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### **John 11:17-44**

*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 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."*

Oh we have a lot to wrestle with here this morning. We have a text with themes of life, death, and resurrection. It explores faith, expectations, disappointment, grief, miracles, and community. Dwelling in dissonance? Absolutely. And leaves us wanting more.

But what I really want to start with is to acknowledge my own challenge in the face of miracles. I found it fitting that in Carl's reflection for this morning,

he began by explaining a bit about who he is, and why that matters when he reflects on what he believes, so here's a little bit about my early years.

I was a child who wanted to believe in miracles. My favorite stories from the Bible were the supernatural ones - Daniel spared from the jaws of the lions... Jonah surviving in the belly of a whale... Moses parting the Red Sea... The prophet Elijah bringing fire down from heaven so hot that it licks up the water-soaked offering. On top of those stories my family spent a year serving in Ghana when I was 10 years old, where I heard stories of witchcraft and demons, of food supplies that outlasted droughts or floods, even one story of a person awakening in the midst of their funeral.

For most of my childhood, my grandmother volunteered with a local Christian television station, taking calls and praying for people over the phone, asking God for miraculous healing amid whatever pain they were carrying. My Grandma had faith that her presence and her words made a difference in the lives of those people, helping to be the face or voice of God for people in need.

But then during my teenage years, my aunt was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer. Aunt Janet had never smoked a cigarette, but the doctors speculated that her years of working as a receptionist in an office where smoking indoors was still permitted probably led to her illness. My Grandma knew what to do, praying intently for miraculous healing. Because of her presence at a Christian television station, she had access to a variety of faith healers who had a track record of miraculous spiritual healing. She connected to all who were willing, to cure my aunt, her only daughter, of her life threatening illness.

I believed in a God of miracles, a God with the power to heal leprosy, to restore sight to the blind, even to raise people from the dead.

But then my aunt died.

I watched it shake my Grandma's certainty. And I noticed the emptiness of the platitudes - God must have needed another angel, everything happens for a reason, etc. Especially for my cousins who now felt intense abandonment - both because of the seeming inaction of God, but also because they no longer had a mom.

Like many difficult scripture passages, this week I found myself wishing this were a different story. I wish for a more realistic story of Jesus comforting people amid their grief rather than supernaturally raising people from the dead. I want Mary and Martha to be kinder and more empathetic to Jesus rather than scolding him for being absent. I want Jesus to be less cryptic about those so-called "last days," and I want him to explain what he means when he says he is the "resurrection and life." I want the crowds to offer space, rather than gawking at Jesus when he weeps over the death of his friend. Really, I want there to be less dissonance.

And yet that is precisely what makes it relevant for us today. Not to amplify the belief that if we only have faith, miraculous healing is possible, but that the journey of being human is messy and difficult.

Human love and grief takes many forms, and is not formulaic. There is something real and honest about those crowds, gawking over Jesus' grief amid loss. They're searching for meaning amid communal loss, and they are looking to Jesus to offer an alternative. What they get is very human - Jesus weeping, in pain that his friend Lazarus is dead. Martha and Mary's lament over Jesus not being present is easy for us to dismiss as cold-hearted, until we realize how frequently we live a parallel existence in the face of our tragedies today - Jesus, if only you had been here things would be different.

There is this interesting moment in this passage where Jesus asks where the body has been laid, and we get the refrain that we sing each week as the children come forward, as if to give Jesus proof that Lazarus has in fact died - "Come and see."

And then this passage also has Jesus' words of life and resurrection, reminding us that even amid the stench of a dead body, four days in the tomb, life is still possible.

The challenge for us today is to figure out how this makes a difference in our lives. Like many Gospel stories, we have choices for how to respond. In the dissonance of grief and love, we still have these paths to walk.

In 2012, Meredith and I, along with 2-year-old Anika, were excitedly awaiting the birth of our second child. But then amid the third trimester, Meredith suddenly stopped feeling movement.

We rushed to the hospital, but the doctor's look of concern, followed by the words, "I'm sorry, I just can't find any heartbeat," has been burned into our memories and transformed our lives in that moment. Why didn't we get a miraculous Jesus intervention in that moment? I found myself longing for a miracle, wishing we could go back in time, and like Mary and Martha, feeling a sense of abandonment.

One word of caution - Please don't hear me saying this morning that miracles never happen anymore. Unexplained miracles still do happen from time to time. But the truth is that there are also moments where we're longing for a miracle and there is no divine intervention.

Fortunately we had a community who carried us during that time, and it was those around us as we grieved that allowed us to feel God's presence when our world felt so bleak. In hindsight this was a moment of dissonance, in which I felt the most confusion about what I believed, and also the most certainty that there was something deeper and more meaningful about God's presence in my life than I ever realized.

Fortunately our community walked well with our grief during that time. Even so, there were a few missteps along the way. One that still comes to mind

from time to time (I've probably even shared it here) - I remember a fellow pastor noting that despite the pain of this moment, it was going to make me a far more empathetic and compassionate pastor in the long run.

Ooh, that message was so hard to hear. It was not comforting at that moment to hear that my pain would be enhancing my professional capabilities. It was a person trying to find a silver lining, but in doing so it dismissed the immediacy and depth of my grief. It made the tragedy *for* something, rather than allowing it to simply *be* a tragedy.

And of course, who among us has the power to hear those kinds of messages amid present trauma? Even if the pronouncement was true, I would have traded the pain I was in to be a lesser pastor moving forward. Give me that miracle, Jesus. I'll gladly let go of some career aspirations for the sake of not having to live out our grief.

That's the trap we fall into when we seek easy answers or neat resolutions for the profound messiness of life, just as Martha and Mary initially sought a clear explanation or a different outcome from Jesus. They wanted their brother saved from death; we want our lives saved from pain. But Jesus doesn't offer a platitude; he offers himself. He weeps with them, entering fully into their sorrow before demonstrating his power over death. The message isn't "don't grieve because I'll fix it," but "I am here, in the midst of your grief, and even this death cannot ultimately defeat the life I offer."

So, as we leave this story and this place, let us carry the dissonance—the tension between our profound human sorrow and the extraordinary, sometimes unbelievable, promise of resurrection and life. We are invited not to rationalize away the pain, but to bring it, fully and honestly, into the presence of the one who is the Resurrection and the Life. May we, like Martha, declare our belief not because we understand all the answers or because we've witnessed all the miracles we asked for, but because we trust that even when life feels like a four-day-old stench in a sealed tomb, God's glory is still waiting to be revealed, and life is still calling us out.

I invite Micah and Hal to lead us in singing again. As we transition from our sermon to a hymn of response, you'll notice that our visuals team has arranged candles for each week of Lent. Symbolically, the worship materials we are using this season suggested using candles, progressively extinguished week by week throughout the season. You may be familiar with this practice from Tenebrae services. Or you may think of it perhaps as the opposite of Advent candle lighting, a custom in which candles are lit progressively throughout the season. I hope you find it meaningful - welcoming the darkness of the season, knowing that light will come again.