

More than any other holiday on the Christian calendar, Easter is about joy. It's about hope. And perhaps we feel that joy and hope even more than ever today as many of us gather together to worship in a way we couldn't last Easter, and as hope is on the horizon for the end of this pandemic.

But this Easter, more than any other Easter I recall, has a backdrop; a very dark backdrop we can't get out of our heads. It's the backdrop of about 550,000 people in our nation lost to COVID 19. Even more staggering is the almost 2.8 million people dead worldwide.

We hear these statistics every day, and it's hard not to grow numb to them. The sheer weight of those numbers can dwarf the individual stories behind each mom, dad, brother, sister, son, or daughter who's died. What does it mean when you're just one in half a million? The larger the number, the harder it is to feel empathy. Our brains just aren't good with big numbers.

But those who've lost loved ones are anything but numb. One woman said, "We don't have that privilege of growing numb to the numbers. We're in it. I wish people would think about this every day."

Another woman who lost her husband of 36 years said, "I try not to think of my husband as a number. Because to me, he's not a number. I mean, I'm sure he's in that count. But I just refuse to attach him to a number."

Lori Baron, who lost her brother Danny put it like this, "I look at the number of deaths in the US, and I just stare at that number, and I think, if Danny were still here, that number would look different. Just by one, but it would look different." She focuses on the last digit of that number and thinks to herself, that's him.

The loss of just one solitary human being is devastating to a loved one. I want to tell you a story today about two sisters who knew all about that. These two women had lost their brother. He didn't die in a pandemic. We don't know how he died. But when he died, they were devastated. However, this is an Easter story, and so it's a story about hope, a story of how Jesus changed that last digit and conquered death for this one solitary man.

Jesus Hears His Friend Lazarus is Sick

The story is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 11. John begins by telling us, "*Now a man named Lazarus was sick*" (v. 1a). He goes on and talks about Lazarus—he's from Bethany, and his sisters are Mary and Martha. Mary is the one who'd poured expensive

perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her tears. These two women love Jesus, and they know he loves them. If Jesus had best friends, they'd be high on the list.

So they send word to Jesus, who is probably a two to three day walk from Bethany, "*Lord, the one you love is sick*" (v. 3b). Clearly, Lazarus doesn't just have a common cold. The fact they came to Jesus with this request implies he's really sick, like on his deathbed sick.

I don't know exactly what they expect Jesus to do. They know he's healed others with a mere word, without even being physically present, so maybe he'll do that again. But when Jesus hears Lazarus is sick, the first thing he does is nothing. He doesn't even start the trek towards Bethany to visit. I don't think these two women expected him to do nothing. I mean, he could have done something.

He does say something. He tells his disciples, "*This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it*" (v. 4). That sounds good, but what kind of comfort is that? No one wants to face a tragedy and hear, "Don't worry. This is for God's glory." Neither did Mary and Martha, worried about their sick brother, who's getting weaker every minute. As time passed, they must have thought, "Where's Jesus? Lazarus is slipping away."

It's almost as if John, who narrates this story, wants to step in and explain. John writes, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days*" (vv. 5-6). Wait! That doesn't make sense. If he loved them, he would leave right away. Why wait two days?

But God's timing is never our timing. We ask God to do something, to intervene. Do something NOW, before it's too late! Those long hours and days of waiting for God to do something because he CAN do something are the hardest. The delays of God are repeated throughout Scripture. God promises Abraham and Sarah their descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky, but then they must wait decades for life to stir in Sarah's womb. God's delays are inevitable. We think we know what's best. We pray and pray and can't understand why nothing changes. In our imperfect knowledge, we want solutions now, but God knows all things, and sometimes we must wait for his plans to ripen. But his delays aren't final. He'll answer in his own time and way.

Jesus Leaves for Bethany of Judea

After two days of nothing, Jesus finally decides to make a move in the direction of Bethany where Lazarus is, *"Let's go back to Judea,"* (v. 7b), he says to his disciples. Bethany is in Judea.

But going to Judea is dangerous. *"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you're going back?"* (v. 8). In other words, "Jesus, you might want to rethink that. The last time we were there, we almost got killed."

But Jesus knows his days on earth are numbered. He knows he only has so much time left to do his Father's work. So he says, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up"* (v. 11b).

The disciples shoot back, *"Lord, if he sleeps, he'll get better"* (v. 12). I mean people who fall asleep, wake up. They're thinking, "Jesus, if you think we're going to walk for three days into hostile territory just so you can be there when Lazarus wakes up from a nap, you need to get your head checked."

The disciples don't get it. So Jesus gives it to them straight, *"Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him"* (v. 14-15). Then Thomas pipes us. Thomas is a realist. He says what everyone else is thinking: *"Let us also go, that we may die with him"* (v. 15b).

Martha's faith is challenged

By the time Jesus shows up at Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. That's important because that means he's really dead. Jewish rabbis believed for three days after death, the soul hovers around the body, seeking to re-enter. But on the fourth day, it goes away. So in their mind, there's a finality to death on the fourth day. John wants us to know Jesus waited until any thread of hope is gone. Lazarus is really dead. Like we say, "Dead as a doornail." Four days; there's no question that he's dead.

