renowned physician, a New York Times best selling author - of books he wrote with Alexandra’s mother, a psychologist specializing in aging women’s issues. They wanted no heroic interventions. They wanted to die at peace, and for their daughter to be at peace with their wishes.

Life doesn’t always work out the way we expect, even with the best of plans. Alexandra’s mother was in her seventies when she began losing things, especially her balance. The doctors

confirmed a brain tumor, and her last few months were not according to plan. But there were no heroic interventions. When her mother died, Alexandra's father seemed to age ten years. But he did what he told other widowed men to do, exercise, eat, stay in contact. He lived five more years, dying only after a sudden and painful attack of leukemia.

But they had had "the talk." And they died at peace, and their daughter was at peace with their deaths.

Have you had "the talk", with the ones you love? Are you at peace with the reality, the certainty, of your own death? There is only one who can save you. Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Have you had "the talk" with Jesus? It really is simple. "Lord Jesus, I need you. Lord Jesus, I want you. Lord Jesus, I love you. Lord Jesus, save me."

Do your loved ones know Jesus, as their Lord and Savior? Have you had "the talk" with them. There is no other way to be sure that they will be at peace, when your death, and theirs, comes. There is only one who promises, "I am the resurrection and the life . . . I am going to prepare a place for you, and come and get you . . . You have an eternal house, not made by human hands, waiting for you."

No one else can offer eternal security. No one else can give you and the ones you love the peace we all so deeply desire. You need to have "the talk."