

LENT 5, Apr. 2, 2017, Year A

"... if you believed, you would see..." (from John 11:1-45)

- A former National Geographic photographer, Dewitt Jones, identifies an **important paradox**: "When I was growing up," he said, "I used to hold that maxim – I *won't believe it, until I see it*. Yet, the more I shot for the *Geographic* the more I realized that I had it *backwards*. That the way it really works is – I *won't see it, till I believe it*. That's the way life works."¹
- Dewitt Jones identifies this paradox in relation to making *good photographs*. Yet, he is *clearly* a person of faith, and could also have been thinking about our Gospel readings for last week and this morning. Just as *believing led to seeing* for the blind man, in *last week's* story, we find in *today's* Gospel that *Jesus speaks about how believing can lead to seeing*. Near the highpoint in the story, he asks Martha, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see...?*"
- *Paradox runs right through* this long Gospel reading: When Jesus' close friends, Mary and Martha, send him a message that Lazarus is ill, he responds with confident *vision*. He declares, "*this illness does not lead to death*." Yet, he *also* says that *Lazarus' illness is for God's glory*. Hearing that, *we wonder how* a loving God *could possibly* be glorified *through his servants' suffering*. Indeed, some people *refuse* to believe in God *precisely because of* this apparent contradiction. John then presents us with one of the most *mysterious* sentences in the New Testament. He tells us how, having learned of Mary and Martha's concern about Lazarus, *Jesus stays two more days before departing! Despite his love for them* and their sick brother.
- On the surface, we hear about a situation that could cause us to feel unease and tension. But *Jesus doesn't seem to waver*. We learn from John how much *Jesus loves the Bethany siblings*. *Equally*, as John tells us, *Jesus loves his heavenly Father*. In the midst of *this delicate balance between obligations*, Jesus calmly decides *not* to move, but to *stay*. He says he does this to help his disciples grow in faith. *In John's Gospel, Jesus makes deliberate choices, and acts in a way that shapes* the circumstances of his passion and execution.

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- The way that John tells this story involving the death of Lazarus, sets the stage for Jesus' own death. For example, notice how John inserts a mention here of Mary's later anointing of Jesus' feet, an act which anticipates Jesus' burial. Jesus waits for two days, and then *on the third day—surely, an auspicious number—begins to move toward Lazarus' location*. Notice also how the one we frequently call 'Doubting Thomas' expresses a *faithful* resolve. "Let us also go," he says, "that we may *die* with him!" Thomas' statement could refer to *either* Jesus' death *or* to Lazarus'.
- In fairly quick order, John's telling of this story *brings near something that earlier seemed tentative, and far off*. At first, Lazarus is *ill*. Yet, when Jesus arrives, *Lazarus has been dead for four days*. Like so much in John, the number is significant. For Jews of that time believed that the soul remained present in the tomb, *around but outside* the body, for three days. *Thereafter*, it would be gone. Martha laments that Jesus has not come *sooner*, saying that *if he had*, Lazarus would *not* be dead. *Surprisingly*, she also expresses *hope* and *faith*. For she says to Jesus, "*even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.*" This is a *remarkable* conjunction of statements. So often, in difficult pastoral situations involving tragedy, I have encountered *questions – spoken or not – mirroring Martha's lament: 'Surely, if the Lord had been here, this wouldn't have happened! Or, its inverse ~ 'surely the Lord couldn't have been here, since this terrible thing did happen.'*
- Jesus then says, "Your brother *will* rise again." Martha does not perceive that *Jesus is speaking concretely about the present, and not abstractly about the future*. She takes him to be referring to *an event far off in the distance, on 'the last day'*. But *Jesus is talking about now, and not about then*. We need to pay *close attention* to his next words: "*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.*"² For Jesus to be *Resurrection* means that those who *believe* in him, and who *die*, will yet *live*. And, for Jesus to be *Life* means that those who *live* and *believe* in him experience *eternal life already now, in*

