

Meadowbrook Congregational Church
“When Jesus Shows Up”
Rev. Art Ritter
April 2, 2017

John 11:1-5, 17-27, 38-44

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But 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.” ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

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

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The 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.”

In a sermon, Calvin Theological Seminary’s Scott Hoezee quotes from Annie Dillard’s book *The Living*. The scene is cemetery where a family has gathered to commit a loved one’s body to the earth. At one point in the service the minister begins to read the familiar words from I Corinthians 15 where the apostle Paul writes, “Where, O Death is now thy sting?” The words tend to float over everyone in the solemn gathering except for one of the family members. He looks up and scans the faces of the grieving. He looks around and sees row upon row of headstones at the cemetery. And then he thinks to himself, “Where, O Death is now thy sting? Why it is just about everywhere,

seeking how you asked. Since you brought it up, death really seems to be at every place around us."

Indeed it seems that way. National Geographic estimates that over one half million Iraqis have been killed since war began there in 2003. We learned this week that over 200 civilians may have been killed as the result of a United States airstrike near the city of Mosul on March 17. According to Wikipedia there are nearly 40 conflicts or insurgencies in our world that killed over 100 people in 2016. The terror attack outside of Parliament in London is still fresh in our minds and we worry about the possibility of it happening close to home. North Korea continues to launch missiles that they claim will one day carry nuclear warheads that can reach our country's shores. In a world that is suddenly all too small, we are vulnerable and at the mercy of decisions made by power hungry men. The power of death is everywhere around us.

But these are just the big events. Turn on the local news or read the Detroit News or Detroit Free Press and the relentless fact of death can be seen in the violence of city and neighborhood and home every day. There are seldom days in which we do not hear about murder or robbery or assault. We are constantly aware of someone who is fighting a deadly disease or of someone who has recently died. Death truly seems to be every place around us.

The odor of death can be sensed in many other ways. Concerns of health. The end of a job. Divorce. Estrangement from loved ones who have drifted away. The loss of status or responsibility. The fear of failure or the anxiety of future that keeps us from acting. I read over our church's weekly prayer chain and I consider the problems that many of you carry, and the issues that consume your hours each day and I am humbled. Yes indeed, since we were asked, we must say that death is nearly everywhere around us.

Death is here in our Scripture lesson this morning. The eleventh chapter of John is the traditional Gospel reading for this the fifth Sunday of the season of Lent. There was already a reference to Mary anointing Jesus' body with perfume and that didn't actually happen until the next chapter. Jesus' death is referenced and that is still some time away. Here Jesus told his disciples about the death of Lazarus and implied that it has some meaning to his own death which is certain given the suspicion his ministry had produced among the religious authorities.

Death is here in the tears of Mary and Martha and in Jesus' attempts to console them. There was some anger and resentment about Jesus getting there much too late to help. Mary said, "My Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Martha was even more graphic in her frustration with Jesus' tardiness. "Lord, the body in the tomb is already stinking because it has been in there for four days." She didn't pull any punches about the reality of death.

When Jesus saw the weeping of the family and of their friends, he too was greatly disturbed in spirit. We read that verse that all Bible trivia experts recognize as the shortest verse in all of the Bible, John 11: 35: Jesus wept. The New Revised Standard Version attempts to make the verse twice as long by fiddling with the verb saying, "Jesus began to weep." It doesn't matter. The death of a friend, the grief of friends, and the reminder of the fragile nature of human life- all of these things were enough to make Jesus cry. You can almost sense the gathered mourners saying to Jesus, "Since you asked, death is pretty much all around us."

Rev. Sheila Gustafson, the spouse of my most beloved seminary professor, quotes a passage from Kathleen Norris' book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. In the book Norris

offers an account of living for twenty years on the desolate high plains of western South Dakota. The land gets too little rain to sustain crops. The population has dropped nearly 75% since 1900. Young people are leaving for a new life in the city. Businesses are closing up. Churches are struggling to hold together a handful of aging members to as Norris describes, "get them all eulogized and baptized." People respond to the signs of death all around them differently. Some deny it, hoping that the good old days will return. Some blame others, outsiders who have come in to help but are now accused of making things worse. Some give into despair. A little girl in the third grade classroom of the dying school said to Norris, "When my third pet snail died, I decided to give up on snails." Norris said that statement was typical of the feeling in the community most had about their situation. Why go on if what they have committed their hearts and souls and lives to what has died?

Gustafson writes that the story of Lazarus is a lesson about the Christian life. In the raising of Lazarus there is so much of the human experience of loss, of illness and need, of frustration and questioning, of grief and mourning, of concern for "what might have been," and of limited understanding of a larger picture. It is an acted out parable that speaks to something more than is present on the immediate surface. If Jesus had wanted, he could have immediately rushed to Bethany and delivered a cure for his friend Lazarus. He could have spared his friends and their family all of the grief and pain. It was within the power of Jesus to change the situation of death that lurked everywhere in the story. But he did not. Jesus did not prevent the loss and the pain and the death. Indeed, he seems to participate in the grief and emptiness that came with death. Yet he pointed to something beyond death. Jesus told Martha, "Your brother will rise again."

We might believe that this story is simply an Easter preview, a story of the power of resurrection. As Jesus stands outside the tomb and calls Lazarus to come out, we might think that we've seen this movie before, but with a different cast of characters. We might scratch our heads and wonder why we have to hear it again now, with Easter only two weeks away.

In verses 25 and 26, Jesus said to Martha, "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." I read this words at nearly every funeral service in which I officiate. We might believe that the concept of resurrection has great meaning for us after we die. We will live on with the Lord forever! We tend to focus on the resurrection part that we see as a distant promise, our guarantee of salvation and eternal life with God in heaven. But in the raising of Lazarus, Jesus was trying to teach his followers and trying to teach us that we don't have to wait that long to experience the power of resurrection. He is the resurrection and the life. It is here now. You don't have to be dead to receive the power that Jesus has to offer. You only have to be faced with the powers of death. And death is not the last word. In the midst of what is happening in our own life and our own world. Jesus promises more life is yet to come.

In one of my favorite movies of all time, *Field of Dreams*, there is scene where many long dead baseball players comes back to life to play on the mysterious cornfield diamond that Ray Kinsella has constructed. When one player steps out of the corn and onto the baseball field he asks, "Is this heaven?" Kinsella responds, "No, this is Iowa." The players then adds, "It looks like heaven to me." Lazarus came from the tomb, perhaps thinking he was in heaven but finding out he had been brought back to life but was still in Bethany. His raising was not to experience heaven but to emerge him

back into life. He was alive again but he would still have to die and in between he would probably experience much of life's joys and sorrows. But now he had the assurance that Jesus was there and the understanding that there was no place where Jesus would not be. Because Jesus was with him, he could face the reality of death as a part of earthly living, without fear.

In Jesus we have the power to see what is lasting, to remove the cloths and tombstones that weigh us to the darkness, to stand in the light if only for this day or moment. We still live in a world of death. We lose loved ones. We lose jobs. We lose the comfort of the past. But if we claim the new life which Jesus offers to us, we will never die in spirit. We have a promise that when we say yes to life, something holy and sacred will be revealed to us. When we say yes to life we will find a purpose to our days. We can live each day in hope, even in the midst of hurting and grief, knowing that such hope is the only way to live. We can sing with the Psalmist, "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."