

“A Life-Giving Encounter”  
March 22, 2026

John 11:1-44

During Lent we are hearing stories of encounters—of connections that people make with Jesus and with one another. These stories are long. Telling what happens when Nicodemus, or the woman at the well, or the man born blind, or Mary and Martha and Lazarus encounter Jesus takes time.

We began this season in the wilderness, hearing of Jesus’ encounter with the devil. And in case you thought things couldn’t get any worse after that, this morning we find ourselves at a tomb, encountering death.

The great twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, wrote of the word “buried” in the Apostles’ Creed that the “future toward which all human present is running is just this: to be buried, to be accessible only to memory.”

Not that we don’t resist this reality with all that is in our power—and rightly so. “Rage, rage against the dying of the light,” the poet advises.

We seek long life, healthy life, productive life both for ourselves and for those whom we love—and we should. When illness or brokenness plague us, we seek the top medical care.

Listen then, as Jesus speaks of life in the face of death. Let his words and this story of Lazarus seep into your soul and you will hear what they have to say about our own living of these days.

When Mary and Martha find their brother Lazarus ill, they send word to their friend, Jesus. He heals the sick, cures the lame, gives sight to the blind. Certainly, he can do something for Lazarus.

The news reaches Jesus. As is often the case, he doesn’t respond as we might think he should. Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill and stays where he is for two days. It’s such an unexpected response. So that we don’t get the wrong idea, John adds that “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.”

The purpose of this illness, Jesus says, is for God’s glory. Those are difficult words. We know how illness can rob us of *our* power and *our* glory. We are puzzled when Jesus speaks like this. We are often puzzled when Jesus speaks.

As difficult as these words are, listen to them. They suggest that what we are encountering here is more than a family crisis in Bethany. We are encountering the crisis of the world that moves toward death.

So, this is *our* crisis as well.

We are confronted here not just with the illness and death of Lazarus—and his subsequent revival. More importantly, we are confronted with Jesus, who is resurrection and life.

Keep this in mind as we start to walk along with Jesus—because you did not come here this morning to hear about death. You came to hear good news. And we will find good news as we move toward that tomb holding Lazarus.

After forty-eight hours, Jesus tells his disciples: “Let’s go.”

And he adds, somewhat cryptically: “There are twelve hours of daylight...Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.”

Oh, well maybe Lazarus *is* just sleeping. Maybe responding to the summons of Mary and Martha isn’t so urgent. And since twelve hours of daylight also means twelve hours of darkness, with all of the attendant dangers and stumbling, perhaps its best to just stay where we are.

But Jesus speaks plainly so there can be no doubt: “Lazarus is dead.” And somehow all of this might lead to belief—a deep commitment to the life that God reveals in Jesus.

Thomas—who later would get a reputation for doubting—doesn’t hesitate. “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Those are disturbing words.

Who can speak like this?

The voice of Thomas reminds us of the paradox that in following the way of Jesus Christ, even as it leads toward death, we are alive as we never were before. These are not glib words. We should neither hear them nor speak them ourselves lightly. But Thomas speaks out of the same hope we all have: that destruction is not the end toward which we move; that out of death might come life. That life—new life—might even come from the lives we find ourselves in now.

Somehow, too, I hope. I hope that while we might not have to decide to die, we still might be given the opportunity to decide to live. And that decision seems intimately wrapped up in choosing to go with Jesus.

When he arrives in Bethany, Jesus and Martha exchange a few commonplace thoughts about life and death. Martha's statement about the resurrection on the last day is one that any good Pharisee would believe. This final resurrection was the hope of many Jewish people.

Then Jesus makes clear to Martha, to all who listen, maybe even to us, that something other than a final resurrection is present. To those who grieve, to those are joyful, to those who doubt or believe, Jesus announces “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Jesus is the point where death ends and life begins. He makes eternity now. He provides *life* on both sides of the grave.

*Life* is in the One who stands before Martha, offering life to her and to those who believe. Such belief is not an intellectual assent to some group of theological principles. Belief is the hope in God's love that grows into trust. When we stare at our own dashed hopes, our own broken dreams, it is belief, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God blowing upon us. Trusting in God's goodness, God's love, we enter into the new life that is offered.

Such belief springs out of the ground of grief and sorrow.