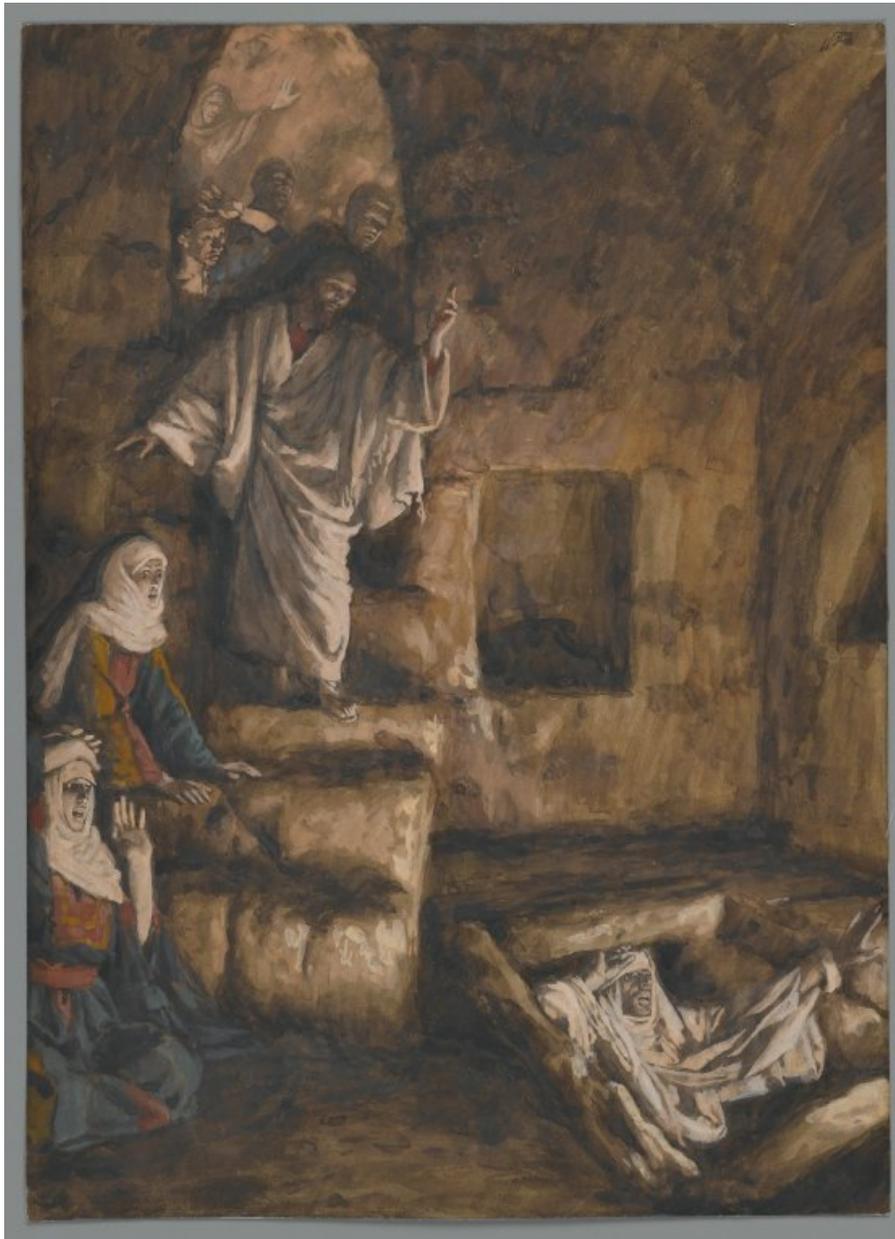
the present. Physical death *no longer has any power* over believers, whose future is shaped by their present faith rather than by their anticipated death.³

- Jesus then asks Martha, "do you believe this?" His question is highly significant. *Ten times in 21 chapters*, John *restates* the basic *purpose* of his writing. It is *so that we may believe*. He summarizes this theme at the end of his Gospel, when he tells us why he has recorded Jesus' signs. It is "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Just as was true for Martha, so it becomes true for us. *Believing opens us to the fullness of Life in Jesus, which begins now.* Believing in him opens us to experience his resurrection, so that this fullness of life will have no end.
- The dramatic highpoint of the story is preceded by this question: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" And in that moment, Jesus prayed, and then called out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" We can put our own names in the place of Lazarus' name. For Jesus calls *all of us* out of the life-diminishing patterns in which we live, and from the dark places we are so used to inhabiting. Just as the power of his word brings life back into Lazarus, so it will transform us. For believing opens our eyes to God's glory, all around us and within ourselves. Believing in him has the effect of unbinding us, and letting us go!
- The paradoxical effect of this is evident in two ways. *Many* of those who had come with Mary to where Lazarus was buried, saw the mighty sign that Jesus did. And having *seen* the sign, they *believed*. But *others*, who did not believe, went to authorities, and caused anxiety and alarm about what Jesus had done. The Council was convened to decide what to do.

"... One of them, Caiaphas, ... said to them..., 'it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' He did not say this on his own, but ... prophesied that Jesus was about to die,... not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death."⁴

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- Our reading today is what we might call *the hinge of John's Gospel*. Everything *before* this moment has led up to it. And everything *hereafter* begins to unfold its deeper meaning. And so, we begin to see the big picture, implied by and revealed in our reading today. John's way of presenting it is both subtle and mystically complex. Yet, we can put his main point simply. *Lazarus died, and Jesus brought new life to him. Jesus then died, and brought new life to us.*



James Tissot, *The Raising of Lazarus*

John 11:1-45 [NRSV]

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “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.” 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, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “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 said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “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?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some

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of them said, “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, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “**Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?**” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “**Lazarus, come out!**” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “**Unbind him, and let him go.**”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had **seen** what Jesus did, **believed** in him.

Notes:

¹ These quotes come from the transcript that accompanies Dewitt Jones video, *Celebrate What's Right With the World*.

² John 11:25-26. For the sake of providing additional clarity, I have split one long sentence into two shorter ones.

³ I am grateful here for the insights of Gail R. O'Day, in Volume IX of *The New Interpreter's Bible*, especially p. 688-9.

⁴ See John 11:45ff.