Little by little, people begin to show up at Mary and Martha's house. They bring whatever comfort they can. Then someone whispers in Martha's ear that Jesus is on his way and nearing Bethany. Martha runs out to meet him. Martha is a doer. She's the one who hustled to put dinner on the table when Jesus and his disciples visited them months earlier. She's the one consumed with "all the preparations that had to be made," and angry at her sister for sitting there gazing at Jesus while she was sweating in the kitchen. Martha is a doer, a fixer. I've done my share of funerals, and there's always a Martha in the group. She's the one who speaks for the family, makes the necessary phone calls, arranges for meals, calls relatives, and writes the obituary. Every family needs a Martha when someone dies.

So Martha hurries out to confront Jesus. She's brutally honest: *"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died"* (v. 21). I get that. When someone dies, there's always the "if only." If only this or that happened, this death could have been prevented." This is more likely a word of regret than

of reproach. "Lord, I wish you could have been here, because my brother wouldn't have died." She still believes God works mightily through Jesus. So she says, *"But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask"* (v. 22). I don't believe she expects Jesus to raise her brother from the dead right then and there, but she's still confident he can do something.

But when Jesus calmly says, *"Your brother will rise again"* (v. 23), that's not what she expected. The Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. *"Martha answered, 'I know he'll rise again in the resurrection at the last day'"* (v. 24). It's like, "Yeah, that brings some comfort, Jesus, but we need help now!"

Then Jesus points to himself and says, *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (v. 25a). In other words, "Look at me. I am the One with power over death. I am." That's present tense. He's not talking about the future; he's talking about now. He goes on and explains: *"The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* (vv. 25b-26). In other words, Lazarus died, but he lives. And anyone who believes in me will share in my resurrected life. "Do you believe this?" he asks. This is a direct question to Martha, and perhaps to each of us. Do you believe this? is just one Greek word, *pisteuon*? It's a very personal question. Each of us must answer it. Do I believe Jesus is bigger than death? Do I believe death needn't have the last word in my life?

Martha's response is anything but hopeful, *"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world"* (v. 27). That's like, "Lord, I believe you are who you say you are. You're the One we've been waiting for. But this is death, Lord, and death is final. I'm not doubting who you are, but that won't bring my brother back."

Mary's grief is shared

So Martha runs back to the house and finds Mary. Mary has been home this whole time. She's paralyzed by grief. You see, while Martha is the fixer, Mary is the feeler. That's why she didn't go out to see Jesus with her sister in the first place. She's mourning. She can't eat. She can't sleep. She hasn't bathed in days. Mary reminds me of many people I've sat with after the death of a loved one. All the typical things like bathing, dressing, and eating seem so meaningless; they don't even bother.

When Martha arrives, she pulls Mary aside and says, *"The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you"* (v. 28b). Notice how Jesus seeks her out. Mary is paralyzed by grief and regret. But there's something about the words—he's asking for you that suddenly gives her the strength to get up from the bed she's been in for four days and race out the door. Perhaps, right now, you feel like Mary? You're dealing with some loss. These words are also for you: "The Teacher is here, and he's asking for you." That may not erase the pain, but perhaps those words can give you enough strength to get up and run to him.

That's what Mary does. She runs to find Jesus. When some of her friends who've been comforting her see her rush out, they follow her, thinking she's going to the tomb to mourn. But Jesus is still where Martha left him, waiting for Mary. When Mary finds him, she falls at his feet and says the exact same thing Martha had: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (v. 32b). There it is again, "If only."

Jesus Responds with both Anger and Grief

When Jesus sees Mary crying and then looks up and sees those who'd accompanied her crying as well, how do you think he responds? I'm not talking yet about his actions or words, but rather his feelings. There are really two emotions Jesus experiences, and they both might surprise you.

The first thing John says is Jesus was "*deeply moved in spirit and troubled*" (v. 33b). The King James version says, "*he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.*" It's clear his emotional reaction is strong and deep. He's not remote from the sufferings of his fellow humans. But don't misunderstand this. The Greek word used here for "deeply moved" was used to describe the snorting of horses. When used to describe human emotion, it always meant an outburst of anger. A better translation would say, "He was outraged in spirit." When Jesus sees Mary weeping and all the people weeping with her, he gets really angry.

Why? Jesus is enraged at the evil of death itself, the unnaturalness of it, what John Calvin called its "violent tyranny." In this moment, Jesus feels the misery of the entire human race and burns with rage against what the apostle Paul later calls, "*the last enemy to be abolished.*" Death itself is the object of his anger, not to mention him who has the power of death, whom he came to destroy. He's enraged, and he advances to the tomb like one prepared for battle.

Isn't this exactly what we feel in the face of death? Haven't we all felt this outrage? Haven't we all sat in hospital rooms and stood at gravesides where the air was thick with unspoken anger and even rage? Anger at the doctors, anger at a deadly virus, anger at the cancer, anger at the guy who decided to drink and drive, anger at the miscarriage, anger at diseases that take the lives of children, anger at Alzheimers.