Certainly, the grief of Martha is real. So real that she neither seems to hear what Jesus says nor does she quite know what she is saying. With one breath she reproaches Jesus for not coming soon enough to save her brother. We can hear the anguish and anger in her voice when she says: "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Then with her next breath she affirms her trust in this same Jesus, adding: "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

From your own experience you know that grief is like this—a strange mixture of anger and trust.

And in sense belief is like that, too. Belief is a strange mixture of faith and doubt, thanksgiving and anger. God can seem consistently inconsistent. So, we often find ourselves praying both "If you had been here . . ." and "Even now I know . . ."

Diana Eck, who has been teaching at the Divinity School and elsewhere at Harvard for fifty years now, writes: "In the Christian tradition, it is so very clear to me that God accompanies us in our suffering. God so loved the world that God became one of us and accompanies us. God accompanies us not just in our life, and in the challenges of growth, but in the sorrow, in the suffering, in the confronting of illness and death and tragedy that are part of the fabric of our lives. We can't see those moments as provocation for us to say, 'If God were really on the job we would be shielded from those times.' God is present right in the midst of those times. That is the power of the Christian story."

By God's power, life springs out of the ground of grief and sorrow.

Now look at how that Life is caught up in our lives. The leader is not exempt from the demands he makes of his followers.

When Mary first sees Jesus, her response is the same as Martha's: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." What took you so long? Her grief and the grief of those around her deeply disturb and greatly move Jesus. Indeed, grief moves Jesus to tears.

The tears of Jesus come immediately after he is told: "Come and see." Those are the same words Jesus used when he called his disciples. Now his own words are spoken to him.

Jesus calls us to follow him. But at the same time, we discover something surprising: In a very real sense the way Jesus goes is no different from our own paths. The rough roads we find ourselves on are also traveled by the one we follow. Our grief, our disappointment and fear are not unknown to the One who gives us life, who is indeed, *life*.

It is a disturbed Jesus who arrives at the tomb of Lazarus. Even the One who is the resurrection and the life is not exempt from the suffering and heartache of living.

The scene at the tomb is oddly familiar, looking back on it from our vantage point. A stone lies against the tomb. Inside, no doubt, a body. Indeed, according to Martha a stinking body now four days dead.

But the stone is rolled away. Jesus screams toward the tomb: “Lazarus, come out.” When he does, Jesus tells the people: “Unbind him and let him go.”

And that is that. The story ends.

John’s Gospel doesn’t tell us what happened to Lazarus after that day. But the world’s literature is rich in speculation that he could never really get back to the old life, that he lived out his days in a daze at the vision of the new life he had been shown.<sup>i</sup>

In Pär Lagerkvist’s novel, *Barabbas*, Lazarus tries to explain what being dead is like, saying: “The realm of the dead isn’t anything. But to those who have been there, nothing else is anything either.”

Lazarus is restored to life. But Lazarus one day died again.

Which might be the reality that this story has been pointing to all along. Lazarus is restored to life. But something—*Someone*—greater is present here. Jesus stands before us as the resurrection and the life. The life that he offers is different than being alive in these mortal and finite bodies that we are. We hear of a new life in this world—a fulness of life that that even death cannot take away.

The New Testament scholar Gail O’Day says that “the question that many hearers of the story of the raising of Lazarus will ask [is]: ‘Did this really happen?’” She concludes that while there is no way to prove the “facts” of this miracle, we must each decide how we understand the world to be ordered. So “the only answer to the question of whether this miracle could have occurred is another question: Can we believe that God, acting through Jesus, has the power over the course of life and death?” The real question then is not so much “Did this happen?” as “Is it happening today?”

Even as spring arrives, we need to look at the tomb of Lazarus. Our spirits long to hear the stories of such places because they are stories not of death but of new life and resurrection. We need such stories not just at Easter but at all times—not just because they are *true* in the deepest sense of that word but because in a world that moves toward death we need to hear the good news that the Spirit of God has power to revive us, power to renew us, power to restore us. When you find yourself among the tombs remember that you have had a glimpse of the new thing that God can do, you have heard a whisper of the mighty power of God.

Remember, too, that there is no time when you are so cut off from God that you cannot be brought back to life; that your hopes, your dreams, your desires, your goals all still matter not just to you but to the God who created you and gave you life. This same God is still breathing new life into you each day, each moment.

Lent draws to a close and Easter approaches in the next two weeks. Perhaps even now we will be able to see not only what God has done but, even more, the new things that God is doing. Perhaps we too can receive the new life offered in Jesus Christ and share new opportunities for life with others.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *John*, Interpretation Commentary, pg. 149.