

March 31, 2024

## Lesson 5: Confident in the Hope of Resurrection

Scripture: John 11: 17-44

### Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Our first unit titled “Jesus Prays,” is an examination of all the ways Jesus engages in prayer. Today’s lesson will focus on what it means to believe.

The scripture lesson for today comes from the gospel of John. Today’s lesson is part of a larger piece on the narrative of Lazarus. The passage for today’s lesson is what begins Jesus’ journey to the cross as what he does with Lazarus is both theological and political. The act of resurrection, particularly with someone who raises another from the dead, is something which transcends human understanding.

The narrative begins before the passage we read today as Jesus is told his friend Lazarus is sick and he is invited to come and heal him. For whatever reason, Jesus does not come immediately to Bethany. Instead, he tells the disciples of how Lazarus is asleep, and they will go to wake him up.<sup>1</sup> Yet when they arrive to the home in Bethany, the scene is one of grief.

Lazarus is not asleep; he has died and is placed in a tomb. When Jesus arrives, he is met with a funeral procession as Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, greet him with lament at his not being present. The scene is of Judean townsfolk accompanying the sisters with the traditional Semitic fashion of showing anger and grief publicly.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, as well as seeing the whole scene, Jesus does respond. With the shortest verse of the Bible (in some translations), we have the response of Jesus: “Jesus wept.”<sup>3</sup> There is grief during such a public display of loss.

As Jesus weeps, he is moved to go to the tomb. Jesus asks for the tomb to be opened. He is met with pushback from Martha who makes the very practical point about a decaying body and the smell it will emit. Jesus turns it into a conversation about belief, and then has the stone removed. After a prayer to the Father with thanksgiving for always listening, Jesus then asks for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. To the amazement of all, Lazarus comes out of the tomb with his feet and body still bound up in cloths. Jesus then tells them to unbind him so he might come out and be around them.

This account is one which several purposes of the Lord are brought forward. Perhaps chief among the purpose of this new life is how Martha could “see the glory of God” (vs. 40) once she had believed and that many of the others watching this would also likewise believe in Jesus.<sup>4</sup> The event ties together how prayer and belief are part of the Christian journey.

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:11.

<sup>2</sup> Sloyan, Gerard. “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 143.

<sup>3</sup> John 11: 35.

<sup>4</sup> Sloyan, “John,” 144.

## **Application**

I love how scripture reading closely once again revealed something to me which I had never noticed before with a text I have read numerous times. Today was the first time I noticed in the Lazarus narrative how Jesus prayed before the miracle occurred. Jesus, full of power and might, gave thanks to the Father and spoke of belief. It is after these words he moves the scene forward and Lazarus comes out of the grave.

Perhaps one of the greatest aspects we have discovered with the prayers of Jesus is how they are not always these long, complex sentences. There is structure and yet they are also simple. As in this case, it is a prayer of thanksgiving which precedes a miracle and shows us how even a little prayer can lead to great things of God revealed right in front of us.

As I read this narrative again, I was also struck by words which John Wesley used to give to his preachers before they went out and proclaimed the Word. He told them, even if they were struggling to have faith, to “preach until you have it!” It is an acknowledgment of how pouring out to God is where God will show up despite ourselves. Faith is something in which God acts mysteriously, defying human understanding and wisdom.

This is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday as we gather with our community of faith today in churches across the world, with different times and different languages. Yet the words are the same: Jesus rose from the grave and has conquered the forces of sin, evil, and death. Because Jesus lives, we too are given life.

Yet we are reminded when we struggle with faith or questions around God, Jesus gives us a way to engage and acknowledge what we need. Jesus invites us to pray, “Help me to believe,” and as we pray, God shows up. And on Easter Sunday, we are reminded no matter where we are on our journey, Jesus rose from the dead regardless of what we think, believe, or know.

I have often noted some of our prayers when they are rooted in either in thanksgiving or supplication tend to open our eyes to things we might not have noticed before. God shows up in them to reveal things to us we might have missed and heals us in the process. We are given new life.

After my father’s death, I started meeting with a spiritual director to help me sort through both questions of grief as well as faith. What does it mean to believe in the Resurrection when you have a saint who is gone, so quickly and so abruptly? During one of the conversations, she told me to engage in what she called “living prayer” where I would ask for little signs from God to connect me to my father and to feel he was there.

I was honestly initially suspicious of such a feeling-oriented approach to processing grief. Yet I had signed up to meet with this spiritual director to help me with grief and faith so who was I to disregard her counsel and wisdom. And so, I started the prayer, “God show me the signs...”

It was subtle at first. The precision of tying a bow tie in the mirror and flashbacks to my father teaching me how to tie them. I saw a kayak on the water and was ushered back to the trips at the river and the beach. Certain scriptures started to make my eyes water and process the days gone by.

What initially became my prayer of “Lord help me to believe,” became prayers of “Thank you God,” for showing me the presence of the one I loved so much. The Resurrection became clearer and there was the realization of how Jesus had risen from the dead, proving death never has the final say. There was hope amid grief and life after death. Jesus had shown up again as he always does and things began to heal and to be transformed.

It is on Easter Sunday we celebrate how Jesus shows up whether our prayer are full of thanksgiving for life or for supplication for those who are sick. Believing isn’t having all the

answers or knowing all the things. Believing a gift from God for even when we struggle Jesus finds a way to break open the tombs we've covered to remind us he is with us and he is for us.

What does the word believe mean to you? How would you explain the Resurrection to a new believer? How has God answered your prayers in ways you had never imagined? Why do you think prayer is so important to a season of doubt or struggle? What is an Easter you remember where Jesus spoke to you?