Jesus' second emotion comes after he asks the question, "*Where have you laid him?*" (v. 34) "*Come and see, Lord,*" they replied. Then John says, "*Jesus wept*" (v. 35). The shortest verse in the Bible, but also one of the most profound. The One who has power over death also weeps at the graveside of a friend. What brought it on? Was it the sight of the tomb or the mourners? Whatever it was, his rage collapsed like the wall of a dam finally bursting. His anger gave way to a flood of tears.

At that moment, some of the people who saw him simply said, "*See how he loved him!*" (v. 36). They got it right. Jesus loved

Lazarus. He loved Martha and Mary. He loved them all. His weeping proves that.

But there were others with a much different reaction. They scoffed, "*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*" (v. 37). Let's be honest, that's the question we always ask, Why would he choose to heal one person and not another? Why would he heal him and not her? It's all so random. Maybe he really isn't that powerful after all.

Jesus Arrives at the Tomb and Raises Lazarus

Jesus finally arrives at the tomb, and John tells us, "*Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb*" (v. 38a). There's that rage again. It's almost like he's getting ready for war. "*Take away the stone,*" he tells them (v. 39a). Martha, the practical one, shoots back, "*But, Lord...by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days*" (v. 39). It's like, "Jesus, You're asking us to desecrate his grave. It's going to stink. It's been four days! He's not just dead; he's decomposing."

Then Jesus reminds her of his promise, "*Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?*" (v. 40). Don't miss that. John started his gospel with these words, "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (1:14).

Then after Jesus' first miracle at Cana, where he turned water into wine, John said this "*What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him*" (2:11). Now he's about to reveal his glory again.

The crowd is silent. A few men step forward, reluctantly, and push the stone aside. Then John says,

Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." vv. 41-42

He doesn't need to pray here. He's in constant communion with his Father. Every breath is a prayer. He stands constantly in his Father's presence. His prayer is his life. This prayer isn't for him but for those watching.

Then I imagine Jesus staring into that dark black cave that is the grave. Everyone else looks with him. Then he speaks in a loud voice, "*Lazarus, come out!*" (v. 43b) It's not an invitation but a command. It's been said Jesus called the name "Lazarus" because if he didn't call out his name, every other dead person within earshot would have come up from the grave as well!

But were simply told, "*The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face*" (v. 44a). Can you imagine? How did he even walk with his legs bound together? It's almost humorous. Did he hop out of the grave? And

with a cloth around his face, can't you just see the part around his mouth going in and out with each breath. We all know what that's like, right? No wonder Jesus said, "*Take off the grave clothes and let him go*" (v. 44b).

Again, it's just one man. But he's not a statistic. Consider this: Just as the loss of one solitary person is monumental, so is his being brought back to life. In fact, this story is telling us if Jesus could conquer death for this one man, he could conquer death for us all. That's the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus, which this story points us to. Jesus, one single man, conquered death for us all and made all the "if onlys" irrelevant.

Look again at those words, "*I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die*" (vv. 25-26). What is he saying? "I AM the resurrection and the life." In other words, "I AM the way anyone and everyone can find victory over death. I was raised for you."

And there are two ways that are true. First, when you die, you can be raised up and live. That's what he means when he says, "The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." That points to a resurrection after death. The apostle Paul later spoke of being absent from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). So death won't have the last word, even when you die.

But get this—Jesus is also saying you don't have to wait until you die to be resurrected. He points to a resurrection that can be ours now. He says, "whoever lives by believing in me will never die." The resurrection isn't just a future hope, but it's a present reality. His resurrection life can be at work in you right now. That's what Paul meant when he said, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*" (Gal. 2:20a).

But all of this hinges on that one question Jesus posed to Martha, and he poses to you today, "Do you believe this?" *Pisteuon?* That's the single most important question you must answer in light of this story: Do you believe this? Not just that Jesus was raised up, but he was raised up for YOU. He was raised up to give you new life now and hope beyond the grave. That's the single most important question you'll ever answer.

This past year there's been so much loss. And because of that, this next year, our nation and our world will experience a tsunami of grief. You may not have lost a loved one to COVID, but you've had losses. Some have lost jobs. Others have missed graduations, proms, or football seasons. Maybe you missed the birth of a grandchild, the chance to attend a wedding, or even hold a

proper funeral for your mom, dad, husband, wife, sister, brother, or child. We've all had losses, and we're all grieving.

But, in the midst of this, Jesus isn't saying, "I know the way to resurrection. Let me show you." He says, "I am the resurrection." It's like electricity. He's not saying he can help us find a source of electricity. He's saying he is electricity itself. "I am the resurrection. So plug into me. Believe in me, and you will never really die."

And so I ask you, do you believe this? And if you do believe it, while that won't take away the grief, it will give you hope in the midst of grief. And it will allow you to spread that hope to others who desperately need it. If Jesus could conquer death for this one man, if Jesus is the resurrection and the life, he conquered death for us all. Do you believe this?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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