

We Belong to God (2)

John 11:1-44, Romans 8:38-39

July 24, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

When we read this story of the resurrection of Lazarus, if we read the whole thing which we've just figured out, is kinda long, we call it something like "the resurrection of Lazarus" and concentrate on that final part of the story. There are several scenes that lead up to the actual resurrection, which are important in their own right. It begins with an introduction of siblings Mary and Martha and Lazarus, who is, we are told three times, very ill. It's clear that Mary and Martha know that Lazarus either is going to die soon, or at the least, definitely could die soon.

They send word to Jesus, apparently in the faith and full confidence that if anyone can do anything to help Lazarus, it is Jesus. Jesus doesn't come, though he loved Lazarus and Mary and Martha. Two days later, he decides to go and bring the disciples along. Lazarus was well and truly dead by this point. The Jewish belief at the time was that the soul left the body three days after death, so the delay has ensured that Lazarus has died, which Jesus tells the disciples plainly and clearly.

First Mary, and then Martha, come out to meet Jesus while he's still on the way. They don't hide their grief or anger. "If you had been here, he wouldn't have died." Even in their grief and anger, they believe that Jesus had the power to keep Lazarus alive. Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the *life*."

Jesus also does not hide his grief, and he weeps right along with the sisters and other mourners. They go to the tomb, Jesus prays, and commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb, which Lazarus does, and Jesus commands him to be unbound.

There's a lot in this story, a lot we could talk about. The sermon request for today helps to direct us. The requester wanted to know how we talk about death, specifically how we talk about death to someone who is anticipating their own. I couldn't think of a Bible story that addresses that exactly, but Lazarus and his family and friends do give us some insights. Other passages and verses do, too.

I've pulled out five things we can keep in mind in talking with people about dying. As always, feel free to disagree with me.

First, name it clearly. "Lazarus is dead," Jesus says. He's just told the disciples that Lazarus had "fallen asleep," which was a common euphemism for

death, but they take it literally and are happy that it will be as easy as just waking Lazarus back up. Jesus corrects them in a clear statement. “Lazarus is dead.” We have any number of euphemisms born out of our discomfort and wishes not to upset people. Passed away, passed on, transitioned. There are churchy ones, too, like “completed his baptism,” or “joined the church triumphant,” or “gone on to her heavenly reward.” All fancy words, all meaning the same thing. He is dead. She is dead. If we’re talking with children, especially, it’s important to state the situation clearly. In the case of talking with dying friends or family, it’s not like we’re putting the idea into someone’s head. They’ve thought it. We’ve thought it. It will likely be helpful to the dying person for you to say so. “It sounds like you’ve been wondering about dying. What do you think about that?” There’s an opening. This goes so against our cultural training and conditioning, but it can be really helpful to just be simple and clear.

Second, don’t be afraid to express your own feelings. Jesus wept, or as our translation says, “Jesus began to weep” when he saw the grief of Mary and Martha and the others who had gathered to help them mourn. It’s completely human, completely natural, completely understandable, to be sad that someone we love is dying. We’ll miss them. This is a balancing act, though. It’s good to say “I’ll miss you,” *and* you want to allow the dying person to express their emotions, too.

Which leads me to the third point. Listen. Just like after a death, when people are grieving, it’s most important to listen. In the time leading up to death, it’s important to allow plenty of time and space and silence. Don’t feel like you have to fill all the silence up with words. Especially if the dying person is sleeping off and on, or in pain, or gathering strength to speak. Invite and encourage them to talk. Share memories. Sing favorite hymns—if I can do it, you can do it; you’ve all heard me sing. Allow space, too, for unfinished reconciliation. Apologize if you need to. Offer forgiveness if you need to. Jesus listened to Mary and Martha. He listened to them accuse him of letting Lazarus die. He listened to their anger and hurt. He listened while they wept.

Fourth, please please please hear this one. You don’t have to have the answers. Nobody knows what heaven looks like or sounds like or feels like. Nobody knows what exactly it will be like when we are in the full presence of God. Nobody knows if we’ll have to answer for what we’ve done and not done, or believed and not believed. Anyone who claims 100% certainty about these things is not telling the truth. Jesus says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” She states what she believes, that Lazarus will rise again at the last day. Jesus says 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.” That doesn’t make logical sense. They will die but they will never die—that doesn’t make logical sense, but it makes spiritual sense. Trusting in Jesus who will bring resurrection and life, whatever that means, whatever that looks like, is how we face death. Not by trusting in our own certainties.

And that leads me to what I am certain about. It was the refrain in our call to worship. We belong to God. It comes from Romans 14. It also comes from one of the confessions in our Book of Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism. It’s the very first question: “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” The answer is “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” (Book of Confessions, 4.001). I am not my own. I belong to Jesus Christ. In life and in death, we belong to God. The same God we know in Jesus Christ. The God whose grace is beyond our understanding, whose mercy is unbounded. That God does not abandon us on this side of the grave or the other. God does not abandon us as we move from this life to eternity. Whatever is to come, Jesus is the life and the resurrection. Whatever is to come, and however it is to come, we belong to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.